**As the Other Shoe Drops: Unraveling a Relationship and a Story**

**Leanna Wolfe**

          In the summer of 2001 I decided it was time to wind down my research and write up my findings.  I accepted no teaching assignments and holed up in the small writing office aboard our family houseboat.  I churned out about half a chapter and began to distract myself.  I couldn’t concentrate.  I kept thinking about how creative and reflective I’d felt when I’d been in East Africa three years before.  Then, words would just tumble into my journal and everything around me was fascinating.  I sensed I needed to go sit in a remote third world village and think.

           My book slipped into the depths of my computer as I began the ritual of surfing the web for airfares and opportunities.  By the second week of August I found myself sitting amongst a tribe of Enga people in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea.  I filled my notebooks with stories of polygynous marriages gone awry, witnessed pigs being offered in exchange for the right to marry a bride and took hundreds of amazing pictures.  Some of the New Guinea I visited was decades more primitive than the East Africa I had gotten to know three years before.  I trekked into a traditional Huli village where men’s fears of pollution by women’s menstrual blood were so strong that no man would dare leave the compelling web of village life.

          Meanwhile, my co-wife, Angela, was off on assignment in New York City and my partner, Ron, was home alone.  For once he had time to think over those big questions like, “What am I doing with my life?”   He thought about how often he does service for others and that it is uncommon these days for most people to find value in giving.    So many Americans just think about, “What’s in it for me?”  Their considerations center upon getting more money and getting more things.  And he does have many people that he serves.  Of course there are his students, his daughter Xiomara, me, Angela, his ex-wives, his mother and the rest of his extended family.  At times it feels like he does so much to meet the needs of others, especially the women in his life, and gets so little in return.

           He closed his eyes a moment and began to fantasize about the vacation he and Angela would take to the small Colorado town in which she grew up.  They’d take an overnight train, rent a car and drive all over those beautiful mountains.  In the five years they’d known each other, they’d never gone out-of-state together.  The thought of the vacation excited him.

          Meanwhile, Angela’s assignments in New York City made it so that she had hardly seen Ron all summer.  Her dog barely recognized her when she would breeze into LA for a long weekend.  And she’d have so many catch-up-with-life-chores, that she’d barely find the time to reconnect with Ron.  Finally, mid-August arrived, she packed up her Manhattan apartment and jumped on an-LA-bound plane for the trip she and Ron had planned.  On the plane she was seated next to Victor, a 60-something fashion designer.  During the six-hour flight to LA, they told each other their stories…and began to captivate each other.  In Angela’s mind Victor was everything that Ron was not.  Victor was driven, he had a vision of himself and his future, he was part of the NYC art and fashion world; he was a man on the move.  In that moment Victor was light and Ron was darkness.

          When Ron met Angela at LAX, her mind was elsewhere.  She gave Ron a cursory peck on the cheek and kept her chatter as mindless as possible.  As soon as Ron left the next morning, she called Victor.  And for the next two weeks she lived for the phone conversations with Victor.  She begged out of the vacation with Ron, claiming she had so much to catch up on in LA.  She’d fill her days with appointments—getting her hair colored and restyled, a fresh manicure and of course a bikini wax.  And the first moment she could return to New York City she did.

 Meanwhile, I was studying the intricacies of intertribal warfare in 21st century New Guinea and gathering advice from Huli polygynists on how to create a peaceful-loving household where everyone works to make everyone else’s life better.  In that moment, Western considerations of jealousy and competition seemed worlds away.  Then suddenly I was back on a trans-pacific flight with rolls of what I hoped were great photographs (they were!) and notebooks filled with data and memories.  Ron met me at the airport—after being so many time and culture zones away, it was really great to see him.

 We spent the next morning making love—reconnecting our bodies and our spirits.  Every so often I’d close my eyes and be back in a Highland village, perched on a log writing up the day’s data, then suddenly the light would appear through the clouds in such a way that I’d drop everything, grab my camera and capture that exquisite moment.  That afternoon we picked up my slides…and immediately I wanted to invite our friends over to see them.  New Guinea had really been a photographers’ dream!   I orchestrated a barbecue slide show for the following evening.

 With the mud barely scraped off of my trekking shoes, Ron realized he hadn’t heard from Angela (who was back in NYC) in more than a day and a half.  It was memorial weekend—it wasn’t like her to have gone out of town without telling him.  After 48 hours without a word, (she usually calls several times a day) Ron grew frantic.  We worried that she’d been in accident and had no means of contacting us.  A friend who is a private investigator placed some calls to the NYPD—there were no unidentified hospital admissions in the part of New York City she’d been staying.  All we knew is that she’d checked out of her hotel and left no forwarding information.  Ron was comatose by the time our guests arrived for the barbecue slide show.  We projected the images over our backyard deck, beneath the starry sky; the people, arts, clouds and trees of Highland New Guinea glowed.  Meanwhile, Ron curled up in a dark corner of the house, fearing the very worst had happen to Angela.

 Two days later, Angela called.  She was fine.  She had been reluctant to call because she had been staying at Victor’s flat.  In that moment, her fantasy to be partnered with Victor, the Manhattan-mover-and-shaker, had nearly been realized.  There was just one hitch.  Victor wasn’t comfortable sharing Angela with Ron.  She’d been ordered to sever all ties with Ron in order to realize the next step.  She would be returning to LA the next day to “talk things over.”

I felt two waves of relief.  One, I was glad Angela was okay—no abduction, accident, etc.  And I felt a second quixotic, yet joyful wave that perhaps Victor would be my savior.  I’d often fantasized that if only Angela would disappear then finally Ron and I could refocus on each other and repair the connection that had become so fragmented since she had entered our lives.  I imagined releasing all the pain we’d caused each other, really listening to each other and completely opening our hearts.  We’d open ourselves to the love and intimacy we’d so feared.  And so avoided in taking up with others rather than looking deep into each other’s eyes and each other’s souls.  We’d vow to make our commitment to each other to be more sacred than anything we’d stir up outside.  In that moment, I was ready to send Victor the biggest bunch of roses and the most joyous thank you note I’d ever written.

 Angela had never been happy sharing Ron with me—deep down she’d always wanted him for herself.  While she did enjoy the independence of keeping her own home, she’d often dream about having someone be her full-time, live-in, life partner and lover.   Professionally it would have been a disaster if any of her colleagues found out she were part of a non-traditional relationship.  While being gay was okay, sharing your lover with another woman definitely was not.  While she would take Ron as her date to professional functions, appearing to co-workers as if she were in an above-board-monogamous relationship, in her bones she felt like a fraud.  If Victor could become her one and only sweetheart/soulmate/life partner, then life would be exceptionally good.  Even her usually aloof sister excitedly jumped for joy at the thought of Angela being in a “normal” relationship.

 The only one who wasn’t happy with these new prospects for the future was Ron.  In fact, Ron was downright miserable.  Ron stopped tending his garden, stopped shopping for groceries, virtually ignored his daughter and could barely look me in the eye.  All waking (and sleeping) hours that he wasn’t at work, he’d be at Angela’s.  He needed to be there.  He needed to find out how this woman who had so loved him—whose commitment to him seemed so indelible, could have lied about having met Victor, lied about why she didn’t want to take a vacation with him and now was considering leaving him altogether.

 What had he done wrong?  What could he do to bring her back into his life?  How could Victor make such demands?  Didn’t he have any respect for him and Angela and the long term loving relationship they’d built?  Ron couldn’t leave Angela’s home until these answers came clear.  No one and nothing else mattered.  He barely ate, barely slept; his life as he’d designed it was in crisis.  Life with just me would be unacceptable.  I couldn’t offer him the attention, the connection and the synergy that Angela did.  I couldn’t generate the companionship that she’d offered—she made him feel seen in a way I’d never been able to.  I was too busy with my teaching, my writing, my photography and all of my friends to really engage him the way she could.  She really cared.  No one else had cared for him the way that she had.

 Ron searched for the flaw in Angela that made her do what she did.  In one moment she’d claim she was in a love-struck daze, perhaps an endorphinated spell and couldn’t think for herself.  Then later she’d admit that she very consciously orchestrated the encounter with Victor—that she’d been wanting a way out of her relationship with Ron.  She knew exactly what she was doing by spending her summer vacation in LA primping her body in preparation for a true-blue-connection with Victor.

 On September 11 two American passenger planes flew into the World Trade Center, another one smashed into the Pentagon and a final one crashed into a field in rural Pennsylvania.  Angela didn’t return to New York for many weeks.  Like many Americans, our lives felt indelibly twisted and shaken.  We could only ask ourselves big questions.  On that painful Tuesday, Ron, Angela, Xiomara and I took our dogs hiking in the San Gabriel Mountains; we were blessed to all be alive and that there was a place our dogs could run free and the sky was quite blue.

 Despite the trauma and insecurity we all felt, Ron continued to stay at Angela’s.  I knew any African co-wife worth her salt would have headed over there with her sharpest kitchen knife, making it clear that dominating their husband was clearly unacceptable.  I felt abandoned and powerless as I prepared food for Xiomara and myself and stared at televised images of those crashing towers.  At some point I grew numb to that ubiquitous footage and increasingly impatient with Ron’s “healing” process.   He hadn’t slept at home in weeks.

 While he would say that his absence was nothing about me, I nonetheless took it personally.  He’d already admitted just having me as his partner was unacceptable.  And in one unguarded moment, the mystery of *us* fell apart.  Pushed into a corner he revealed that he and Angela had a much more satisfying sexual chemistry than we did.  I readily retorted that I’d felt more heat and interest with other lovers as well.  In that he wasn’t sleeping at home anyway, I grabbed at the last straw there was and proclaimed that I was no longer interested in being his lover.  Angela had had unprotected sex with Victor and as part of his “healing” process, Ron was having unprotected sex with her.  On just a viral level, I had no interest in being part of their soup.

 Polyamory, as we’ve practiced it, isn’t for the fainthearted adventurist.  Serious emotions get ignited, compelling passions get exposed and moreover there’s no safe bricked path back to sweet secure monogamy.  Once someone else touches your heart, or for that matter, deep into your body, you return transformed.  While some swingers may gaze into the distance as they copulate with strangers they may never encounter again, the unbridled passions that polyamory invites, inhabit another realm.  Perhaps for my own esteem, I had dismissed Ron’s relationship with Angela.  I’d tell myself that all they did was walk her dog, watch TV and do crossword puzzles.  But certainly much more had been ignited and a deep and meaningful synergy had been sustained.  And the thought of her disappearing into Victor’s high-powered world of New York fashion and design shook Ron at his core.

 Perhaps the events of September 11 were what saved Ron and Angela’s relationship.  If she had woken up in Victor’s bed that tragic morning, she would have would been blocks from the epicenter, sharing an emotion-charged event with a man who felt like a soulmate.  Instead she woke up 3,000 miles away in the loving safety of Ron’s arms.  Air travel was suspended that week.  Moreover, it took many more weeks for a version of “business as usual” to return to New York.  Victor’s urgency over having Angela break off with Ron and be with him, became a petty power play amidst the real rubble than befell lower Manhattan.  In such times of turmoil we stick with who we know and who truly loves us.

 In the following weeks Ron remained fearful that Angela still could disappear forever.  It had started with fearing her loss in early September and then he’d been engaged in a quixotic battle with Victor over Angela’s soul.   It persisted in fears that if she returned to Manhattan, terrorists might be aboard her plane, bomb the office buildings she worked in or otherwise obliterate the woman who knows his heart and his soul.  One day he came home with a bag of groceries and as if nothing much had happen over the last two months, began to cook dinner.  I asked him what was going on.  He quietly responded, “Nothing much.”  The “healing” he so needed was well underway.

 Meanwhile, I had called hundreds of imaginary realtors in search of a new home and a new life so that the next time an event as earth shattering as September 11 occurred I wouldn’t be left alone in bed for so very long.  Why didn’t I actually place any of those calls?  Mostly the world felt too shaky to make a sudden move.  And then I’d fret over not being able to afford a home with a large enough yard for my dog, abandoning Xiomara in the middle of the school year and how troubled Ron would be if I took our new kitten as well.  I faced that my home life was *much*bigger than my relationship with Ron.  When I considered how very alone I’d feel in an empty house with just one neurotic cat, one Australian Shepherd and no external dramas and traumas, I realized it wasn’t what I wanted to do.

 The following month Ron and Angela released themselves from their quagmire enough to attend my fifth Papua New Guinea slide show.  While Ron did help me set up the equipment, I began to see our very separate archetypes.  He’s the orphan, while I’m the wanderer.  I’m off sitting inside remote smoky huts journaling about the challenges of traditional polygyny in today’s missionary-infested New Guinea Highlands, while he’s doing everything he can to keep his Southern California home and hearth intact.  I’m forever flying the coop in search of more amazing pictures and better data, while he’s preparing food and buying special treats for all the people and pets that he loves.  While I stay in touch with some of my exes and generate love and intensity with the new men I meet, the women in his life are much more demanding.  They need money, practical assistance and a steep serving of the nurturing emotion-thick stew he’s so adept at cooking up.

 When I first told Ron I no longer wanted to be his lover, it felt like an attention-seeking angry proclamation that I wouldn’t actually keep to.  Then, much to my amazement, I found value in my newfound status as the emotionally unfettered public wife.  Finally, I released all of the jealousy I had towards Angela; she was no longer my competitor.  We now inhabited completely separate arenas.  I faced that much of what had troubled me over the last five years had been that she’d attempted to occupy my domain, causing me to fear displacement.  Now that our domains were completely separate, I recovered my esteem and my security.  I stopped scrutinizing the nature of Ron’s connection with Angela; it held no further interest to me.  I remained Ron’s life partner in the areas of keeping a home, parenting (his daughter and our two cats and two dogs), and business (producing videos, photography and books).

 With my emotional, sexual, and spiritual arenas wide open I quickly built connections with other men.  And for the first time in my nine years of relationship with Ron, he actually found one of them to be acceptable!  He, Jason, lives in a distant town and when he visits, Ron would graciously stay at Angela’s home to give us privacy.  And unlike the single men I’d attempted to convert to polyamory, Jason very much lives a polyamorous life.  He lives with his wife and teenage sons while maintaining a passionate connection with his lover and colleague Rachel.  While it seemed that his plate was more than brimming, somehow our connection took hold.  Together we taught each other about unfettered love—a love that could be kindled in spite of all of the real life baggage busy mid-life professionals carry.  Despite that marriage, children and owning a home together were not in our mutual futures; we could love and engage each other from the core.  There were no limits to our fantasies or the real life ways we’d manage to actualize them.

 Sometimes we’d madly exchange five e-mails in a day trying to plan business and professional projects or sort out a theory one of us had conjured up about how love, life and relationships work.  He’d traveled and lived in as many odd and remote places as I had and had complete empathy for my experiencer-mode of figuring out human behavior.  While I’d never given much credence to soul mates, in Jason, I sensed I’d gotten close.  I could tell him more of my truth than I’d told just about anyone else and he’d make me feel very heard.  It was as if we’d grown up in the same cultural mélange and serendipitously landed on the exact same lily pad.

Now most Americans would be pretty unimpressed at the thought of loving someone they could never marry whilst living with someone who no longer captivated their erotic and emotional soul.  The more I thought about this, the more I faced that this is exactly how humans have lived for most of civilized time.  One’s home base was not one’s love base; there were public marriages for reputation and procreation, and then there was love and romance.  In Old Europe there were the stately Lords and then the love-struck Troubadours.  In Modern Europe there are proper public marriages and then the slightly more hidden mistresses.  In Latin America there is the *Casa Grande* and the *Casa Chica*.  How fascinating that in my search for “new” paradigms beyond Modern Western Society’s embrace of monogamy, I landed in one of the oldest paradigms known to humans!

 Would living a day-to-day life with Ron, spinning lost in paradise fantasies with Jason, and being open to the many forms of Eros that cross my path be my final answer?  Would a less-fettered Jason-type be able to sweep me off my feet and sweet-talk me into monogamous marriage?  Could the unadulterated fantasies that a distant lover /courtesan conjures up ever be sustained in a dirty-laundry-need-to-go-grocery-shopping day-in-day-out relationship?  Of course not.  And that’s one good reason a very old paradigm made so much sense to my 21st century life.

 One evening, it struck me that it was time to stop being so angry with Ron.  With the state of the world as fragile as it is, I faced that as Americans, especially; our days could be numbered.  And for whatever time we have left, it would be better for us to be lovers than to be foes.  With thick calluses from all of those layers of emotional estrangement, we reconnected.  It wasn’t one of those wide-eyed full-bodied full-trust dives into an optimistic soup of interdependency, it was cautious and it was honest.  I had no designs on wrestling him back from Angela…and he, too, knew better than to try to give me what Jason does.  We are simply another polyamorous couple with our own deeply-layered story.