



BEYOND MONOGAMY

It's in the air, in the news, on TV—a new paradigm for happily ever after. Could polyamory really be the next sexual revolution? This month, two intrepid reports from the frontiers of love, sex, and coupling. And tripling. And quadrupling.

PART 1: THE MORE, THE MERRIER

Multiple lovers later, how does a polyamorous marriage go the distance? **John H. Richardson** returns to tell the story of John and Nan

I FIND MYSELF IN AN awkward position. I have been writing draft after draft of a story about a polyamorist tribe from New Jersey. But people keep telling me it's too confusing. There are too many voices, too many strange concepts, and no dominant voice of authority to explain it all for you. In frustration, I cry—that's the whole point! That's the world we live in now! My friends tell me I'm being inflexible. *Lots of people don't even know what polyamory is*, they say.

So let's start at the beginning. Seventeen

years ago, I wrote a story for *Esquire* called "Scenes From a (Group) Marriage." The main characters were John and Nan, a married pair of well-educated professionals living in the suburbs of New Jersey. John was tall and handsome, with an athlete's body and the serene intensity of a military officer. Nan was a sexy Jewish earth mother, welcoming and open-hearted. They had good jobs, happy kids, a nice house, and a Volvo in the driveway. Influenced by an idea called "radical honesty," they admitted that they weren't satisfied by monogamy but also didn't want to end up as ordinary philanderers. Instead, they were going to move a pair of young lovers into their house and try polyamory—which means "many loves," and also "expanded marriage" or "complex marriage." They were going to risk everything for a dream.

My story ended with their new twenty-first-century tribe assembled in their rec room, a

recently installed hot tub bubbling away in the backyard. Eventually, however, the original lovers drifted away and were replaced by others. So much drama and pain went down that Nan coined the term *polyagony*. Finally, they admitted defeat and decided to give up on polyamory forever—and that's when their story took a completely unexpected turn that shed new light on everything.

ENOUGH EXPLAINING! Let's plunge into the chaos together, poly style: Seventeen years ago, I was standing with a group of suburban goddesses in the spot where the hot tub would soon be installed. Some *om-ing* may have occurred, some weed offered to the heavens, but otherwise Nan and John seemed like completely normal—

"You were here before the hot tub?" Nan interrupts.

"When it was a bare spot," I say.

“And your two daughters were bouncing on the bed that night,” she remembers.

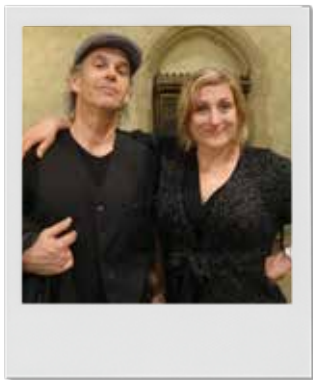
Did I do that? Did I bring my innocent little girls into this house of uncontrolled sexual depravity?

“It’s a very old hot tub now,” Nan says.

I had responded to John and Nan’s ad in the *Village Voice*—yes, young people, this was in the distant era before sites like Craigslist and Adult FriendFinder, when people actually inked their desires like tattoos onto the skin of dead trees. Nan’s ad began: “Spiritual, loving marathon runners looking for loving friends and friendly lovers” and referenced *polyamory*, a word I had never heard before. Since I was chafing at the limits of monogamy myself, I jumped at the chance to learn more (“You have to put some skin in the game,” says Nassim Nicholas Taleb, author of *Antifragile: Things That Gain From Disorder*). Affairs, I could understand. But isn’t sex supposed to be the “secret garden” where no gardener cuts back the vines? Wasn’t this polyamory thing just a way to take out the dark energy and make sex—ugh—nice? Or was it actually more sane and forgiving?

“I think by making it a possibility and bringing it out of the shadows,” John says, “you lose the taboo and that energy where people can’t talk about it because it’s ‘perverted.’ I think this is a less perverted way to live.”

BY NOW YOU MAY BE wondering: Who is Nan? Who is John? Who is this “I” chafing at the limits of monogamy? I know that Nan’s parents fought a lot and were “superjudgmental,” but also had a beatnik streak that expressed itself in consciousness-raising seminars and smoking weed “for glaucoma.” (Nan thinks they fought as a way to “renegotiate marriage” without the proper tools.) I know that Nan has a PhD in cognitive neuroscience and a hippie love vibe that may be a little compulsive—she’s always saying how “awesome” things are, which sounds especially funny in her Jersey accent. John’s parents were on the silent and repressed side, a businessman and



John and Nan, from top: At their prom in 1975; expecting in 1985; all grown up in 2011.

a housewife, both Catholics. They sent him to Catholic schools. He ended up a lawyer. I also know that Nan was the stable one at first and John literally “surfed in hurricanes,” which was the basis of their initial attraction—they were also both “gorgeous,” as Nan puts it—and that they gradually switched roles as Nan became more adventurous and John became more controlling.

But now, with four decades of marriage behind them, they finally feel so secure in their lives and marriage they’re even willing to let me reveal their last names—meet John Wise, Esq., and Nan Wise, PhD, bold explorers in the wilderness of the heart.

So here we are, old friends, sitting around a patio table piled with healthy snacks from Trader Joe’s. Because interviewing John and Nan is always a group experience, I’ve brought along my wife, Kathy, an artist and graphic designer with a very open mind. The night is balmy, the air is soft, the birds are singing, the bong is circulating. Dense thickets of bamboo make the patio cozy. Nan is laughing about what a long, strange trip it’s been. “What the fuck were we

thinking?” she says. “That was fucking *crazy*.”

Moving their young lovers into the house, she means. I actually helped move Jen, John’s 32-year-old girlfriend, down from Boston in a driving snowstorm. That was in the fall of 1998, three or four years after they’d started their poly experiment. Nan’s young lover was named Tom. There was another young guy named Malcolm living in the house, too, though I was never clear about his role.

“I think it bothered the kids at times,” Nan says. “At the end of the day, I probably would have chosen to be more protective of my house and not have people live here.”

Of course, if John and Nan had really been protective, they wouldn’t have agreed to appear in *Esquire*. Although they didn’t use their last names and wore party masks in the photographs, the story landed like a bomb in their small community. “Got out of bed, threw my sweats on, went to the corner and got the magazine and went home” is how Nan’s friend

Norma remembers it. “I’m into it about 20 minutes or so and the phone rings; it’s Cecile. She says to me, ‘What page are you up to?’ I say, ‘Nan’s multi-climactic. Call me back.’” Here’s Nan’s sister Lynn, a retired retail buyer who lives in Florida: “My first reaction was, ‘Oh God, this is nuts.’” But it turned out that Lynn’s own husband was secretly screwing the woman who would become his second wife: “I told him he was polyamorous, but he forgot to tell me about it.” He responded with a list of demands faxed from his lawyer’s office, which included forbidding their daughter from ever visiting Uncle John and Aunt Nan.

This kind of hypocrisy happened so often, it seemed to form a pattern. One woman who cried *shame, shame, shame* at them turned out to have been cheating on her husband all along. And Nan’s beatnik parents got upset, too, pointing out how reckless they were being with their children’s welfare.

But some people surprised them—John’s conservative parents pretended nothing was happening but gave them quiet support. Nan’s best friend, Trish, just shrugged it off. “Whatever floats your boat,” she said. And when her husband issued his revenge fax, Lynn chose the side of the sexual outlaws. “I didn’t want to be poly,” she says, “but it made me realize there were lots of choices out there.”

NOW BACK TO MY DISJUNCTIVE narrative, a symptom of social collapse in the era of petro-modernity (Roland Barthes, author of *Empire of Signs*, please jump in at any time). John is sitting back with his usual Zen-master poise, slightly disengaged and listening to the rest of us talk. What was *he* thinking?

He takes a moment to consider. “We were embracing the idea of community as a primary unit,” he finally says. “You were no longer a member of a nuclear family, solely; you were a member of a family of choice, a member of a tribe, which was said without irony or snickering. You were rejecting the idea of ‘There’s only one star in the sky.’ There are

Was their marriage ever threatened?
Nan says no, never. John is less certain.

actually many stars in the sky, and for me to be in denial of that is hypocritical; there's a certain part of me that I am withholding from the rest of the world. And it goes back to 'Do you love more than one kid? Do you love them both? Do you love anyone less?' And you go down that rabbit hole."

Did I mention he's a lawyer? His specialty is bankruptcy, which he loves for the opportunity to plunge into chaos and find order.

"It was a step outside of the map I had for what family was," he continues, "the blue pill version of family." ("You take the blue pill, the story ends," says a character in *The Matrix*. "You take the red pill, you stay in Wonderland, and I show you how deep the rabbit hole goes.")

So what happened to Tom and Jen? They lasted about 18 months, Nan says, but it wasn't "sustainable" because Tom wanted Nan to himself. Jen never actually moved in, just settled nearby, and moved on around the same time Tom did because she wanted John to herself—the first taste of the polyagony to come.

And how many polyamorants were there altogether?

After Jen, they say, John hooked up with another woman he doesn't want to name. The relationship lasted more than seven years. Nan marked time with a guy named Steve and then a handsome party boy named Julio.

I met Julio. That guy was a douche.

Nan defends him. "He had integrity. I wasn't particularly attracted to him, but I appreciated him for trying."

John won't comment. "I think the witness speaks for herself," he says.

And how did it work, exactly? Did they all do it in the same room?

"Initially we were all together," Nan says, "and gradually we got into going into separate rooms and sometimes separate houses and sometimes separate zip codes."

She laughs. "Wait," she adds. "I remember the most important thing—Julio was a placeholder for me, because I think it was easier for John to get satisfactory relationships."

"Ah, that's very honest," John says.

Neither wants to go into too much detail about all this. I can't tell whether they think it's old news or if they're just afraid to rip off the scabs. Both of them tend to be a bit cerebral anyway, forever drawing lessons from their experiences. But it's not hard to read between the lines. Nan talks about sinking into a "companionate relationship," a married woman's tendency to go into "sexual retirement," and the excitement of "new-relationship energy." Of course, you're going to get "ramped up in spontaneous desire for your new partner," she says. "Sometimes I definitely took my eye off the ball and bankrupted my marriage because of that.... Sometimes

The expanded marriage is really tremendously romantic."

it hurt when I saw him taking his attention off me.... You learn not to identify that as love."

Later, when I text Nan a follow-up question about the mystery woman, she gives me another glimpse into her pain. "She ended up being such a disappointment. Traitor and cowgirl. Oh, well."

A moment later, another text arrives bearing what is, for Nan, perhaps the harshest judgment of all: "She was a monogamist."

But these days, she'd really rather discuss all this on a scientific level. "As a cognitive neuroscientist, I've learned that it's like the way the brain reacts to drugs; the newness and unpredictability intensifies emotions and creates a sense of reward. It's like chess on three levels. It's like going to a new country where everything is new. Everything's brighter, louder, bigger. It can be scary."

Then she shrugs it off: "The lows were low; the highs were high."

AND JOHN? The short answer seems to be as old as marriage itself: He fell in love with another woman.

"A train wreck in slow motion," he says. "The blowback, the self-loathing, all that good stuff. Losing my integrity in the process."

Please continue.

"Not being as completely honest and truthful as I should have been with Nan and the other one."

And what specific truths did you withhold?

"I don't want to go there," John says.

Their dog comes by, distracts everyone for a moment. John seems a little too grateful.

"So what truths did you withhold, man?"

"Very good," he says. "Ask again."

Refusing to take the easy answer is poly in itself, John believes, an effort to push for a deeper connection, so he forces himself to meet the challenge—with a hint of an exhausted marathoner rallying himself at the twenty-fifth mile. "I had a hard time saying no to the one not named Nan. And I hurt Nan, I hurt the other one; I should have been more courageous. I should have been a man."

He's so vague about all this, I end up relying on Trish, a wised-up New Yorker who spent

her career in the music business. "It seemed like he would much rather be with A—," she says. "He lied a lot to Nan. That was horrible. She kept calling him on stuff, and he just kept lying." Given the premise of radical honesty and open relationships, all of this was doubly painful, doubly a shock. "Nan was having a really hard time," Trish adds.

Maybe because I'm a man, painfully aware of the female gift for manipulating men with emotions, I'm a bit more sympathetic to John. You can't give moment-to-moment reports on feelings you barely understand, can you? "Isn't it natural to withhold the full truth? Even in regular relationships, you can't hit them with too much too soon."

"Bullshit," John answers. "That's where the self-loathing kicks in. Because I know better. I know right from wrong."

But don't things change over time? Don't lovers in these situations usually say they're cool and modern and even seem attracted by your loyalty to your wife and then revert straight back to possessiveness as they develop more feelings?

"Why are you asking that, honey?" asks my wife, all mock innocence.

"Because of my wide theoretical knowledge of the field," I answer.

For all these reasons, Nan continues, she felt the need to "balance the equation." She got tired of sleeping alone, but mostly she was looking for a way to make things work. "Even at the end of the day, when it was time for somebody to leave," she says, "I wasn't about wanting her to go. I wanted her to *work* with us."

Still radically honest and insanely adventurous, they invited John's unnamed partner to a polyamorous therapeutic encounter with Nan's shrink, an open-minded therapist named Margie. John's partner refused. For Nan, that was the final evasion. "I said, 'I'm not staying in a marriage with somebody who's not showing up. You've got to kick her to the curb.'" Margie met with the woman privately and agreed: John's lover wasn't on the same journey.

BUT HERE'S THE GOOD NEWS. In the worst part of this polyagony, a spiritual teacher taught them how to "breathe up" the chaos energy instead of trying to control it. Then Margie the therapist suggested that Nan try breathing the energy into her career for a while, and Nan went to Rutgers to get her PhD with Barry Komisaruk, the first scientist to study the brain during orgasm. (Komisaruk is known for, among other female-orgasmic things, discovering that vaginal stimulation dulls the pain of childbirth by blocking the neurotransmitter that sends the pain signal. I went to his lab once to watch women's brains light up while they had orgasms

in an MRI machine; good times.) This week, Nan's finishing up revisions for a paper on brain activity unique to orgasm in women for the field's leading academic publication, *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*.

Still, the polyagony continued. John just couldn't let the other woman go. Finally, Nan reached her breaking point. "I was done," she says. "I was like, 'Fire everybody; this isn't working for me.'"

"That was a very popular phrase at the time," John says.

John always wants life to be a celebration. At parties, he's so busy tending to his guests he barely sits down. But he also wakes up before dawn, gets to the office by seven, and serves as president of the local Rotary club ("The dizziness of contradictions: the only pleasure that remains once you've decided you know better than the world"—Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick*). So it seems appropriate to ask if their marriage was ever seriously threatened.

Nan says no, never.

John is less certain. Out loud, he reminds himself of his intention to be 100 percent honest. "Um, I went through a period of time that was really trying," he says. "I was making a series of bad decisions, and when you make bad decisions one after another after another, there comes a point where you embrace the possibility of making a bad decision about anything, which is really scary. You look at yourself and go, 'Wow, I'm that guy—I'm the guy that's capable of making really bad choices.' So I thought about ending my marriage, not by choice but by incompetence, by not paying it enough attention."

Which raises the question: Are the prudes right? Is it a mistake to have sex with other people? Isn't it greedy? Selfish? Isn't your spouse *enough* for you?

"That's the biggest crock of shit I've ever heard," Nan says. "That's the downfall of marriage, that we expect people to meet all our needs. Take sex off the plate. We don't fuck you and Kathy, but we like to be with you. We can choose the relationship styles we want."

"I really like spending time with Nan," John offers. "If it were just me and her, I'd be absolutely superterrific and fine."

"We would have worked stuff out in other ways," Nan agrees.

"We'd be mountain bikers."

Which reminds me of something John

Continued on page 323



PART 2:
THE EXTRA

Open marriage reportedly invigorates some relationships. But what's in it for the women who are so-called secondary partners?

By Whitney Joiner

BACK IN MARCH, the *New York Times* Sunday Styles section published a story that created such reader interest that, two days later, the paper ran a comment-filled companion piece online. Called "The Secrets to an Open Marriage According to Mo'Nique," the original story featured the actress and her husband, Sidney Hicks. "I wanted to continue to see the gentlemen that I was seeing, and I felt comfortable telling my best friend," Mo'Nique told the paper. (Her best friend being her husband; the duo have a podcast about their marriage called *Mo'Nique & Sidney's Open Relationship*.)

Despite the minor battle waged over monogamy's pleasures and perils in the comments section, this story wasn't a surprise. It seems like many of us have been discussing open relationships much more, well, openly these days. A few days after the Mo'Nique story ran, DirecTV debuted a new show called *You Me Her*, about a married couple in Portland who start seeing a woman; it was quickly renewed for two more seasons. The rise in interest in open relationships has been chronicled in countless print and online outlets over the past five-plus years (*Newsweek*, *Rolling Stone*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Slate*, *Salon*, *The Guardian*). In 2012, Showtime debuted the reality series *Polyamory: Married & Dating*, which involved a handful of Californians endlessly processing their feelings about

their partners' outside sex lives; it aired for two seasons. Last July, a *Times* article asked, "Is There Such a Thing as 'Ethical Cheating'?" featuring the dating site OpenMinded.com. (For a paper that famously lags on spotting social trends, the *Times* is really into this nonmonogamy thing.)

Data on open marriages, open relationships, and polyamory is slim, but research points to the growing acceptance of the practice. A 2013 study in *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy* estimated that 4 percent of the population was currently engaged in some kind of consensual nonmonogamy; a year later, a study in the April 2014 *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* found that a substantial minority of people might consider an open relationship—up to 16 percent of women and 31 percent of men. This April, in a survey of 8,700 single people published in the *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 20 percent of the respondents said they'd been in an open relationship at some point, with men and LGBTQ people more likely to answer in the affirmative. (If that number sounds inordinately high, it's because "friends with benefits" was a relationship option, rendering large swaths of us nonmonogamous by default.)

The recent media glut notwithstanding, an important voice has gone missing in the conversation: that of the extracurricular partner, the lover, the girlfriend or boyfriend. The focus is always on the couple—how their adventures in nonmonogamy fuel their partnership and heighten their sex lives; how they're able to navigate sleeping with others without breaking their sacred union.

In the open-relationship world, there's a term for this: "couple privilege." It was introduced to the lexicon by Franklin Veaux,

coauthor, with Eve Rickert, of 2014's *More Than Two: A Practical Guide to Ethical Polyamory*. They define it as "external social structures or internal assumptions that consciously or unconsciously place a couple at the center of a relationship hierarchy or grant special advantages to a couple." You can imagine how this plays out in practical terms. "You're telling her that she's good enough to fuck but not good enough to be seen in public with. You're telling her that you love her—but not as much as you love the social privileges of seeming to be monogamous," Veaux writes on *MoreThanTwo.com*. While "couple privilege" is a concept meant to be resisted by people trying to ethically navigate nonmonogamy, I also saw it as the larger macro lens through which the media reports on these relationships: always through the eyes of the couple, with a tinge of titillation (ethical cheating, sexy!) as well as anxiety (but what about the dying institution of marriage?). It's an angle that only serves to reaffirm the preeminence of coupledom in American culture, not disrupt it.

So who are the mysterious people these nonmonogamous couples are sleeping with? What would it mean to be in someone else's open relationship as a single woman? Would it always seem like the dreaded settling, a lesser version of what one should truly want? Does it always mean wasting a limited amount of emotional and psychological bandwidth? Is it possible to be happy as a "secondary," as wince-inducing as the word is?

Beth, a 37-year-old therapist in San Francisco who's currently dating a couple (sexual with the man, "romantic" but not sexual with the woman), is of two minds about the settling question. She worries that she isn't leaving herself open for the primary relationship she'd eventually like to have because other men will be turned off by what she's doing. On the other hand, "when my sexual and intimacy needs are being met, I feel whole, like I'm not approaching [new] men from a place of need or desperation," she says.

Although it's hard for many to imagine being a sort of auxiliary lover as anything other than agony—as a competition for time with an adversary who holds the best cards: the years together, the marriage certificate, the kids—Beth and many of the other women I talked to said it's much easier being, shall we say, number two rather than number one. "I've been the primary in open relationships, and it's really challenging," she says. As a secondary, she feels "less jealous and less threatened," because to lose the guy would be to lose someone important but not the person "at the center of my world."

Most of the women I interviewed—10 around the country, but mostly in the Bay

Area, where it seems like practically everyone is at least a *little* nonmonogamous—raved about dating polyamorously married men. They were excellent communicators, the women said, because to negotiate the inevitable minefields of nonmonogamy, they had to be. The women attested to feeling loved, adored, cared for: lots of dinners, weekends away, vacations. But they didn't have to play the classic mistress role, either. Since transparency was required—and they were involved, in some way, with the wife or primary partner—they could be out in public as the "girlfriend."

"I loved her like a sister," says Ivy, a 35-year-old Bay Area activist, of her boyfriend's primary girlfriend. "I don't know any woman who isn't occasionally like, God, I just wish someone else would handle my husband tonight. Just make sure he's okay and give him a blow job. I [gave her] that. And I got weeks off, but still got to feel the love of these two people."

Still, Susan—a 44-year-old graphic designer from San Francisco who likes being a secondary because she tends to feel suffocated as part of a traditional couple—acknowledges that there's an inherent sadness to the setup. "They get to go home to their partners and have a conversation around what it was like for them," she says. "I go home and sleep in my own bed alone. Which can be really amazing, but I don't have somebody to [immediately] share my experiences with. And as the secondary lover, it's harder to ask for support. I feel like the man's responsibility is toward his primary relationship, especially if there are children. What's left for me?"

When jealousy does arise, these women seemed to have found a way to keep it from consuming them. Ivy says that her immersion in the "open community" has transformed her attitude toward the emotion. She recalled a time when her boyfriend canceled their plans to visit his main girlfriend in Boulder. "At first, I felt that rising feeling of disappointment and feeling slighted," she says. "Then I thought, What if I put on this new belief: What could be great about having the weekend alone? Well, I'll be able to just drop into myself. I'll be able to read. I'll

"I loved her like a sister," Ivy says of her boyfriend's girlfriend.

be able to spend time walking in the park.

"We were raised with this idea that life is a zero-sum game," she continues. "If you believe that and try this, you're going to be in for a world of pain. You're going to be like, I'm not getting that; *she's* getting that. I'm not saying it's easy to switch paradigms, I'm just saying that it can be beneficial, for pretty much every area of life." Rationalization? Perhaps. But could it also be that Ivy has successfully cultivated a mental framework to cope with reality: namely, that we can't always be at the top of the list, even of those who love us.

Ivy and Beth both want children, and they don't think they have to become monogamists to do it. Ivy hopes to raise any kids she has in a communal setting; as for Beth, she says, "I'm actively looking for a partner, a coparent, or a sperm donor. This is my primary goal for the next year."

The women who've made this model work all simultaneously dated other people to ward off putting undue emphasis or expectation—psychically and practically—on someone who already had a wife and possibly a family. Another management strategy of sorts: Though many of the women said they were in love, they didn't think their partner was The One. "There were certainly aspects of [my partners] that were attractive, but I was never wanting to jockey for the primary position," Beth says. Susan agrees: "I used to say, 'If I could just squish [my lovers] together into one man...'" There are things that are incredibly satisfying about each of them, but for somebody I'd want as my primary, there are definitely things missing."

While reporting this piece, I went on a road trip with a close guy friend and told him how satisfied the women sounded with their arrangements. He wasn't so sure. He thought they were avoiding "true" intimacy by picking and choosing which aspects of a romantic relationship to prioritize. "I want the hard parts, the messy parts, the boring parts," he said. I understood what he meant, but the women didn't seem to be avoiding anything to me. They seemed to be plunging right into the messiness of human entanglement. And they all said they wanted to marry or be a primary...someday. Until I started talking to women who were way outside of conventional relationship patterns.

"AS A TEENAGER, I HAD a sense that I didn't want to settle on just one person," says Mel Mariposa, a 34-year-old relationship coach and author of the blog *Polysingleish* in Vancouver, British Columbia. Still, she got married at 22, with the caveat that someday she'd want to explore her attraction to women. A few years in, when she felt ready to do so, her husband balked at her seeing other

Continued on page 324



THE MORE, THE MERRIER

Continued from page 272

said 19 years ago—that he and Nan were stuck in the suburbs with jobs and kids, so polyamory was their version of mountain climbing, something dangerous and transformative they could do at home. At the time, I thought it was poignant and a little sad. But John did end up climbing mountains. And entering triathlons and Ironman competitions. That was his way of breathing up the chaos energy—in fact, the Ironman phase began when one of Nan’s lovers took him up the angular ridges of Mount Snowdon, the highest point in Wales. “We were above the cloud line and it was one of the great days of my life,” he says. “Shame on me for underestimating myself.”

And the kids? How did they turn out? Their son, Adam, 13 when we first met and now a tall and handsome married man with a new baby, a PhD in engineering, and a “superboring” job making semiconductors in Arizona, tells me they were a “superaffectionate” family, so nothing seemed out of place. “It was never weird; it was surprisingly not weird,” he insists. He remembers Tom as a “very cool guy.” His friends liked hanging out at his house for the “free-spirit vibe.” But his own marriage is “100 percent not anything but traditional.”

As for their daughter, Julia, she was so busy planning her wedding I had to corner her at one of her many engagement parties. Twenty-eight now, a therapist in a locked ward for troubled children, she told me she figured out what was going on by observing other parents. “I remember going to my friend Andrea’s house, and her mom was very upset because Andrea tried to wear pajama pants to school one day. And I was like, ‘Well, I don’t have any of *that* at home because my parents are people.’” Of course, there were some hard times, even times when she wondered why they didn’t get divorced. But on a day like today—the banner stretched across the wall of the rec room says, “Congratulations Julia and Kate”—she appreciates them even more. “I guess that in relationship to myself, it kind of gave me this acceptance of ‘It’s okay to do what feels right.’”

“If I can talk about us for a minute?” Kathy says.

“Please,” John says.

When our daughters were well past 21, she says, she told them that we had “loosened the rules” of our marriage a bit (because Kathy is the secret-garden type and doesn’t care to share the details with outsiders, that’s as much as I can say). Being honest with the kids “felt so good,” she adds. “Nobody should go into a marriage thinking these archaic—”

“The Disney idea of monogamy,” Nan says.

“Whereas the expanded marriage is really, if you look at it in a certain way, tremendously romantic.”

“It is!” Nan says. “It’s a romance that you can

stay with the person through all sorts of things.”

For many people, this may be the strangest concept of all. But it is the heart of this story. Imagine you confront the Great Forbidden and it turns out to be just another fat little man behind a curtain. All your fears and doubts melt away in a blast of freedom. You and your spouse become partners in crime, collaborating instead of negotiating, glowing with a universal energy that really does seem larger than yourself; Nan calls this blissful state “polyhead.”

“The growth of the partner becomes more important than the maintenance of the status quo,” John adds.

“What he needed to do, what he needed to work out,” Nan says, “I had the capacity to support.”

“That’s true love,” I say. “Are you taking notes, Kathy?”

“I’m totally there,” she answers. “You know that, you idiot.”

We all laugh, united by the sense that while we’ve walked between the raindrops, others have gotten soaking wet. We’re a bit smug, it is true. “But we’re longtime married couples,” I point out. “What about people where this is the dynamite that destroys something that might otherwise work?”

“That’s the chance you have to take,” Kathy says.

Her certain tone surprises me. But isn’t that the whole point, after 30 years, to still be surprised by your wife?

SO HERE’S THE FINAL JOKE, the last twist of all this screwing—just when Nan and John decided to quit poly forever and become ordinary swingers, saying good-bye to the endless complexities of complex relationships, they met a pair of swingers who’d had their fill of new bodies and were ready for a deeper commitment. Within a year, the four of them were exclusive partners in what you might call a group marriage (Nan prefers to call it “an exclusive relationship”) that has lasted for nine years and counting. They spend three nights a week as a foursome, pairing off at bedtime, John with the other wife and Nan with the other husband. According to all reports, their sexual pleasure has only increased with time.

This couple did not want to have anything to do with me at first, issuing an absolute blanket refusal to meet or even talk anonymously on the phone. But just before my deadline for this story, they changed their minds and came out for a night of jazz and wine in the city. At first, they seemed just like any progressive older couple, the husband a reserved New Englander with trim gray hair and the wife a little more outgoing. Both in their early sixties, he’s a financial planner and she’s in social services—and that’s as much information as they will let me give. “I’m from Maine,” the husband says. “Even talking to you is a stretch for me.”

But I can tell you this: He’s sober, but she gets wilder as the night goes on and we keep drinking, and soon the social-services do-gooder image melts into the wild Brooklyn punk she once was, hanging with the Weathermen and touring the Hellfire Club with a gay male friend way back in

the ’70s. At one point, I refer to swinging as impersonal. “You know nothing about swinging!” she protests, defiant and frustrated as a teenager. Later, her husband explains: They saw the same swing partners for years; one couple even had their wedding at a swing club. There’s a little swinging in poly and a little poly in swinging and a little of both in ordinary marriages, though it may not get expressed in sex. The labels only limit people. But whatever label you use, he says, the whole thing is more ordinary and natural than outsiders could possibly imagine—as John said, a “less perverted way to live.”

I can’t resist a joke. “Is there a way we can make it less perverted while still *keeping* it perverted?”

“If I can figure that out,” Nan says, “I’ll be a very, very rich woman.”

“You can find out a way to make it both,” John argues. “It doesn’t have to be either/or.” He trots out one of his favorite aphorisms, a variation on Heraclitus’s famous line about never stepping into the same river twice: “You never fuck the same woman twice.”

Nan all but rolls her eyes—if John followed this idea to its logical conclusion, he’d end up a monogamist.

“He loves that line,” she says.

“It’s been trained into me,” John answers. “It didn’t come naturally.”

HAVE WE ARRIVED AT a happy ending? The comedy of remarriage updated for the twenty-first century? Even their best friends have doubts. One suggests that John is hiding something by spreading himself so thin—the girlfriends worshiped him but Nan will call him on his bullshit. Trish thinks Nan’s parents were a driving factor because they criticized their daughter so much: “She has to prove, prove, prove.” Another theory is that John is such a restless and hungry but fundamentally loyal person that he’s had to figure out a way to experience romantic adventures without sacrificing his marriage.

Nan says they’ve had to learn to balance the chaos and control energy in their individual selves instead of relying on the other to supply it (“Google ‘imago therapy,’” she tells me). It does seem significant that both couples are at a later stage in their lives and all of them are about the same age. It also seems safe to say that in the doorway of their lives, John and Nan will always be facing out.

But this much is certain: Their friends and family all approve of the other couple. “They’re so stable, it’s perfect,” one says. “It’s a very giving, supportive relationship,” says another. One reason they’re so accepting is because they all hang out together in that same old rec room, friends and lovers all together in the same tribe, so there’s no mystery or fear casting shadows on the wall. That seems significant to me, and that’s the lesson I take away. Humanity can’t even decide if history is circular or linear, much less judge the inner lives of others. The best answer is to be honest, breathe it up, embrace the chaos, and try to love one another as much as we can. “Fun first,” Dr. Wise prescribes. “There’s an infinite game we can play.” ■



THE EXTRA

Continued from page 273

people. So they broke up, “and I dove headfirst into polyamory,” Mariposa says.

But her flavor of polyamory, dubbed “solo poly,” involves multiple partners, including men in open marriages, but no plans to ever move in with someone, or put him or her above all others. “I see myself in the long term having a solid network around me—not just in terms of my romantic relationships but also my friendships,” she says. “I’m not putting all my eggs in one basket, so to speak. We’re sharing that load together.” Her goal, she says, is to live “off the relationship escalator”—referring to the prevailing model of intimacy that starts with flirting and ascends to legally sanctioned, monogamous marriage.

Wendy, a 38-year-old in San Francisco who runs a Facebook group called Support for Solo Living with 234 members, shares Mel’s desire to remain a “free agent.” (There’s another solo poly Facebook group, with 4,600 members.) She’s in a long-term open relationship, four years and counting, in which she and her man live separately and see each other once a week, once every two weeks. “It’s a very deep relationship,” she says. “We’re just not doing the other stuff together.”

When I called Wendy, she was ready with a list of the reasons she loves her situation. “One: I like my own company,” she says. “Two: Not needing anyone’s permission or agreement for day-to-day decisions. Avoiding the enmeshment or control sometimes present in relationships. Life stability: When breakups happen, there’s less life disruption.” She goes on, “You have more personal time to contribute to your community, to interests or hobbies. This is the last one, and really important: With solo poly, I continue to choose my partner, and my partner chooses me,” versus being caught on that escalator.

Her life actually sounds a lot like mine and many of my single friends’: with overlapping and multiple sexual and romantic relationships that fulfill different needs; prioritizing solo time, strong friendships with all genders, and sexual exploration; and a deep ambivalence toward both having children and total merging with one partner. And it’s different from just randomly sleeping around: Polyamory is predicated on a commitment to honesty and communication.

But still, you might say, *still*. What about getting hurt? Isn’t a secondary especially vulnerable? What if deep down she’d be thrilled if her boyfriend left his wife? “Over time, I’ve learned to assess my level of suffering,” Beth says, to decide whether the good outweighs the bad. “Say I know that I’m falling in love with the person and want more than they’re available to give, I need to let it go.” In other words, she makes the same kind of calculations all of us make in the pursuit of love and romance—whether we believe in the rule of two or three or more, more, more. ■