

When One Lover Is Not Enough

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Three years after Angela became my co-wife I had to admit that her addition into my life continued to be an unnerving experience. Despite occasional efforts to socialize as a threesome, the most comfortable configuration we'd found was that of two twosomes with Angela and I each having half the week with Ron and the other half to ourselves. Being that there were two separate relationships, there were always secrets. To quell my discomfort over this, I'd tell myself that Ron and Angela's relationship was boring and that I had little interest in knowing what went on between them. While I resented how much of Ron's time and energy went into Angela and her home, I also felt there was absolutely nothing I could do about it.

Angela would remind me that Ron had made a commitment to her and that the time he spent alone with her was barely her fair share. Hour per hour I had to agree. He'd spend many more waking hours futzing around our home, fixing computers, working in the yard, and remodeling the kitchen and the bathroom. I also knew that he cared lots more for our two cats than he did for her two cats. Every so often Angela would have outbursts over how dispensable she was—that if something horrible were to happen to her, no one would be there for her. She'd proclaim she was just as alone as she would have been had she never gotten involved with Ron. Only now she was in love with him...and too often it just didn't feel like he was hers. While for Ron the arrangement drew him much loving focused attention, the downtime that Angela and I were left with caused problems. She'd call him countless times on the evenings he was supposed to visit with me. Sometimes her calls were filled with much emotional urgency, with fears that he wasn't really there for her. He'd seem so distant, like he couldn't come over even if she'd really needed him. Sometimes I'd suggest that he just go over there. The sound of her pain would so overwhelm me that I didn't want to be responsible for keeping her from feeling better.

Meanwhile, I proceeded to fashion a social life sans Ron. Often I'd get together with girlfriends and we'd do lunch, take hikes and yak up a storm. On the weekends I'd go to parties with my old friends. About a year after I'd returned from Africa, I felt a growing desire to have a second lover. Under the current circumstances, Ron was clearly not enough for me. He wasn't available half the week, and Angela's emotional demands continued to wear him (and me) down. I thought to myself, if I could have the perfect new lover, what would he be like? He'd be cute and playful and have lots of energy to do fun things like dancing and swimming and hiking. He should be interested in me, but not so interested that he'd make the kind of time and emotional demands that Angela makes on Ron.

I needed a lover who'd send shivers down my spine. I had no plan; I just figured that someday I might meet him. In June 1999 that day arrived. It was a sunny Saturday afternoon and I'd dropped by a girlfriend's pool party. It was Ron's date night with Angela and I was bearing up to another lonely Saturday night followed by a way too quiet Sunday morning. As I walked in I immediately caught the eye of an extremely attractive man who looked to be about my age. My first impulse was that he looked too cute and that I'd better keep some distance. I

doubted he was as taken by me as I was by him and so I for the next hour I just chatted with whoever came by. Then one of my girlfriends whispered that Michel, the very cute guy, wanted to meet me. It was time. The next moment I turned around, there he was and immediately we embraced. I had no idea what to say to him, all I knew is that he had a cute ass, dancing eyes, and long brown ringlety hair. Within moments we were snuggling on a couch and making plans to spend the evening together.

I was a bit astounded at myself. I couldn't remember the last time I'd met someone at a party and gone home with him. Maybe it was San Francisco in the 70s. I floated into Michel's crowded Santa Monica townhouse. We talked, drank, and tried to eat. We were way too smitten to have an appetite. It had been so long since I'd been with a lover other than Ron that our attempts at intimacy felt awkward. He smelled different, moved different, and touched different. It was exciting, but also unreal.

The next morning I called Ron and told him where I was and what had happened. It didn't sit well with him. Ron's reaction to me taking a new lover was so different from how I'd reacted over Angela. During the first months that I knew about Angela, we had a lot of sex. Ron seemed to have to prove to me over and over again that he loved me, was attracted to me and very much wanted to be with me. Now, with my new passion for Michel, Ron just backed off. He refused to make love, and would barely hug me or look me in the eye. Initially, I was so taken by Michel that it was a bit of a relief that Ron was keeping a distance. The same time I was anxious about losing touch with Ron. While I did find Michel to be lots more than a pretty face, I had no interest in leaving Ron for him. I, too, had come to believe that for me one lover isn't enough.

For the first couple of weeks, I'd arrive at Michel's place in the evening and he'd cook me delicious dinners and then we'd make love. He'd making me shiver and writhe in ecstasy, doing things to my body that no one had ever done before. Then one weekend afternoon I felt a fever coming on. Quickly it escalated into a summer flu, which soon brought on weeks and weeks of laryngitis. I hadn't been so sick in years. Some days all I did was wrap myself in blankets until I'd get covered in a clammy sweat. Then I'd smear suntan lotion all over and lay out in the hot afternoon sun. I considered that perhaps the reason my voice disappeared for so long was that I was very anxious over what I'd been feeling. While I considered Ron a man I was proud to have as my life partner, I had so much more fun with Michel. With Michel I could say whatever was on my mind and it was okay. And I could hear whatever was on his mind and that was okay, too. We gave each other the space to be very truthful.

Then as my voice returned, Michel began to venture out from his initial infatuation with me. He claimed that though I looked like his ideal lover, I didn't behave like her. There were things about me that just didn't please him. The more I listened to his complaints, the more I was ready to go packing. Here was a man who was so picky that no woman in years had ever been just right. In one breath I told him that I didn't want to get in the way of his search for Ms. Extremely Right and then in another breath I found myself saying, "You can't go away." Finally, I proclaimed that since I was practicing polyamory by continuing to relate to Ron, he should continue to be lovers with me while he searched for the woman of his dreams. He agreed.

The next phase of our connection was much more casual. Sometimes he'd drop by my houseboat / writing office and we'd take a swim and make love. Other times we'd just swim or go on a hike. Sometimes we wouldn't see each other for weeks. We'd rarely go to parties together; our social lives seemed more and more separate. Then his best friend whom he'd grown up with in Montreal called to announce that he was coming to LA. As teens, fueled by the francophonization of Eastern Canada, they both renamed themselves "Michel." He went on to mention that in their early 20s they had shared a woman. Teasingly I asked, "Would you do it again?" He nodded. About six weeks later, Michel #2, arrived.

I was anxious when Michel #2 stepped into Michel's bedroom. I'd never before met this man and now it was presumed he would become my lover. He smoked cigarettes (I Ron't) and lacked the artistic flair of Michel #1. It certainly wasn't the first meeting I would have orchestrated, but out of deference to their connection, I didn't protest. I wondered what it was that had kept them close over the last 35 years. They showed me a film they had shot of themselves in Paris when they were in their late teens. I started to sense a bit of their history and their own relationship.

Still, I feared being regarded as a cheap slut that Michel had so little respect for that he would pass her on to his friend. I was assured that this wasn't the case. Rather because Michel loved Michel #2 so much, he wanted to share me, his special lover. Perhaps with so many years living apart, they had a strong desire to feel close. And while they might be uncomfortable being directly sexual with each other, a woman between them would make a physical sharing possible.

Nonetheless, I had little basis to want to be lovers with Michel #2. I was a bit frightened that this man I'd never before seen, was going to touch me in an intimate way. While, I didn't feel like I would be in any danger, I feared I would be uncomfortable being touched by a man I had no interest in or connection to.

I closed my eyes and hoped for the best. Soon I found myself in an extremely delectable position. Rather than being scrutinized for not being "the one," I was transported into the world of unrequited love that family and best friends share. And I became the recipient of amazing kisses, caresses, and much erotic intensity. With two lovers, my mind couldn't wander off as far. With so many of my erogenous spots being stimulated simultaneously, orgasms kept tumbling out. While I made occasional efforts to stimulate my partners, I mostly basked in being the focus of their attention. Finally, I felt I was making up for all of those cold lonely nights when Ron stayed with Angela. For me, in that moment, two simultaneous lovers were completely enough.

During the next week I felt extremely tight-lipped about what had happened with the two Michels. Some of the time I felt weird for having been intimate with Michel #2 who was still a stranger and the rest of the time I sensed I'd crossed into a dark spooky world of erotic taboos. I figured that if I never did it again no one would ever find out and it would just be a private secret. Life didn't unfold in that way. Instead I started pondering Michel #2. Who was this man who comfortably chimed into Michel's and my erotic play? Was he actually attracted to

me? Could there be a connection between he and I as well? I figured that the best way I could begin to surmise these questions was out of the bedroom.

The following weekend I invited both Michels to join me at an outdoor concert at the Hollywood Bowl. During the concert I floated from one Michel to the other. Sometimes my legs would be wrapped around one, while the other would run off to look for friends or find us better seats. Being that there were so many people there, our three-way affection seemed to go unnoticed. Later that night my attraction to Michel #2 felt genuine and we became lovers in Michel #1's bed. It was an amazing moment, filled with passion and the generosity of spirit that both Michels share.

When I'd appear in public with Ron and Angela, we'd make efforts to not draw attention to our three-way relationship by saying we were "just friends" and keeping our hands locked in our pockets. With the Michels it was another story. Spurred by my efforts to gather data on how the general public reacts to poly love, we'd walk arm in arm, engage in three-way hugs, and announce to anyone who cared what we were up to. Women that we'd meet would acknowledge my euphoria, but would choose to keep a distance. Men's reactions ranged from regarding me as sexually available to them as well, to asking me which Michel I really preferred. When we rented a hotel room on a weekend getaway, the hotel concierge wished us well, proclaiming, "You only live once!" I was so giddy about finally getting to be poly in public!

During the last couple of years I'd discussed some details of my challenges in sharing a man with my cultural anthropology students. For them it made the study of polygamy truly come alive, as we'd contrast jealousy and economic issues in marriage in African vs. Western cultures. Invariably my students would share their own opinions and experiences and our discussions would become quite heated. Being that infidelity is quite common in our culture, my "plight" of having Ron take up with another woman drew much empathy. But when I suddenly found myself in the midst of a polyandrous love affair, I felt cautious and tight-lipped. Would they come to regard me, their otherwise proper college professor, as a slut? At one point a couple of female students begged to know the recent details of my love life...their reaction was both envy and glee. They felt Ron "had it coming" and they were so excited for me. Meanwhile, my own girlfriends were excited as well. Soon they all wanted more than one man to be lusting after them, too. While today's polyamory movement certainly supports both polygynous as well as polyandrous relationships, I began to feel gender dynamics make each of these configurations very different. And certainly whoever is in the middle has a very different experience than the other players.

After a couple of months of being shared by the Michels, I had little appetite for sharing Ron with Angela. As Ron sat between Angela and I in the safe cover of a darkened movie theater and placed a hand in each of our laps, my heart sank. I shuddered remembering how in the years before I'd found this experience to feel so connecting. Quickly I rescued my sinking heart by allowing my mind to float off to thoughts of being the center of Michel #1 and Michel #2's attention. Now, sharing Ron with Angela felt like a silly charade. I had little interest in connecting with her as family, especially the whitewashed pseudo-family she'd concoct for public appearances where I'd be introduced as "a friend," while Ron would pose as the man in her life. Her needs to be private about being in a poly relationship so troubled me. Certainly

having the Michels dream up ways to delight me took the cake compared to hovering on the edges of Ron and Angela.

Now if it seemed that Ron had a difficult time accepting that Michel #1 would be my lover, despite several of my girlfriends' proclamations that "he had it coming," his accepting Michel #2 nearly tore us apart. Initially, I attempted to keep Michel #2 a secret largely because I thought it would be a brief "experiment." I figured why ruffle Ron's feathers over something that's going nowhere? Then I attempted to create a cover for myself by simply telling Ron that I was getting together with "Michel," figuring little harm was being done in dropping an "s." Meanwhile, I basked in my dizzying euphoria as I walked into walls, daydreaming about the last tryst and fantasizing what else might be in store. After awhile my new threesome had so consumed the spare areas of my brain, that I had nothing much to say to Ron. Part of me wanted to continue floating and part of me was a bit overwhelmed by the high and by my growing distance from Ron.

In telling Ron about the second Michel, I fractured the spell. Ron contended that my tryst with the Michels was a "gang bang" and threatened to "punch their lights out" if they ever again graced the doorstep of our home. Meanwhile, Michel #2 got sick for a couple of weeks. It gave me time to ponder what had happened. Being a research anthropologist, I could chalk it all up to participant observation data gathering and just let both Michels go. While I had made friends with lots of poly folks, studied African polygyny, attended plenty of swing parties, and weathered sharing Ron with Angela; being shared by the Michels was truly the first and only time in my research I'd really had fun.

What I had begun to understand, which I honestly believe I could only really know through experience, was what it is like to be an ardent female. Until connecting with the two Michels, I remained incredulous at women who could be freely sexual in public, or for that matter in semi-public, or for that matter in the privacy of their own bedrooms! I'd interview women who I'd see partying up a storm at swing parties and ask them how they did it. Whatever they'd told me, went into one ear and out the other. I continued to see women as sexual negotiators. They trade money and/or security for sex; and as they get older and have their own resources under wrap, they might trade sex for companionship...or if possible, sex and companionship for sex and companionship.

But having sex without a proper seduction continued to make no sense to me. I really didn't understand how women could be sexual with strangers if they weren't at least being paid. My connection with the two Michel's caused me to see, feel, and know another way. Being that my professional income is more than adequate and that I share a secure home with Ron, I was not particularly vulnerable to being seduced financially. Moreover, neither Michel had been in an economic position to offer me more than sweet heartfelt gifts nor was particularly invested in the connection to promise me the moon or the stars or even a serious commitment.

At one point Michel joked with me that if he could introduce me to a third "Michel," I'd readily become lovers with him as well. I wondered. Part of what enables a woman to feel that it's okay to be sexual with a man is her sense that theirs' is a special connection. If it seemed

that she was willing to be sexual with every Tom, Dick and Harry on the block (or every Michel for that matter), then she was a slut. And of course no upstanding professional woman such as myself would want to risk being seen as a slut. So, the only way I could know how an ardent female processes her sexuality, was to risk being regarded as a slut. First, I had to consider for myself whether being considered a slut had any charge for me. As a researcher it didn't (it was still part of my participant observation adventure), though as a professional woman I was a bit anxious. When Hillary Clinton launched her New York State senate campaign, proclaiming that she herself had never had an affair, I began to wonder whether it really was safe for me to dabble as a slut.

The opportunity arrived and I stopped thinking so hard...and somehow I let myself go. Michel #1 took me to a swing party with his very attractive friend Jacque. In past forays into swinging, I'd mostly maintain an anthropological distance and watch. I might strike up conversations with those taking a break and occasionally would make love with Ron. After wandering aimlessly for a bit, Jacque motioned for me to join him and Michel. My initial caution melted as I did what I'd never before done: make love with a new man (Jacque) at a swing party. For me it was an incredibly smooth first encounter...and I readily assessed that Jacque was certainly as good as he looked. I found myself construing a story that made this slutty dalliance okay. Jacque wasn't really a stranger; I'd spoken to him on several occasions in the last month or two. And moreover, he had worked as an International Economist, so he, too, was a professional. And then I didn't do anything sexual with anyone else that evening so perhaps I hadn't yet fallen over that reputation-ridden red line.

A couple of weeks later Michel and I spent the afternoon at a secluded nude beach. It was the day after Christmas and we exchanged gifts and rubbed sunscreen over our winter-white bodies. The rubbing led to sensuality, which led to sexuality, which led to a true stranger perching himself in such a way that he could watch us with impunity. I was aghast that a stranger was watching us and begged Michel to pack up and go. Michel suggested I look the other way and just grok the moment. It was a beautiful afternoon and we'd been having such a good time. I concentrated as best as I could, but the stranger's presence continued to trouble me. We stopped and began to gather our things; then the stranger came over and introduced himself. He was concerned that he'd made us uncomfortable. I told him that he had, though, in a different context, (e.g. a swing party), it would have been okay. The more the stranger chatted, the more human he became. Eventually he helped us carry our things back to the car and I admitted just to myself that the stranger was actually pretty cute and that I could imagine making love with him, too. That night I dreamt about making love with my cats, my childhood dog, and my mother and my father. For that moment I had no fears—I was open to love. Finally, I glimpsed at what it's like to have no gates, no fences, no walls, no secret doors and no double bolted locks. I didn't need to scrutinize my lovers; I was open to loving everyone in every way.

For the most part when anthropologists actually research things like this they're primatologists who study the behaviors of bonobo chimpanzees. Bonobos are pretty amazing compared to common African chimps. They traffic in sexuality. When new females join a troop, they size up their new "family" by making love with each male and each female. Observers contend that the females prefer each other as lovers, naming their erotic activity G-G (genital-genital) rubbing. (Their very large clitorises appear to make this

exceptionally satisfying.) The strong erotic and social bonds that the females share could be what enables them to easily stand up to aggressive males. Interesting parallels have been drawn establishing that amongst modern humans, a woman's ability to choose her mates and to control her own reproduction are key to ensuring the viability of her offspring (Smuts, 1995).

My question thus became, could I learn about being an ardent (human) female from studying bonobo females? Of course humans have very complex and varied cultures compared to bonobos. We have art, music, literature, film, and of course pornography which all influence what we consider a female's sexual potential might be. And bonobos only have the unique cultures of their individual troops. But unfettered by art, literature, etc. are bonobo females the quintessential ardent female? Perhaps. Certainly the strong bonds amongst the females enable additional protection, food sharing possibilities, as well as much erotic pleasure. The ways that female bonobos engineer their sexuality creates little certainty over paternity and in turn much female power.

Despite that human female ovulation is not physically "advertised," women don't typically wield the sexual power and independence of bonobos. In natural fertility cultures like the Dogon of West Africa (Small, 1999), where birth control is not used, paternity still can be easily discerned. Menstrual huts afford everyone ready information as to which females are pregnant, lactating, and menstruating. Males can then figure out each woman's fertility cycle (e.g. she'll be most fertile a couple of days after she leaves the hut) as well as readily establish paternity (e.g. the last one who slept with her since she stopped coming to the hut). As for modern men, who could not possibly keep up with the whereabouts of their wives and lovers, DNA testing assures irrefutable biological paternity.

Despite those only .5 percent of human societies openly practice polyandry, human females may very well have an extensive history of ardency. Those infamous australopithecine bipedal footprints imbedded in the 3 ½ million year old volcanic ash of Laetoli, Tanzania may have in fact been a threesome. And if they were a threesome, who is to say they weren't a female with her two male lovers? The Canela of South America (Crocker and Crocker, 1994) happily report trysts with up to two dozen partners in the same afternoon. Eskimo men show their male visitors kindness and respect by offering their wives for the evening. The Yoruba and Masai share their wives with age-mates and allies. Amongst the East African Luo, all children produced by a polygynous man's wives are *considered* his. Meanwhile these husbands freely acknowledge that their wives might be entertaining his brothers and cousins on their nights off. Recent considerations regarding sperm competition propose that males that function well in a matriarchal context (e.g. bonobos, the Canela and swingers) may be producing huge numbers of battle (blocker and killer) sperm. They might possibly have an aphrodisiac reaction to watching their lovers making love with other males since ultimately reproductive decisions would occur intra-vaginally.

Altogether, I had to conclude that my dalliance in being a "slut" has a long rich history and that for female chimps, bonobos, and humans, one lover has rarely been enough.