



ONE LIFE TO LIVE

Learning the difference between reality and fantasy in romantic relationships can be quite the struggle for some

BY LAUREL MILLS

In the past few decades, I've taken classes in everything from etiquette, ballroom dancing and intermediate Spanish to postal requirements for non-profits and chain-making. I have attended a variety of institutions, both public and private (including three colleges). I even spent a week in the Galway Islands learning about poetry when I was 17. But, much to the chagrin of my father and his checkbook, what really stuck was always learned outside the classroom — and from some very unconventional teachers.

Because both of my parents worked, my sisters and I spent a large portion of the day with our housekeeper, Eileen. I was five, going on six, when Eileen came to work for my parents, and my second sister, Sarah, was due any day. I was enamored with her from the get-go.

When Eileen came to our house she was 45 and already a grandmother. Trying to compare the hip Lydia with my own grandmother was mind-boggling.

"How can you be a grandmother?" I asked.

"I was 15 when I had my first baby," she said.

"People can have babies at 15?"

"Yes, they can, but they shouldn't. Don't do that."

This tidbit was the only beginning of the wealth of knowledge Eileen had. Everything she told me seemed vastly different from any experiences anyone else had ever recounted to me.

"Did you ever get in trouble when you were younger?" I asked one day on our way home from school.

"Oh, child," she said, shaking her dark, curly hair and looking over at me in the passenger seat. "Did I get into trouble ..."

"What kind of trouble?" I asked, entranced.

"One time my teacher caught me smoking in the girls' bathroom."

"But smoking is so bad," I said, my eyes growing wide.

"I know," she said. "But all of the other girls wanted me to try it, and I wanted to be cool."

"How old were you?"

"Thirteen."

(Didn't I tell you that this woman was advanced and worldly?)

"What was it like?"

"Scratchy."

And, her Chicago upbringing could come out in the most fascinating ways.

"Jason teased me at school today," I said, recounting my crush's less than flattering behavior. "He said that I'm too short, and he called me a midget."

"You're not too short."

"That's what I said!"

"You know," Eileen added. "He might like you."

"That's what Mama said."

"Or ..." she paused. "He might just be a jerk."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. One day, I was going home from school when this boy was sitting on the front stoop singing *Brown Eyed Girl* because I have brown

eyes. Well, I told him to stop singing that song because I didn't like it. I knew he was making fun of me."

"Did he stop?"

"Nope."

"What did you do next?"

"I told him to stop it one more time," she said. "Then I went upstairs, found an old table leg from some furniture my mother had gotten rid of, went back downstairs, and beat him with it."

Hmmm.

"Now, he was just a jerk. But, he never bothered me again. Give Jason a little more time. And you can always call him 'four eyes' if he calls you a midget again."

This was so much better than my mother's advice to just ignore him.

"And, if that doesn't work — whoop his butt."

It was Eileen's edge, or "street smarts" if you will, that endeared her to me time and time again. Growing up in an affluent Southern suburb, I didn't know that it was possible to "whoop someone's butt" before she arrived, nor did I know about *The Jeffersons*, *Good Times* or the electric slide.

Eileen also loved soap operas and pretty much anything else on daytime TV for that matter. (She often shopped off of QVC while brushing our hair with one hand and clutching the phone in the other.)

My sisters and I were used to soaps because of our first housekeeper, but Eileen took our viewing to a whole different level.

"Where are you going?" Eileen asked me after lunch on her first day.

"The big hand is on the one, it's time for our story," I said, moving across the room to perform my daily job of turning the TV to the appropriate channel.

"Oh no, no, no, no, no ...," she said.

Was she going to object to the racy content? The questionable ethics? Would she make us watch, horror of horrors, PBS instead?

"Not this one. We're going to watch *One Life to Live*." She went to the dial herself.

"Now, that's Vicki," she said, pointing to a blonde woman on the screen. "She used to have an alter ego named Nikki, but she's been working through that."

I've been hooked ever since.

I loved everything about soap operas. I loved the hair, the clothes, the perfectly manicured nails, the well-timed slaps, and the fact that no one had jobs other than police officers or brain surgeons. I have devoted years to learning the children, half-siblings and step-children of so many families (as well as all of the last names of one Ms. Erica Kane).

My Barbies didn't just change outfits and play with Skipper; they suffered from amnesia. My Barbies hit their heads changing imaginary light bulbs or climbing a kitchen cabinet that served as Mount Everest and forgot everything they had ever known. Only with Ken by her side would Barbie regain her memory just before Christmas, or right as Ken was preparing to give her a brand new pink Corvette. And my Barbie's wedding to Ken was always interrupted by another Ken.

MY YEARS WITH SOAP OPERAS ALSO TAUGHT ME SOME TRIED AND TRUE RULES.

1. In soap operas, nothing is permanent, and everyone is replaceable.

“Who’s that?”

“Lillian.”

“But I thought Lillian was blonde?”

“That Lillian was blonde. This is the *new* Lillian.”

This is known as “the re-cast.” If an actor doesn’t renew his contract, has difficulties with the writers, or just isn’t working out, but the character is considered indispensable to the story line, a soap must find someone else to play the role. And, there is usually very little fanfare to accompany the actor’s exit or entry. One day Lillian is blonde, and the next, she might be brunette with a glass eye. There’s just no telling, and you’ve got to roll with it.

2. Hope springs eternal in the absence of physical proof, and most people have short memories.

“Who would leave me this mysterious rose?”

Only Jack, my missing and presumed dead husband, used to leave me red roses.”

“I knew this would happen when they didn’t find a body!” Eileen said, giggling.

Sometimes, an actor is too popular for viewers to imagine his or her role in the hand of another actor. In this case, the character must be killed rather than simply re-cast. Soap deaths can be quite wrenching. But, since most soap actors leave in pursuit of success on nighttime television or the big screen, occasionally a body is never found in case the actor ever wants to return. Also, the death that isn’t a death can make a future re-cast easier. Viewers don’t like seeing their favorite role in the hands of an unfamiliar actor, but after a few months, people are more willing to accept an alternate version of their “favorite” character.

3. A slow clap is the best way to denote evil or long-awaited justice.

“So, you’ve figured out my little scheme, have you Thurston? You know I’m not pregnant after all.

Cheers to you.” ... clap ... clap ... clap.

The slow clap is only for special occasions, and should, most importantly, never be overused.

“So you did finish off the mayo.” ... clap ... clap ... clap, is simply not acceptable.

4. When eavesdropping, always leave before the conversation is over.

“Of course you’re an attractive woman

Octavia,” is all that is heard by someone listening to her husband at the door. She’ll leave before catching, “But I love my wife and always will.”

This eavesdropping will usually lead to revenge sex and

further problems.

On soap operas, characters act on the first and smallest bit of information learned. Reactions are strong, emotional and usually in response to the wrong incident.

5. If you’ve done something a little bit wrong, the only way to avoid

conflict is to keep lying. Never give up the ghost.

“That isn’t Drake’s jacket. Drake would never be in our apartment, my darling.”

If a character ever confessed to the truth or a small sin, he would be fine. But, one lie ensures a string of lies that will eventually lead to the end of a relationship, death or a business bust.

I loved my soap operas, but strangely enough, a background in soap operas isn’t all that helpful in romantic relationships. Not only aren’t there L-shaped sheets in the real world, but cheating boyfriends rarely reform, the dead stay dead and I’m pretty sure it’s illegal to switch paternity test results. (Plus, there’s usually no kind-hearted Josh Duhamel/Leo waiting to mend your broken heart.)

On a soap opera, as with most of television, happiness gets boring. Audiences don’t tune in day after day and week after week to watch a couple that works at being together argue about the dishes and try to figure out whether a kitchen renovation or student loan pay-off is a bigger priority. No one would watch it.

These ups and downs make a soap opera, but trying to apply that model to life is ... exhausting. Trust me, I had an early-20s full of tearful confrontations, screaming matches and other immature actions I mistook for “passion.” If it wasn’t a constant struggle, I wanted nothing to do with it.

So imagine my surprise the first time I fell in love (real love — past crushes and infatuation) and found that there wasn’t a lot of that kind of excitement. Actual love felt calm and peaceful and secure. And I didn’t have to fight for attention, argue for acceptance or plead my case. I didn’t need a daily roller coaster to mask what I had really been feeling in all of those other relationships — mainly fear, insecurity and doubt. I could be loved for exactly who I was — yawn-inducing as that may be.

So, with my one life to live, I’ll take the hand in mine crossing the Publix parking lot for all of the deserted islands, hospital galas and eye-patched strangers in the world.

I think Eileen would approve.

Assumptions are the termites of relationships.
~Henry Winkler

