

Discoveries and Dalliances in New York City

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I returned home from Mexico and was welcomed into a small coven of San Francisco travel writers including Ed Buryn who had just published *Vagabonding in America*. After a year of cappuccinos in the mid-70s hole-in-the-wall cafes in North Beach, the Haight and Noe Valley, work as an applied anthropologist studying the learning challenges for immigrant Hispanic children at a community reading clinic, late night visits with Hernando and proper dates with Eduardo, I decided it was time to go to graduate school in anthropology.

Hernando had just finished a Master's Thesis on the cultural trajectories of Latin American immigrants and I would go over his house to read it in that ease of sharing pdf files was some 20 years into the future. I would make careful notes on his theoretical analysis, in an effort to build a mentor/colleague relationship. After the third visit, he suggested, "Why don't you take the thesis home with you and come lie down here with me?" Quickly our intellectual exchange transitioned to hugging and kissing and ultimately a series of late-night drop-ins. I would attempt to have the visits include dinner or drinks, while he preferred cutting to the chase. One time the passion escalated so quickly that there was no time to insert my diaphragm. For the following week and a half, I was both worried and excited that I might be pregnant. I wanted a thicker connection with him and dreamed of parenting our half-Costa Rican half-Jewish love child. Eventually my period arrived. In that Hernando's girlfriend was my summer job supervisor, I was ultimately relieved that none of his sperm met my egg.

Then there was Eduardo, who happened to share a flat with Hernando, but whom I met independently. Eduardo prided himself on being better behaved than Hernando. He was a well-connected community organizer who would take me out to dinner and wrote me a letter of recommendation for a graduate school scholarship. As long as there was an intellectual

connection which I believed implied mutual respect, I would readily agree to decidedly casual sex. Sometimes I feared I was being an easy *Gringa*, but the joy of connecting with these accomplished Hispanic men with undertones of *macho* masculinity, kept me agreeing to their offers.

In the fall of 1977 I entered the graduate program in Anthropology at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan. In that classes met in the evenings, my days were free for work or do community research. I volunteered with a Lower East Side oral history project, offered a workshop on Cultural Imperialism at a progressive community center, and studied Feminist/Marxist Anthropology and Political Economy. One summer I got hired to work with young people in central Brooklyn. I taught them interviewing and oral history techniques and ultimately created a community book titled, *Flatbush from the Youth Perspective*. Dennis Bernstein, who was then a WBAI radio producer, created a lovely feature profiling the students and the book.

When I arrived in New York City, I was a cultural virgin. One night while waiting for a subway at Astor Place, I discovered that I was alone on the platform a mere 10 feet away from a man who was staring into me while furiously stroking his cock. I ran towards the stairs; waited on the landing with my ears trained on the rumble of the next train. As a distant rumble sounded, I ran down the stairs only to discover it wasn't my train. The guy was right there where I left him with his pants still open. I charged up the stairs again, my heart beating with full on fear. Eventually my train arrived; once home my head would not stop spinning. As I became a more seasoned strap-hanger, I learned to avoid empty platforms by pretending to join groups of strangers or staying near the station agent and only heading downstairs when I was absolutely sure a train was on its way. In that taxis were well-beyond my graduate student budget, my other

strategy for avoiding these uncomfortable encounters was to stay over wherever my late-night forays ended.

One night Jose, a Dominican grad student invited me over for dinner. He shared a small apartment with his identical twin brother Carlos. We got stoned and talked about philosophy and the human condition for hours and hours. At about 2 AM, I asked, "Can I sleep over?" Being that they were identical twins, I was equally attracted to both of them. Nonetheless, Jose made sure that I sleep with him and not his brother. Eventually, the chatter transitioned into kissing and quietly turning each other on while equally interesting Carlos snored away.

After about a year I met Tom, a short intense Italian with curly auburn hair. He sported a newly minted PhD in Anthropology from Columbia University and had a wild unruly side that readily matched mine. We first met at the dawn of 1979 at a crowded New Year's Eve party on the Upper West Side. I had arrived with my boyfriend Michael, an honorable and caring Jewish writer. Nonetheless, Tom and I flung ourselves around the dance floor and chatted about his soon-to-be-published book. I slipped Tom my phone number, advising that I would be available in a month in that I was leaving for California the next day. Michael, meanwhile, was decidedly perturbed that Tom and I were so drawn to each other.

Several weeks later, Michael and I were broken up and I went to an anthropology seminar featuring Richard Lee's work on hunter-gatherer cultural and economic practices. Tom was in attendance. I could not get my eyes off of him. As the crowd dispersed I approached him. "Yes, of course I remember you," he said, "but I was reluctant to call in that you said you wouldn't be available until February." He wrote his number on a small slip of paper.

The next week, I invited him over for dinner. He spoke about the fieldwork he had done in the slums of Naples. I was captivated. Like me he was drawn to the gritty underworld and

had the capacity to go deep to capture every nuance. After dinner we walked ten blocks over to his place. He lived in a studio apartment furnished with a small dining table, a couple of chairs and two single beds. We were in no particular rush to make love and agreed that whatever the attraction was between us, we'd give it time to brew.

For our second date we arranged to see "Norma Rae" at a Greenwich Village movie theater. The movie was about to start and he had not arrived. I went in, presuming he would join me. My experience was that he stood me up. His experience was that I stood him up in that I was not in front of the movie theater when he showed up five minutes later. He waited outside the movie theater for an additional half hour, went to a bar to get a drink and then returned to the movie theater to catch me when I exited. He didn't see me and I didn't see him. At 10 PM we boarded different trains back to Brooklyn.

The next day I called to find out what happened. We both accused each other of inappropriate behavior! I was apparently, "More interested in seeing the whole movie than in getting together." And he wasn't, "A mind reader" who knew that all he needed to do was enter the theater and grab the seat I was saving for him. If we'd only had cell phones, there would have been no such misunderstanding! Sadly it was some 20 years before I would get my first flip phone. We finished patching things up that afternoon at a romantic café in Little Italy.

Our next date was a dinner party with several editors from the Knopf Publishing Company. I downed two gin and tonics and attempted to converse with one of the well-heeled editors about my commitment to social change and activist anthropology. Tom and I were seated next to each other; his fingers were exploring whatever they could discretely access below the table cloth. As I munched a mouthful of rich chocolate cake, he whispered, "Let's get out of here." I smiled, "Yes." Outside in the blustery February cold, we shared one of those

interminably long kisses. My body shuddered all over. We snuggled close on the subway back to his place in Park Slope. He offered me some sweet apricot juice and we resumed kissing and then he playfully threw me onto one of the beds. I wanted him and I was scared. We matched and we didn't. I liked his rough masculinity and the way he confidently removed my clothes. I was too anxious to orgasm together or even admit that I faked a shudder and a moan. Afterwards he crawled into the second bed across the room. I was freezing and barely slept, knowing he was nearby but not snuggled into me.

As we saw more of each other, we started having amazing sex. He was funny, confident and full of passion. I was no longer anxious—I would spill my thoughts all over the room and he would track each one of them. We'd talk about doing engaged fieldwork, authenticity, post-modernism and scheme about revolutionizing the lumpenproletariat. I would then lie back and bellow, "Oh my god...oh my god!" as he pumped super hard. We couldn't get enough of each other. His unbridled passion and my curiosity with the edgy and extraordinary unleashed a potent connection.

I became completely captivated. In his presence all I could do was tremble and beg for more—more heady conversation, more of his Italian cooking, the red wine and yes more, much more sex. Sometimes he'd slap me on the butt or pin me down onto the bed – I had no idea why it worked or why I liked it. At the time, I was clueless that any of this behavior had a name or a subculture attached to it.

Ultimately the dating relationship was short-lived. He had recently divorced, having fled a working class Long Island suburb for an erotically sustainable life in New York City. His capacity for intimacy was limited. He absolutely refused to share a bed, contending that, "Such an act is extremely sacred...it would take me a couple of years to feel that sort of bond!" He

would point out, “The ascetic scholars of the Middle Ages knew better than to share their beds!” Moreover, bisexuality was on both of our minds. While my encounters with women were rich emotionally and slightly erotic, his explorations with men were decidedly intense as he engaged post-Stonewall pre-AIDS Gay New York. Being that I could not tolerate his refusal to engage in post-coital snuggling, we migrated to Wednesday night visits where we’d engage in no holds barred conversation and the wildest sex I’d ever known. He’d snort potent fumes from a small bottle that would raise his heart rate and produce an intensity I’d never imagined. Afterwards, I’d pull myself together and he’d walk me home.

My erotic life began to impact my scholastic interests. I volunteered to be a guest editor for the sexuality issue of *Heresies*, a feminist arts magazine and I poured much passion into my Master’s Thesis, “Towards a Cross-Cultural Understanding of Female Sexuality.” I was so overcome by the orgasms I was experiencing that I wondered if women in other times and places were equally moved. I noted that male anthropologists who reported on sexual behaviors had little access to women’s stories and sensations; I sought to create a Sexual Anthropology that celebrated the female experience.

I started dating Sean, a political organizer I’d met over the phone. I had placed a call to NYPIRG (The New York Public Interest Research Group) for assistance in research methodologies for a school project. I was referred to Sean who was not only helpful, but very engaging. When he told me he would prepare a packet of materials for me to review, I offered to drop by his office so we could meet in person. At the time he was living with a girlfriend and presented himself as unavailable for a more personal connection. He was tall and blonde with sparkling blue eyes, slightly crooked teeth and a delightful mix of quirky, passionate and adorable. Like me, he very much wanted to make the world a better place.

One weekend his girlfriend went out of town and he invited me to see “Peppermint Soda” at a midtown movie theater. Afterwards we walked in the rain along the southern edge of Central Park and then escaped into a café for hot chocolate. As he disentangled from his girlfriend, we began to spend more time together. Ours became a full-bodied relationship where we’d go backpacking in the Ramapo Torne, the Grand Canyon and the High Sierras, get to know each other’s families, share a home and raise several cats.

Sean had grown up in a small Ohio town in an austere Missouri Synod Lutheran community. He, too, was seeking a life apart from the world of his parents. Considering the gaps between their world and his early-80s New York City world, on Christmas morning he would peruse the religion section of the *New York Times* and note the services he might have attended. After a lazy morning of giggles, lots of sweet sex and the deepest emotional connection, he would call them with his faux sermon and choir report.

Soon after Sean and I began living together, it became clear that I wouldn’t be able to hang without my Tom-fix. And thus I became polyamorous – some 12 years before the word *polyamory* (the consensual engagement of multiple partners) was coined. While Sean was a wonderful guy who I absolutely respected, every Wednesday I’d find my way over to Tom’s apartment for delicious pasta, poppers and to completely lose my head and shriek it all out. I’d arrive home with a gooey diaphragm gently leaking the night’s pleasures into my panties and curl up quietly on my side of the bed. While part of me wanted to take a shower and wash Tom away, I dutifully followed the diaphragm instructions and left it in for the prescribed post-sex six hours. Tom with his two single beds and disdain for post-coital cuddling, had no interest in displacing Sean. While Tom and Sean certainly knew about each other...and Tom would drop

by for the parties Sean and I hosted, the disconnect I'd feel sleeping on my side of the bed with the dripping diaphragm was excruciatingly private.

Thinking back, the intersection of our lives where Tom would pound into me and I'd grab all of him might have saved both of us. His sexual explorations ultimately led him to contracting AIDS; he passed away in 1995, having lived an exhilarating but truncated life. I cried hard when a mutual friend recalled how he would gloat over our potent connection. Ah, if I could have weathered the two separate beds and thus averted his deadly HIV infection! I remain, nonetheless grateful to him for kindling in me a high standard for passion and playful kink.

Rayna Rapp, one of my graduate school professors, invited me to research the nascent home birth and midwifery movements in New York City. Bridgette Jordan's *Birth in Four Cultures* had just been published which exposed how relative to Holland and the Yucatan (where I had witnessed a quiet and simple hammock-based home birth), birth in North America was being co-opted by the medical industrial complex. Rather than the empathic synergy between an awake and aware birthing mother and her midwife, women were being hooked up to fetal monitors and C-section rates were going through the roof. As the American story unfolded, I sensed that an applied anthropological approach would be in order and began to research a book, *Giving Birth in New York City: A Guide to Childbirth Options*.

Sean arranged for NYPIRG to publish the book and organized an advisory board to ensure the book's accuracy and a base of community support. We stayed late many nights at NYPIRG's lower Manhattan offices working on the book's design and layout. The press campaign (organized by Sean), included coverage in the *New York Times*, *New York Magazine* and an appearance on "Apple Polishers," a TV show featuring good work done by New Yorkers. To keep up with all the press we received, I would hand-distribute copies to book stores all over

Manhattan and Brooklyn. Following the success of the book, I made *Changes in Childbirth*, an award-winning documentary film, wherein I was able to feature many of the 1980s players in New York City's natural birth movement. Like the days I spectated sex as a teen virgin, in my 20s, I'd become a childbirth expert without ever having birthed a child of my own. From a purely chronological perspective, the early 1980s might have been an ideal time to have had my own children. I'd finished my MA in Anthropology and Sean and I had begun to live together.

After graduate school, it was a challenge to find sustaining employment. I worked for a semester teaching at several New Jersey colleges—the commute was overwhelming with subways, carpools, trains, and a bit of hitchhiking (where the police would pick me up admonishing me to not hitchhike)! On the days I wasn't teaching, I worked as a Spanish bilingual/bicultural research assistant for a social services study in East Brooklyn. When these assignments ended I worked as an employment counselor for a Manhattan technical school and then for the New York State Department of Labor, which was impossibly tedious. One day the paper shredder broke and my supervisor assigned me to be a human paper shredder. I tore two pieces of paper in half and then quit on the spot. I paced around Central Park that afternoon, determined to never again accept menial work!

I never did find my way to becoming a wife and a biological mother. I worried that having children would derail Sean from his demanding career as an activist and political organizer. I admired his impassioned speeches and certainly gave lip service to the causes he embraced. The same time, I wished that he could work fewer hours, limit the size of his book collection and make a bit more money. One of my close male friends suggested that I trick Sean into getting me pregnant in that ultimately it would lead us to good things like marriage and family. I was way too scared (and perhaps had too much integrity) to pull off such a ruse and

thus didn't. Years later I mentioned the suggested ruse to Sean who had since married a sweet woman with whom he'd had a wonderful son. Sean reflected, "If you had gotten pregnant at 28, we would have certainly gotten married." It brought tears to my eyes, considering how close I had been to a having a child with him.

Needing to shake things up, in 1982 Sean and I left New York City and moved to Berkeley, my cultural hometown. I focused on being a documentary filmmaker and Sean continued his political activism. We lived in a white-picket fenced house where we might have raised a young family. Instead, we rented out the second bedroom to a series of roommates and my restlessness led me to scrutinize our once lovely sexual connection. I flew back to New York City to attend a friend's wedding and wallowed in a couple of nights of super-charged sex with Tom. I returned to Berkeley in a dither.

I tried to get Sean to slap my butt and pin me to the bed the way Tom did. It didn't work. Sean was no Dom ...and there was nothing that could be done about it. Our erotic appetites could not line up. He wanted me to wear cheap lingerie that he could rip off my body; initially it was fun, but ultimately didn't sustain my interest. Without the buffer of children, we were really stuck.

We felt powerless to rekindle the excitement of the attraction phase of romantic love when our brains were on fire with dopamine and norepinephrine. Our brain chemistries had long-since converted to the attachment phase wherein oxytocin and vasopressin, the snuggle hormones, were being produced. I did not know that relationships go through cycles and that deepened passion could ignite new layers of intimacy and excitement. All I knew is that we could no longer access our early in-love madness when we'd make out between sips of fresh squeezed orange juice under the table of Oggi's, our favorite Soho café, snuggle tight on

roundtrip Staten Island ferry rides and kiss under the moonlight on the Lower Manhattan rooftop of Sean's office.

I had an affair with a successful San Francisco attorney named Rob. Suddenly my dopamine receptors fired up and I would obsess over the wonderful life I might have with him. The affair with Rob was short-lived. Afterwards, Sean and I saw a relationship counselor who was unable to help us through our impasse. I implored Sean, "At least get mad at me for getting so impassioned over Rob!" He couldn't. His focus was on changing the world and I was too much trouble. My crazed dopamine receptors were out of gas and I reluctantly left an otherwise wonderful human being. Sean eventually married; seven years later I wrote, *Women Who May Never Marry: The Reasons, Realities and Opportunities*.