

Home

Spring 2010

Winter 2010

Autumn 2009

Summer 2009

Spring 2009

Autumn 2008

Summer 2008

Spring/Summer
2008

Winter/Spring
2008

Editor's Note

Guidelines

Contact

Moresomes

by Jody Keisner

What is peculiar to modern societies is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it ad infinitum, while exploiting it as the secret.

-Michel Foucault

Even though I've never desired one and know little about the various cuts, sizes, and metals, an engagement ring delightfully—and stubbornly—encircles the ring finger of my left hand. I've been told the diamond is a brilliant cut, and despite my previous disinterest in the physical representation of commitment, I do find it and the man who asked me to wear it, shaky and down on his knee, brilliant. The moments before, when Jon surprised me with a tiki-torch lit beach and a moonlight ride on a pontoon boat around the man-made lake where my Grandparents once lived (my childhood spent day-dreaming on inner tubes) and then awed me again by producing a small ceramic peacock, and then turned me upside down by opening the peacock and producing something else, the ring, these moments I cannot imagine ever forgetting, though I've already forgotten some of the words we said to each other then.

Returned to the shores of Hansen's Lake, Jon had close family and friends waiting for us with chocolate covered strawberries, small cakes that read "Will She Say Yes?" and Corona (for me) and champagne (for everyone else). A friend of Jon's, high heeled and stumbling through the sand to get to where I stood barefooted and slack-jawed, whispered: "That's it. No more dates or kisses with anyone else. You've officially departed from your single life. How do you feel?"

"Happy," I said. "Overwhelmed."

During the weeks that followed I was giddy, but the more I thought about the word "marriage" the more terrified I became. I feared some of me would soon be sent away so that I might become a compromising we with the man I respected and admired, but had known just a little over two years. I should have been fantasizing a wedding dress, but instead I visualized my own pictures of travel, friends, and experiences coming off of the walls, replaced by photos of places Jon and I've both been to, friends we both have, experiences we've shared.

In an attempt to keep hold of 34 years of individuality, I turned every minor discussion into a major debate. It didn't matter if we were deciding between Indian food and barbeque, whether to walk the Keystone Trail or bike it, or whether to live in mid-town or West Omaha—I challenged Jon's assertions with my own, afraid he was trying to control me. Jon, sometimes calm, more often exasperated, reassured me that he wasn't interested in taking anything from me. Wasn't he? Weren't we both asking for something from the other? The ring, and whether I wore it, represented my choice to be monogamous or not, a question my friends and I had long pursued. Out of the dozen of us who had been friends for at least a decade, some of us had been unfaithful, others had been cheated on, and some had experienced jock strap fetishes. We were bisexual, heterosexual, and homosexual, one had a lover who dabbled in cross-dressing, and we had toys,

movies, and erogenous zones that many would consider perverse. Some of us were serial monogamists, breaking-up current relationships to begin anew with someone else. Others were social swingers; while we saved our bodies for our husbands, wives or significant others, we gave our hearts and private thoughts to those we met in secret. And some of us—so far I fit this category—were both socially and sexually monogamous, though I had been a serial monogamist during the years before Jon. My friends and I, like most Americans, ran the sexual gamut, and our involvements represented only a small sampling of what people like in their bedrooms. None of us had experienced the most controversial sexual pairing: partner swapping, trading mates for sexual games and pleasures with the consent of primary partners.

Many people would consider my sexual experiences vanilla. I do have, however, a healthy curiosity regarding romantic and physical love, and this has me often wondering whether monogamy is the way I ought to be loving. The summer I turned fourteen, I first saw polyandrous sex. In the privacy of an unfinished basement, the fastest girl in my junior high class, Theresa—we called her Tee because she was also the tiniest girl in our class—produced a thick videocassette tape from the laundry room.

“My step-Dad has tons of pornos,” Tee said.

Her own experience was obvious in the casual way she handled the red tape in her hands, pushing it into the open mouth of the TV. I watched between fingertips, and the other girls laughed and said “gross,” continuing to eat the cheesy popcorn Tee’s mother had made upstairs.

“Not like that,” I said to the rising and falling on the screen, to the close ups of body parts I’d only seen in textbooks, to the bodies joining and separating in a way I found viciously and unapologetically ugly. One woman, several men. My first glimpse of group sex was also my first glimpse of any sort of sex. “It isn’t supposed to be like that,” I said.

Tee sat up on her knees to get a better view. “Haven’t you ever seen one?” she asked me. I didn’t know if she meant an orgy or a naked male. Other than catching a peek of a neighbor boy while he peed on a neighbor girl’s patio door, I had seen neither. I uncovered my eyes and stared at the screen as my first knowledge of sex unfolded in front of me, limbs entangled, tits and mouths, white asses and a woman with hair sprayed bangs and red lips, red the color of Tee’s fingernails, red the color of our high school mascot (The Trojan), red the color of my sudden and surprising shame.

Curiosity, excitement, embarrassment, and guilt—the sex emotions I felt in Tee’s basement (and the order in which I experienced them) were the same ones I have felt throughout my life. For many years I believed, naively and idealistically, that while matters of the heart are elusive and difficult to explain, requiring outside sources and sage wisdom to understand, the boundaries of sex are simpler. Making love was for loving, monogamous relationships, and sexual urges and sexual beings could be relatively uncomplicated. Premarital monogamous sex didn’t trouble me since almost everybody I knew was partaking, and I saw little reason for arguing that two consenting adults should not. Infidelity, on the other hand, could be controlled and avoided, like my father firing a button on the remote control to change the channel from a maxi-pad commercial to something more polite and family-friendly.

It was at graduate school surrounded by *The Awakening*, *A Doll House*, *The Lady*

with the Pet Dog, and *Story of an Hour*; my unhappily married friends; and my choice to move in—but not marry—my boyfriend that my convictions regarding monogamy and love were first given a rigorous shake. The women in these stories and plays were happy once freed from their husbands. For Chopin's protagonist, Louise Mallard, learning that her husband is alive and well—and thus, her new-found independence as a widow has vanished—results in her literal death. My own coupling wasn't as idealistic as I had hoped, and I was soon identifying with the women in these stories, two of whom had found love outside their primary relationship.

"You should take a new lover every ten years," Sarah, one woman I met months earlier in a literature course, said. "If you want romance and love, don't ever get married. Just date."

I sat in the passenger side of Sarah's car while she drove up and down a street in Dundee, a historic neighborhood in midtown Omaha, watching after a young man's (not her husband's) car. Would he stay at his recent ex-girlfriend's house or stop into the neighborhood bar for a drink? She wanted the answer.

"Your husband must be pretty knowledgeable in bed," I urged. Her husband, Nick, worked in the tourism industry, traveling the country while Sarah raised their three boys, took classes, and wrote poems about working-class men she met in Omaha bars. During the few interactions I'd had with him, Nick seemed charming, confident, and sexy. In fact, his body—muscled from playing soccer—easy grin and casual flirtations suggested to me that he was a love machine.

"He doesn't know what he's doing down there. His rhythm is off. I wish he had more lovers before we married. Sex with him is very boring."

I was surprised to hear this, since Nick had starred in at least two of my own erotic dreams. I had never told Sarah this or questioned what this meant about my own relationship, since dreaming sex was not having sex (dreaming sex could often be better).

"Could you rent a woman-friendly sex tape or read an erotic book together?" These were all activities I had done with my boyfriend to keep our love-making interesting, though a visit to any adult store ended disastrously with me lecturing him about the oppression, sexual abuse, and the overall tyranny and misogynistic attitude of a patriarchal sex industry

"I don't think I could do *that*," Sarah said.

A skinny, unshaven man wearing a red baseball cap stumbled out of the house we'd been casing.

Sarah cleared her throat and sunk down in her seat. "Do you think this is weird?"

I thought for a moment about people and everything we do to secure love, climbing out bedroom windows, writing voracious love letters, talking and kissing in the back seat of cars until dawn. "No," I said.

Sarah's social infidelities and my own failing relationship—my live-in and I were fighting more and loving each other less—had driven me to find out if others believed in monogamy. I knew what my heart wanted, but these wants were emotion-based and I needed reason. Like I did with any dilemma, I had armed

myself with books and nestled next to my cat on the bed. We certainly aren't supposed to cheat on our loved ones, though scientists David Barash and Judith Lipton argue in *The Myth of Monogamy* that it is biologically unnatural (but not socially unnatural) for humans to attempt monogamy since it is in humankind's most basic nature to have, what they call, extra-pair copulations (EPC). Infidelities allow humans who might not otherwise have a chance to produce offspring a chance to pass on their genetic code. The males sought by unmated female animals are usually not bachelors—the rejects of the species—but those males already mated. I underlined and highlighted their insights into coupledness, reading aloud: “Evolutionary pressures tend to favor males who are sexually available, readily stimulated, and interested in multiple sexual relationships.” My black cat, Shadow, unimpressed and neutered, had yawned and licked his paw.

With Barash and Lipton as my bedside companions, the world seemed less romantic and more hostile, a place where males and females of the species take whatever sexual pleasure they want. Other than a parasitic flatworm that joins at the midsection with another parasitic flatworm during adolescence larvae, most insects and animals—even swans and pesky tree swallows—are non-monogamous. Pair biological impulse with an unattainable but frequently projected, culturally enforced expectation that love must always be sexually joyful and romantically thrilling, and the challenges of monogamy become even more apparent. The accepted social conventions of a monogamous marriage are rendered unrealistic, if not biologically improbable.

Thankfully, we aren't hard-wired for recreational sex with virtual strangers either, since as Edward O. Wilson points out in *On Human Nature*, human beings flirt, court and engage in romance, all behaviors that reinforce bonding but are unnecessary if “insemination were the sole biological function of sex.” Love and sex are not meant to be separated, at least, not from a biological standpoint, and Wilson believes the sexual bond surpasses the sex act in importance. Wilson had taken a higher place on my bookshelf than the *Myth of Monogamy*, though the phrase “extra-pair copulations” sprung to mind when I watched the sparrows outside my apartment fly from their tree to their neighbor's, looking, perhaps, for a more thrilling nest to drop their worms.

Sarah and I ordered pints of beer at the bar while she waited for her new love interest to meet us.

“I think that humans are very close to animals, very primitive,” Sarah said. “I also believe very strongly that each person has a unique need. Some need more activity and some need less.”

“Do you think monogamy is possible?”

“Unfortunately, monogamy means giving something up, your freedom. Your freedom over your own body and desires.” Sarah took a delicate sip from her Blue Moon and watched the door. When the man in the red baseball cap arrived, she sat up straighter—and maybe I was under the spell of new and forbidden romance, too, but it seemed as if she and the entire room brightened.

“I've waited my whole life to feel this,” Sarah said.

Later that night, in bed beside my snoring boyfriend and my snoring cat, I told myself I would never seek love outside of a marriage. I worried about the pain it would cause Sarah's husband if he knew, and I worried about the emotional harm it might have been causing Sarah. But I didn't know if I agreed that marriage

should mean giving up new experiences and chances to love other people, to feel alive and full of the bliss and sorrow loving someone new brings. Sarah felt her marriage was a strong economic and social partnership, but a passionless one.

Domestic sex—“How can that compare to the feeling of being *reinvented*? Of being *desired*? Of feeling *fascinating*?” Laura Kipnis asks in *Against Love: A Polemic*. With her affairs, Sarah rebelled against time, the cooling of passion in a relationship by the daily arguments, compromises, routines, and eventual boredom caused by familiarity. Sarah also rejected orderly social institutions, and I both admired and feared her. If she could so easily thwart these love rules, we all could. What if she told her husband and they agreed to an open relationship, would Sarah continue to feel excited by her social infidelity? Do we want the truths that put nothing at risk? Barash and Lipton claim, “There are few things as sexually stimulating to socially monogamous animals as the possibility that the mated female might have had an EPC.” This explained men’s interest in watching pornography and desiring a woman who was copulating with another man. But, why was I, an educated, Catholic-reared “respectable” woman, so drawn to learning about these alternative ways of loving? It was possible (likely, even) that I might grow tired and unsatisfied with monogamous sex and the security it provided. But would I seek sex elsewhere?

My live-in boyfriend certainly did. Repeatedly.

“You don’t expect me to have sex with only one woman for the rest of my life, do you?” It was a cliché only because so many ask this question of their lovers. My boyfriend asked it of me, too, right after the *other woman* called our apartment and confessed their affair to me. “I don’t love her. I love you,” he said. I screamed at him that he should *make* love only to those he *loved*. I raged and threw pictures of us in the toilet, and then peed on them. After our hot-blooded break-up, months spent slouched and crying on my bedroom floor reading old love letters from him, I began to think rationally again. Our sex life had become uninteresting, and I had fantasized about other men, but I had never acted on it. Would I have behaved differently after several years of sleeping with him and only him?

We are not allowed meaningless sex, not in the Midwest, not in good American, Christian families. We are allowed to marry, to vow for better or for worse, and to acquiesce to a sex life that most would agree diminishes over time. While I consider myself a free thinker and have been curious enough to seek out sexual encounters, I also unwittingly obey the social conventions that tell me how, when, where, why, and with whom to have sex. I have two versions of myself: the first could easily be lost in the fantasy and consider anything (anyone, anyhow, anywhere) a possibility. The second version thinks the first self has made mistakes; this self seeks sacredness in sexuality, and dreams a monogamous, lifelong relationship with a marriage partner. Several years before I met and then chose a monogamous relationship with Jon, I was already fighting the opposing sides within me. New relationships helped me to grow and reinvent myself, but they also demanded emotional and physical energy. I worried that having too many sexual partners would whittle away at my core.

When I committed myself to Jon and to having sex with only him, many of these worries left me to be replaced by new concerns. Would we always find the other desirable? Of course not. What happens during those moments or weeks or years we don’t feel attracted to each other? What if one of us wants to leave the relationship sexually or socially but not completely? What if one of us loses all sexual interest in the other? I didn’t have the answers to these questions—so few people honestly discuss these concerns—and I felt frustrated and unsure of the

commitment I had made. My previous monogamous relationship had not worked out so well. Infamous playboy Hugh Hefner once defended his philandering in an interview: "One of the greatest sources of frustration in contemporary society is that people feel so powerless, not only in relation to what happens in the world around them but in influencing what happens in their own lives. Well, I don't feel that frustration, because I've taken control of my life."

I wasn't dating anyone and living alone in Michigan while I pursued a second graduate degree. One lazy evening, wishing I had a romantic date but settling for peanut butter cookies and the company of my cat, I stumbled upon an ABC News' 20/20 special on partner swapping. I was instantly excited and intrigued (later, I would feel embarrassed and guilt-ridden for my interest). I was surprised the host, John Stossel, claimed that in Western Culture spouse trading, or swinging, was becoming an increasingly common lifestyle choice. While many viewed swinging as the antithesis to monogamy—I certainly did—the swingers interviewed made a distinction between what they did in bed and cheating, saying that cheating occurs when one partner violates the bond both partners agreed to. Their bond included mind, soul, and heart, but their body could be (should be) shared. I wondered if it was possible for a couple to preserve the trust, intimacy, and love in their relationship while finding sexual excitement outside of the primary relationship. Could swinging be the antidote to the failures of monogamy? Stossel estimated that 4 million Americans partner-swapped, and his research was backed by the infamous Kinsey Institute. Many couples claim to practice monogamy, but the oft-cited statistics tell us that upwards of sixty percent of married partners admit affairs. Half divorce their partners, and the majority of divorcees have at least one more (if not several more) sexual relationship in their lifetime. When I crunched these numbers on a napkin, I calculated that in eight out of ten relationships, people were slipping into bed with someone other than their original marriage partner.

Although an antiquated view, I thought of men as the sexual adventurers and assumed women could more easily control their urges and needed sex less. In this way, I saw women as more evolved "moral" beings who kept the family structure intact. Yet more and more women confess infidelity each year (though, the numbers have consistently been higher for men). The women Stossel interviewed stressed their ability to enjoy many partners in one evening, while most men were physically able to join only one or two. Swinging is perhaps, then, the one sexual structure where women are perceived as having more power than men have. For the first time in my life, I truly wondered why I shouldn't have sex whenever I pleased. Was there anything harmful with this, as long as I was honest and safe with my partners? Men had given themselves this sexual freedom for years; why shouldn't women also? Well, for one, I couldn't bear the thought of exposing Shadow to a parade of men, and I doubted I would ever meet lots of men that I would want to have sex with. Maybe I just didn't know how to find them.

When I typed "swing" into my search engine on my computer, the first three entries were for Tarzan. I corrected my vernacular and tried "swingers" and got "Swinging: Recreational Playcouples," "Is Wife Swapping Beneficial?" and "Partner Swapping Comes Out of the Closet" and so on. *Swinglifestyles.com* is what I settled with for a place to learn about partner swapping, a practice that I knew had been around since the Roman orgies (many locker room jokes assume so). *Swinglifestyles.com* claimed that wife swapping was practiced in America when military men left the sexual care of their wives with friends during World War II. I wondered how the wives felt if their husband's friends had pasty white calves and chain-smoked, like my ex's best friend. According to a group of Christian swingers who called themselves Liberated Christians, a minister first used the term "swinging" to compare humans who bed hopped to monkeys who swung

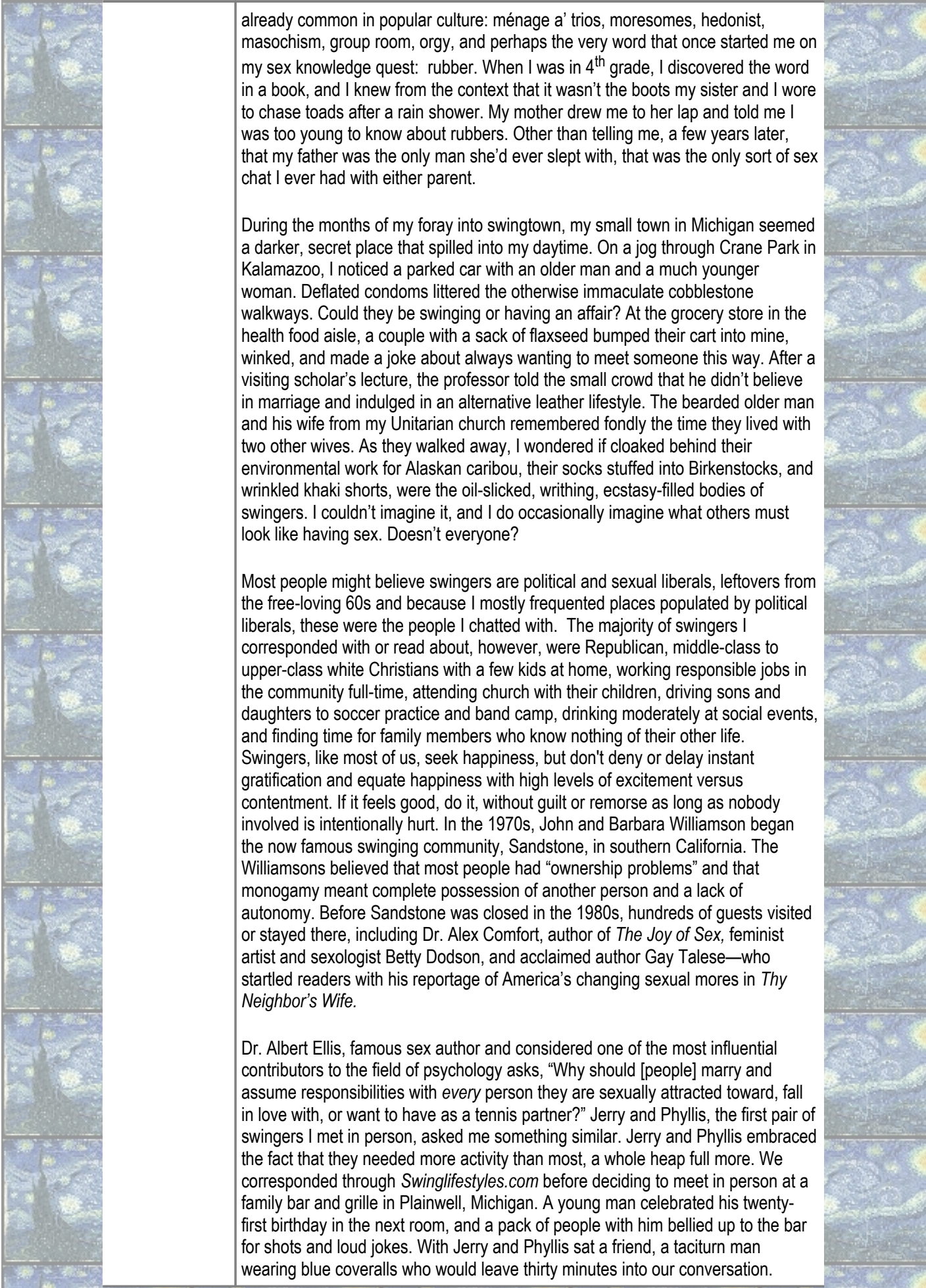
from tree to tree. The Christian swingers also argued that swinging is not an issue of morality, but of desire. The easy response is to say that swingers are somehow hurting themselves, every new sexual experience somehow eating away at that elusive and unknowable thing called the soul, but as a group, swingers on these sites claimed lower divorce rates and higher levels of happiness than other married couples.

Swinglifestyles.com's trademark image reminded me of Rodin's *The Kiss*, a nude and beautifully bodied couple embracing. The next image I saw was of a couple in their 40's looking for another couple. In the picture, an overweight woman sat on the bed with only black bra and panties on, while a man stood next to the bed, fully clothed in a stripped button-down shirt, his face out of the frame.

Swinglifestyles.com advertised itself as an on-line meeting place. Couples wrote profiles, including everything from height and weight to sexual preference, and they included what sort of fantasies they were seeking to fulfill. Couples could choose to display pictures—the site urged that the most successful couples did—and pictures were everything from “normal” grocery store cart pushing couples wearing sweaters and ironed shorts to partially and fully nude couples. A wife, her backside clothed in lacy lingerie, wearing spiky black heels, was the most popular picture posted. To view more explicit pictures, a guest to the site had to pay, which I didn't want to do with Shadow watching from his perch beside my computer screen. “Tame” was the lowest grade of sexual interest, the site's definition included having an interest in dining out with other couples, nude beaches, and meeting other couples for voyeuristic sex. I once accidentally stumbled upon a nude beach in Prague, an accident because I thought the beach advocated toplessness but not complete nakedness. It wasn't the wildly erotic experience of taut limbs and stomachs one might imagine, but instead mostly aging adults with sagging buttocks and hairy limbs. At this beach, ice cream stands were everywhere, and my traveling companion sent us both into hysterics when she asked of a long line of nude men, “Where do they put their money?”

“Moderate” and “Wild” included varying degrees of swapping partners and having sex, so I selected “Tame.” I named myself CuriousJay and created a swinglifestyles.com profile. If reading about infidelity will lead a person to think about cheating and likely lead a person to have an affair, as Louise DeSalvo suggests in *Adultery*, then does reading about partner swapping pose the same threat? But I wasn't married, so I couldn't really cheat or partner swap. I wrote: “I want to understand this lifestyle. I'd like to talk with married couples only.” My profile was looked at 56 times during the first day even though I did not post a picture. I realized, after receiving a few solicitations from single men, couples looking for bi-sexual women, and a woman who called herself Love2LoveU who wrote, “I like to make other women feel good. Real good. Anyway I can. Where are you?” that the name CuriousJay implied that I was bi-curious, but I wasn't, unless one counts one night in my early twenties when I kissed a spiky-haired girl who I knew my boyfriend lusted for. It did not feel like a good kiss, but like a wad of stale bread.

Swingers have created their own language to more efficiently get down to the business of sex. If a couple wrote that they are looking for a GBM that meant they were interested in meeting a gay black male. A woman advertising herself as HWP was at her ideal body weight for her height. INTERESTED IN FRIENDSHIP meant a couple sought an emotional connection and recreational sex opportunities with another pair. MEET FOR PLEASURE equaled sex only. Couples who wore PARTY CLOTHES dressed in clothing that was easily removed and offered access to erogenous body parts. PASSIVE described a “Quiet, submissive, non-contributor, willing to receive corrective training.” Many of the words defined on the *Swinglifestyles.com* site didn't need explaining as they were



already common in popular culture: ménage a' trios, moresomes, hedonist, masochism, group room, orgy, and perhaps the very word that once started me on my sex knowledge quest: rubber. When I was in 4th grade, I discovered the word in a book, and I knew from the context that it wasn't the boots my sister and I wore to chase toads after a rain shower. My mother drew me to her lap and told me I was too young to know about rubbers. Other than telling me, a few years later, that my father was the only man she'd ever slept with, that was the only sort of sex chat I ever had with either parent.

During the months of my foray into swingtown, my small town in Michigan seemed a darker, secret place that spilled into my daytime. On a jog through Crane Park in Kalamazoo, I noticed a parked car with an older man and a much younger woman. Deflated condoms littered the otherwise immaculate cobblestone walkways. Could they be swinging or having an affair? At the grocery store in the health food aisle, a couple with a sack of flaxseed bumped their cart into mine, winked, and made a joke about always wanting to meet someone this way. After a visiting scholar's lecture, the professor told the small crowd that he didn't believe in marriage and indulged in an alternative leather lifestyle. The bearded older man and his wife from my Unitarian church remembered fondly the time they lived with two other wives. As they walked away, I wondered if cloaked behind their environmental work for Alaskan caribou, their socks stuffed into Birkenstocks, and wrinkled khaki shorts, were the oil-slicked, writhing, ecstasy-filled bodies of swingers. I couldn't imagine it, and I do occasionally imagine what others must look like having sex. Doesn't everyone?

Most people might believe swingers are political and sexual liberals, leftovers from the free-loving 60s and because I mostly frequented places populated by political liberals, these were the people I chatted with. The majority of swingers I corresponded with or read about, however, were Republican, middle-class to upper-class white Christians with a few kids at home, working responsible jobs in the community full-time, attending church with their children, driving sons and daughters to soccer practice and band camp, drinking moderately at social events, and finding time for family members who know nothing of their other life. Swingers, like most of us, seek happiness, but don't deny or delay instant gratification and equate happiness with high levels of excitement versus contentment. If it feels good, do it, without guilt or remorse as long as nobody involved is intentionally hurt. In the 1970s, John and Barbara Williamson began the now famous swinging community, Sandstone, in southern California. The Williamsons believed that most people had "ownership problems" and that monogamy meant complete possession of another person and a lack of autonomy. Before Sandstone was closed in the 1980s, hundreds of guests visited or stayed there, including Dr. Alex Comfort, author of *The Joy of Sex*, feminist artist and sexologist Betty Dodson, and acclaimed author Gay Talese—who startled readers with his reportage of America's changing sexual mores in *Thy Neighbor's Wife*.

Dr. Albert Ellis, famous sex author and considered one of the most influential contributors to the field of psychology asks, "Why should [people] marry and assume responsibilities with every person they are sexually attracted toward, fall in love with, or want to have as a tennis partner?" Jerry and Phyllis, the first pair of swingers I met in person, asked me something similar. Jerry and Phyllis embraced the fact that they needed more activity than most, a whole heap full more. We corresponded through *Swinglifestyles.com* before deciding to meet in person at a family bar and grille in Plainwell, Michigan. A young man celebrated his twenty-first birthday in the next room, and a pack of people with him bellied up to the bar for shots and loud jokes. With Jerry and Phyllis sat a friend, a taciturn man wearing blue coveralls who would leave thirty minutes into our conversation.

(Later, I wondered if he had been brought to tempt me). We sat in the dining area of the bar, and with Jerry's balding head and Hawaiian shirt, Phyllis's ample figure and small, observant eyes, and the age discrepancy between us, the four of us looked more like part of a bowling team.

Over twenty years ago, Jerry first saw Phyllis playing poker in the lobby of her college dormitory. She used Skittles for poker chips. Moved by her curly blond hair and curvy figure, Jerry searched through his jeans for quarters, bought Skittles from the vending machine and eagerly invited himself into the game. Now, they had two daughters, 15 and 9, a foreign exchange student from Japan who didn't understand such American idioms as "Get your goat," and they were considering letting a neighbor's troubled 18 year-old-daughter move in. Also living with them were 2 dogs, 5 cats, 1 bunny, and a 10 gallon fish tank full of guppies. Jerry worked in sales, and Phyllis worked as a secretary for the high school. They'd been swinging for eight or nine years. Jerry couldn't remember exactly.

While swinger's sites suggest that those interested in partner swapping leave books about swinging lying around the house and then sit their partner down for a serious talk, Jerry and Phyllis did not initially use an open, honest approach.

"One of my guy friends came over with a porno. It turned out to be some leather fetish thing. Neither one of us had seen anything like it," Jerry laughed. "She got up and went to bed. He leans over and tells me he thinks Phyllis is attractive. He asks if I mind if he 'gives it a try.' 'Nope,' I go. See, we're living on the third floor and I'm thinking, 'I give him two minutes before she throws him out the window.' Well, two minutes go by, then seven, then fifteen. So I go down the hallway and they're going at it. I go back to the couch and pretend to be asleep. The guy comes back out after a while, sits on the recliner and starts eating some chips. About fifteen minutes later, he goes back into our bedroom and they start up again. Well, now I got off the couch. I wasn't going to have him going in and out all night."

Jerry and Phyllis were not what most people consider movie-screen attractive. Jerry had a large gut, and later I would remember him laughing and rubbing his watermelon belly, though he never actually did. Phyllis was overweight and dressed in Midwestern mom attire: T-shirt, high-waist elastic jeans, and white tennis shoes. Her body language was also conservative, almost timid, though she rested her enormous breasts on the table while we talked and stared at me in a way that made me uncomfortable.

"Do you believe in monogamy?" I asked.

"When the time is right, we believe in monogamy for our 15-year-old daughter," Jerry said. "But it's not for us. Our daughters are too immature to date right now."

Jerry explained that swinging is a decision that needs to be made when a couple is ready, that there must be mutual trust, and they don't believe this lifestyle will fix their marriage; although, they have friends who believe this. Then Jerry added: "A part of me believes open relationships *can* save a marriage. You don't have to bottle your fantasies up. It's about trust. It's not for people who can't trust each other." Some of their swinging friends were after notches on their headboards, but Jerry and Phyllis wanted friends who they could go to movies and ballgames with, too.

"Is anything off limits?" Some swingers strictly forbade kissing on the mouth, whispering in the ear, handholding, cuddling, sharing secrets, romantic letters, and

other behavior associated with early courting. These couples banned everything that my friend Sarah allowed with her male friends, making a distinction between social and sexual monogamy.

“Nope.”

“What do you save for each other? How do you keep your marriage sacred?” Later, I would question my use of the word “sacred” since it means different things to different people.

Phyllis answered: “When I met him I felt like I’d known him forever. It’s not emotional with the others.”

Jerry and Phyllis don’t worry that they will develop feelings of intimacy or romance for someone outside of their marriage.

While we talked, a noisy waitress with red cheeks and long brown hair stopped by our table and bantered with Jerry, whom she had already determined was the easiest going of the 4 of us and probably the one footing the bill. When we had first arrived at the restaurant, the waitress asked, “Are you guys relaxed or going to be uptight?” Jerry had snorted at the irony of this. Now, she dropped hot wings onto our table, and Jerry asked if she had a boyfriend. She told us she did and that her night had been rough and now she had to work the breakfast shift. “You and your boyfriend should come relax in our hot tub tonight.” The waitress declined. Jerry told me that this was one way to meet swingers, by making comments that could be taken a lot of ways, without telling them the truth.

“You’ve gotta have rules though,” Jerry said.

Jerry and Phyllis had ground rules now, but they discovered them after their first couple of years of swinging. They never had sex without first getting the okay from each other. They had a few signals, such as Phyllis would say she had “lady troubles” when she wasn’t interested in the other man, and Jerry would complain of a stomachache when he didn’t find the other woman arousing.

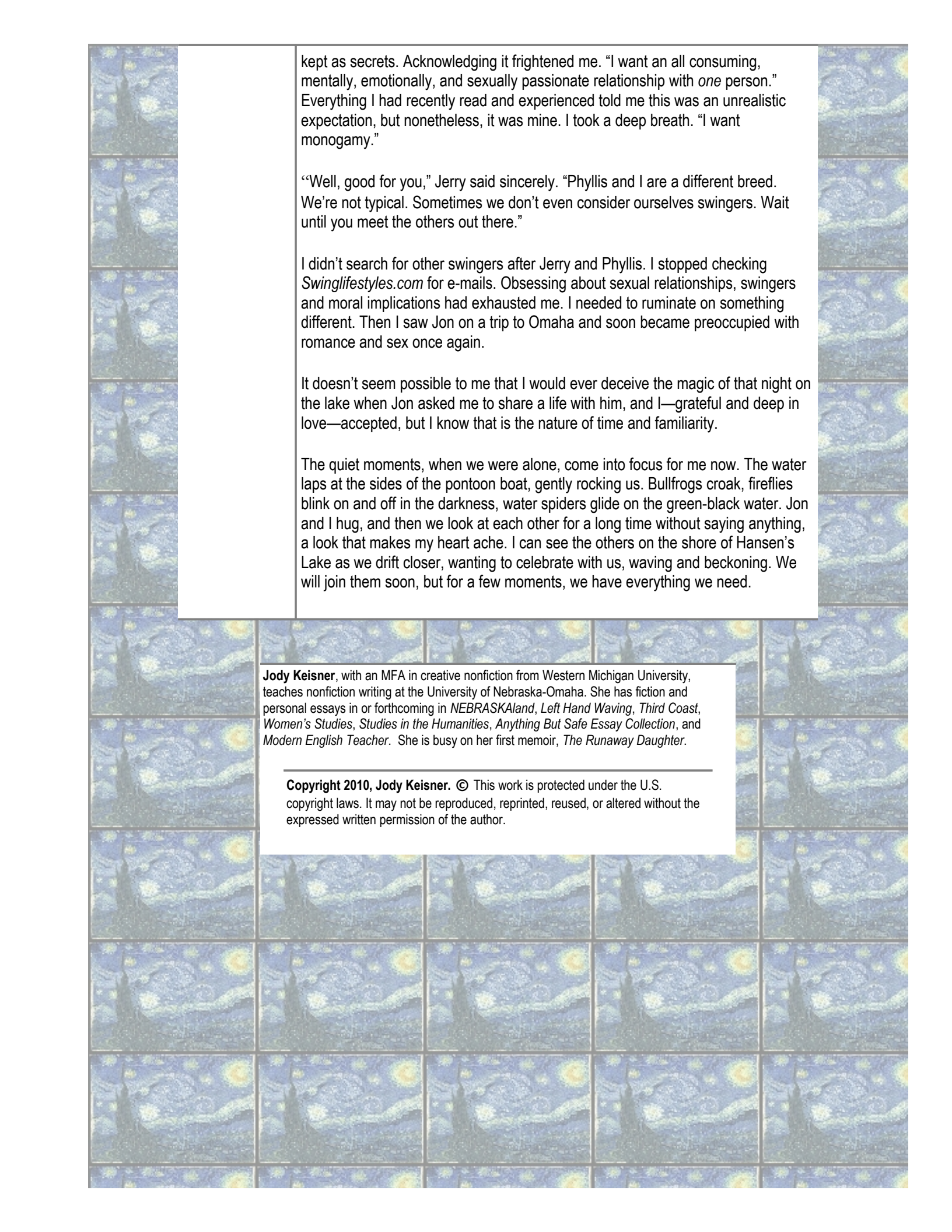
They usually went to a motel for their swinging interactions, and once they had a full swap—two couples switch partners—on the same bed in the same room. “We were conversing the whole time. It heightens our own relationship,” Jerry said.

“We enjoy talking about it,” Phyllis added.

After an hour or so in the restaurant that led to other, more innocuous topics like movies and teenage fashion trends(boys and girls who wore pants so low you could see their underwear), Jerry asked me: “Are you interested in only writing about this or do you want to learn about it by experiencing it?”

It was hot in the restaurant, and sweat beads formed on Jerry’s forehead and upper lip. Phyllis’s breasts sagged and spread onto the table. I thought Jerry and Phyllis were nice people, but I wasn’t attracted to them on a physical or mental level. Among other reasons, their ease with leather fetish pornography scared me. Their world didn’t seem like something I could handle.

“Jerry, I’ll tell you what I really want.” I paused a moment. I knew what I wanted, I had always known, even when I tried to fool myself with my supposed open-mindedness. Wishes thrown into wells or made on stars only come true if they are



kept as secrets. Acknowledging it frightened me. “I want an all consuming, mentally, emotionally, and sexually passionate relationship with *one* person.” Everything I had recently read and experienced told me this was an unrealistic expectation, but nonetheless, it was mine. I took a deep breath. “I want monogamy.”

“Well, good for you,” Jerry said sincerely. “Phyllis and I are a different breed. We’re not typical. Sometimes we don’t even consider ourselves swingers. Wait until you meet the others out there.”

I didn’t search for other swingers after Jerry and Phyllis. I stopped checking *Swinglifestyles.com* for e-mails. Obsessing about sexual relationships, swingers and moral implications had exhausted me. I needed to ruminate on something different. Then I saw Jon on a trip to Omaha and soon became preoccupied with romance and sex once again.

It doesn’t seem possible to me that I would ever deceive the magic of that night on the lake when Jon asked me to share a life with him, and I—grateful and deep in love—accepted, but I know that is the nature of time and familiarity.

The quiet moments, when we were alone, come into focus for me now. The water laps at the sides of the pontoon boat, gently rocking us. Bullfrogs croak, fireflies blink on and off in the darkness, water spiders glide on the green-black water. Jon and I hug, and then we look at each other for a long time without saying anything, a look that makes my heart ache. I can see the others on the shore of Hansen’s Lake as we drift closer, wanting to celebrate with us, waving and beckoning. We will join them soon, but for a few moments, we have everything we need.

Jody Keisner, with an MFA in creative nonfiction from Western Michigan University, teaches nonfiction writing at the University of Nebraska-Omaha. She has fiction and personal essays in or forthcoming in *NEBRASKAland*, *Left Hand Waving*, *Third Coast*, *Women’s Studies*, *Studies in the Humanities*, *Anything But Safe Essay Collection*, and *Modern English Teacher*. She is busy on her first memoir, *The Runaway Daughter*.

Copyright 2010, Jody Keisner. © This work is protected under the U.S. copyright laws. It may not be reproduced, reprinted, reused, or altered without the expressed written permission of the author.