

Although surviving correspondence privileges the views of affluent Americans, it offers important evidence of the casualness with which sexually active individuals discussed the intended and actual procurement of contraceptives after birth control became a crime. The correspondence of Violet Blair Janin and her husband Albert is illustrative. The couple were married May 14, 1874, fourteen months after the Comstock Law was passed. From Albert's boasts of "hymen breaking" we can surmise that Violet's first experience of intercourse occurred that night. From then on, the bride awaited the onset of her period with new anxiety, since a fear of dying during childbearing because of long-standing gynecological problems had forged in her mind a resolve to stay childless. Begrudgingly, Albert supported Violet's goal. Since May the couple had been using the rhythm method, with Albert carefully recording what he believed were Violet's safe and unsafe days. But Violet did not trust the technique, and her letters to Albert, who worked in New Orleans as a lawyer much of the year, were plagued with worry. At a time when the safe period was generally believed to be the midway point in a woman's menstrual cycle (the very time when, we now know, conception is most likely to occur), too many women and men had seen this and other natural methods of birth control fail. Only the arrival of her menstrual period could put Violet's mind at ease, and yet its appearance invariably set the stage for a new monthly drama to begin.⁵³

By November she had had enough. When a female homeopath confirmed Violet's suspicions that pregnancy could be fatal, she wrote Albert that "it is best that we should have no children. . . . So I renounce all ideas of it." Renouncing children was one thing, renouncing sex another. The couple discarded the maligned rhythm technique for condoms, a commercial method they both considered more reliable. On November 26 Violet discreetly asked Albert: "Would it be possible for you to find something you told me about?" By the time her letter arrived, Albert, willing to forego intercourse until Violet's health improved but preferring not to, had already stocked a supply. "I have managed to procure some things I have once or twice spoken to you about," he wrote playfully. "Can you guess what they are? I have often wished since the 14th of May [their wedding night] that I had some of them." Buying condoms in New Orleans apparently presented no obstacles worth mentioning.⁵⁴

What emerges from the Janins' prose is not pangs of guilt for breaking the law but a shared resolve to keep Violet from becoming pregnant, whatever the cost. Whether Violet and Albert even knew about the new prohibitions is unclear. Both were ardent followers of national politics, but the Comstock Law was not headline news, and it would have been easy for them to miss. Whatever their knowledge of the law, Violet and Albert turned to the contraceptive market because they believed purchased birth control meant better birth control.

⁵³ Albert Janin to Violet Blair Janin, July 3, 1874, Janin Family Collection (Huntington Library and Archives, San Marino, Calif.); Violet Blair Janin to Albert Janin, Aug. 22, 1874, *ibid.* On medical views of, and women's firsthand experiences with, the safe period, see Margaret Marsh and Wanda Ronner, *The Empty Cradle: Infertility in America from Colonial Times to the Present* (Baltimore, 1996), 84–85; Eric Matsner and Frederick Holden, *The Technique of Contraception* (Baltimore, 1938), 33; John Rock and Marshall K. Bartlett, "Biopsy Studies of Human Endometrium," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, June 12, 1937, pp. 2022–28; Irving F. Stein and Melvin R. Cohen, "An Evaluation of the Safe Period," *ibid.*, Jan. 22, 1938, pp. 257–61; Kennedy, *Birth Control in America*, 210; Abe Laufe, ed., *An Army Doctor's Wife on the Frontier: Letters from Alaska and the Far West, 1874–1878* (Pittsburgh, 1962), 165.

⁵⁴ Violet Blair Janin to Albert Janin, Nov. 23, 26, 1874, Janin Family Collection; Albert Janin to Violet Blair Janin, Nov. 24, 1874, *ibid.*