

- EXCLUSIVE -  
THE LOST COMMUNE  
CHAPTERS

# THE TRUTH

An Uncomfortable Book  
About Relationships



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## Introduction

The following was originally an entire section of *The Truth*. While editing, it felt like the story was self-contained and could be removed almost entirely without harming the overall narrative of the book.

Note that this section was excised during an *early* draft. So unlike the finished book, it has not been edited, cut for pacing, copyedited, or fact-checked. So please forgive any errors, places where it drags (and there are many), overlaps with the published book, or general idiocy on the part of the protagonist.



This time I'm doing it right. And that's because I'm doing it differently.

## THE TREEHOUSE COMMUNITY GUIDELINES

- 1. The rules, attitudes, judgments, and limiting beliefs of the “real world” do not apply here. We are creating a better way to live.*
- 2. The goal is to live neither a strict nor a self-indulgent lifestyle, but to live a balanced lifestyle.*
- 3. We will endeavor to remove the “filters” that keep us from seeing others as they are. Instead, we often see them in relation to our self-esteem or past experiences we've had. As housemates, our goal is to always see the best in each other and assume the best intentions.*

“Honestly, what's helped us and could help you is our philosophy,” Ilana says. “And our philosophy is that life is perfect and *I* am perfect. That idea is what binds us together.”

By us, Ilana is referring to the sixty or so members of Lafayette Morehouse just outside San Francisco, one of the country's oldest and most successful communes. Since its formation in 1962, it has spawned additional Morehouses around the world—and its teachings have been ripped off by countless other sexual and communal movements. I'm in front of a panel consisting of Ilana, Judy, and Colin, all commune members in their forties and fifties.

As we speak, I have a rough manifesto on group living that I've created in front of me, which I busily revise as they preside over the rules like a council of Mormon elders. In two weeks, I'll be showing it to the nine members of my own commune.

4. *There will be house meetings every morning. During this time, each resident may check in about whatever he or she wants. A talking stick will be passed around the circle, and only the person holding it may speak.*

5. *It is of vital importance to the experience of your fellow housemates that you do not attempt to caretake them or look after their feelings during group meetings. They will benefit most from your honest, uncensored, and constructive thoughts, advice, and reactions.*

6. *Everything has been planned, but nothing is set in stone. Every day, during the morning meeting, the group can change the schedule and activities.*

Lafayette Morehouse was founded as “an experiment in pleasurable group living” by a charismatic former Marine, bouncer, and mob enforcer named Vic Baranco in 1968. Like Father Yod, he was tough, had likely killed people, harbored rock-star ambitions, and died early. According to former residents, when Vic was around, if someone left the premises for a few hours, he was likely to come back to find someone fucking his wife or that he’d been moved to another room. Life was a series of adventures and experiments. Despite Baranco’s lack of peace-and-love origins—Lafayette Morehouse is probably the only commune with a boxing ring—his group succeeded and prospered harmoniously, long outliving thousands of other groups who tried.

A month earlier, I’d never heard of Baranco and his Morehouses. But after Violet and Nadine left, I read *Sex at Dawn* and befriended the authors, Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá. But when I asked for their thoughts on replicating the way of life they recommend in their book, Ryan said that the world had changed too much since the poly paradise he described. “The problem with replicating the conditions we describe is that we don’t live in hunter-gatherer bands of people who’ve known each other over their entire lifetime,” he explained.

So far, every so-called expert I’d talked to had said the lifestyle they recommended as natural wasn’t possible. Helen Fisher said our nature was serial monogamy with cheating, but that it’s not responsible or ethical in our society. Isis Aquarian said group marriage worked in the seventies, but wouldn’t work today. And now Ryan was saying our nature is group

relationships, but the world has changed too much and become too interdependent to make them possible.

“So are we just relationally homeless, unable to live out our nature in our culture?” I pressed him.

And that’s when he gave a little ground. “As human beings, we live in zoos of our own design, from our work to our family structure,” he answered with a sigh. “The question is: Are we going to live in the San Diego Zoo where the enclosures try to replicate our natural environment or in the Jakarta Zoo where the animals are in concrete cages?”

And so I began studying contemporary zoos that tried to create a natural habitat for relationships. I started with books on group living—from fiction like Robert Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* and Robert Rimmer’s *The Harrad Experiment* to non-fiction like Robert Houriet’s *Getting Back Together* and Richard Fairfield’s *Communes USA*. There was a wide gulf between utopias that writers imagined in their fictional books and the actual ones people created in real life. I studied what made them work (qualities of sharing, temperance, and a work ethic) and what made them fall apart (hostility from neighbors, in-fighting, megalomaniacal leaders, accepting new members indiscriminately).

Then I went in search of still-existing communities. All roads seemed to point to only three that were successful, long-standing, and significant: the Zegg Intentional Community in Germany, the Osho Ashram in India, and, closer to home, Lafayette Morehouse in California.

“I want to get as much information as I can to make things go smoothly when we try out this group relationship,” I tell the Morehouse triad. “One thing you say now may save the entire group.”

“How brave and deliberate,” says Judy, who, with her thin frame, brown bowl cut, and hoop-earrings, looks simultaneously strict and sensitive. “A lot of people just hope for the best. This is a much better plan. It’s something we’ve researched for forty-five years.”

“I’d recommend having your partners join for only a couple of weeks and not give up their apartments,” her more reticent sister Ilana says. “Say, ‘Look, we trust that we’re gonna love you, but we think we should get to know each other, hang out, see how it all works, and then decide if it suits you before moving in.’”

It’s good advice. I jot it down and continue:

7. *This is a safe space. The walls and roles you may put up in the outside world are not necessary here, because you are not being judged or evaluated. The more you share your truth and your vulnerabilities, the more intimacy and growth you will experience.*
8. *There is no leader here. There may be people organizing or teaching, but everyone is equal and has equal say in everything.*

“We have a recommendation,” Judy says. “It’s called the one-no vote. And the only groups that we have seen that make it, including groups of two, are people who treat each other that way.”

“Can you explain it?” I look at them curiously, clustered together on an old couch, super-heroes of communal living, all almost sharing the same hive mind. They don’t look remarkable or out-of-the-ordinary or alternative in any way. If anything stands out about them, it’s that they seem disconnected from any fad, trend, or style. If I passed them on the street, I’d think they worked in a library with a lax dress code.

“Yes, it’s that if one person votes no on something,” Ilana elaborates, “then it doesn’t happen.”

“Can there be a re-vote later?”

“No. We truly honor people’s no’s. However, we’ve had only like two no votes in our entire forty-five years. So if someone is even looking like they don’t want something to happen, instead of voting, we’ll back off and talk.”

“It’s very empowering to everyone,” Judy adds. “Once you know that your voice will be heard and that even if you just hint that you’re going to object, people will stop and listen to you. So each person has so much influence that they don’t have to go around bludgeoning people with it.”

9. *While no meal or event is mandatory, showing up will always benefit your life, your experience, and your relationship with your housemates.*
10. *Make an attempt throughout the week to interact and spend time with everyone, rather than just staying close to someone you already know.*

“We actually take care of at least one person on sanctuary, which is to say one person who needs help,” Judy adds. “It could be a homeless person or somebody who just needs a break from life in some way. You don’t have to do that, but a Morehouse does that. We feel like it reminds us of the surplus and the good life that we have. It’s also a way to pay back.”

“Really?” I’m shocked to hear this. “Isn’t it hard enough for so many people to live together as it is, without introducing a homeless person as a wild card?”

“Actually it can be a way to unify the group because any group will align either on a common good or a common enemy. Often it’s easier to align behind a common enemy, so you have to really reach for the good by doing something like taking care of somebody.”

*11. While group solidarity is important, so are boundaries.*

*If someone is intruding on your physical or psychological space, politely let them know that you need a little space.*

*If you’re not okay with something, say you’re not okay with it. Similarly, if someone makes that request of you, immediately comply. You can explore the reasons why if you choose to during house meetings.*

*12. Avoid talking about others behind their back and*

*complaining about things in the house. If you have something to say about someone, say it in the house meeting to their face with compassion and empathy. Before making a judgment or complaint, think about your part in it and consider whether it’s really about the other person or about you.*

“We have quite the opposite philosophy,” Ilana interjects. “We are pro-gossip. We talk about each other behind each other’s back at all times.”

“Really? What do you mean?”

“Well, if these are people we’re choosing to spend our lives with, presumably they’re good people and we try to assume that they have the best intentions. So if something’s going on with them, we’ll talk about it.”

Experience is the best teacher, and often the lessons are counterintuitive. This simple conversation is going to make the commune far more likely to succeed than the harem.

“We notice each other,” Judy elaborates. “Like, ‘Did you see her face? She

looks like something is upsetting her. Let's find out what's going on.' So the outcome is interest and caring, and ultimately talking with someone directly, not decimating them."

"But what do you do with someone who's just annoying and hard to live with, and doesn't really listen or change when you bring it up with them? Do you eventually ask them to leave?"

"We call that person who's the most annoying person in the group The Biggest Asshole," Judy explains patiently as I sit there practically awestruck. They have an answer for everything. "Regardless of how small the group is, somebody will take that spot. I guarantee it. You're going to be tempted to say, 'Man, this would be a great group if only we didn't have Gary who uses up all the toilet paper or doesn't refill the ice cube tray or whatever.' So you get rid of Gary and you think everything's going to be great now, and what we have found is that somebody who had been perfectly fine until that person left steps up to be The Biggest Asshole—and it turns out they're actually worse. So you keep getting rid of people until you're alone, and then you find who the Biggest Asshole really is."

The more I think about that concept, the more powerful it seems to be. People always say, "The world would be better if a certain regime was deposed or if various people, religions, ideas, and even countries didn't exist. But there will always be a biggest asshole in the world. And usually the people seen as the biggest asshole—whether it's Nazis, Communists, or violent extremists—are trying to eliminate others they see as the biggest assholes. So the secret to world peace may just be for everyone to stop saying "the world would be a better place if only those guys were gone or moved somewhere else."

13. *One good way to give feedback is to use the following format:*

*When you \_\_\_\_\_ (did/said something), what I made up about that is \_\_\_\_\_ (your subjective impression), and I felt \_\_\_\_\_ (emotion).*

Half the rules for the house came directly from rehab. I suppose ultimately sex addiction counseling is about teaching people how to live in relation to others. If you remove the shaming of sexuality from the therapy, it becomes great training for any type of relationship.

“Are there other roles that people fall into besides the biggest asshole?” I ask them, fascinated.

“One role that’s really valuable around here is someone who’s just happy. They may not be good at electricity or plumbing or computers or cleaning, but when they come around, people feel good in their presence. It’s not a role you can assign somebody and say, ‘Okay, now you be the happy person.’ You just gotta luck into it.”

“There are lots of other roles,” adds Colin, who’s barely been able to get a word in edge-wise. He has a boyish face topped by short grey hair, and though he’s soft-spoken, at times he seems to bristle with irritation “There are people who support the action and people who challenge the action. And there are people who always seem to be not understanding what’s going on and not current with what we’re doing.”

“That’s the space case,” Judy cuts in. “They don’t read the emails, they don’t talk to anybody. And it’s actually a good thing. You’re not looking for another six yours.”

*14. Be willing to step outside of your comfort zone, because that’s where growth happens. If you ever feel awkward or exposed, accept this, because everyone else will.*

*15. Because there are only three bathrooms, try not to linger in the bathroom, particularly in the morning. If you’re just using the sink or mirror, leave the door open so someone else may shower.*

*16. There are no rules to the house. Only guidelines.*

“These are a lot of rules,” Colin says. “We don’t have many rules besides communal property, sanctuary, and one no vote. The only major rule: When you live here, you don’t ever have to do anything you don’t want to do. So this way if you’re doing something, we’re going to assume you want to be doing it.”

Ilana adds that there’s also another rule: “Don’t put glasses on Vic’s floor,” which basically means that the other secret to living with others is to respect their idiosyncracies, even if they don’t make sense to you.

*17. Not everything will go perfectly. Enjoy the imperfections.*

“Our time is almost up,” Judy says. “Is there anything else you’d like to ask?”

“Yes, actually there is one thing.” And that’s when I ask the question that’s been in the back of my mind the whole time, burning my tongue, waiting for the right time when they’ll be honest about answering it.

“What about the sex?”



I ask them about sex as casually as possible, hoping they’ll be as open about it as they’ve been about everything else.

Judy, as usual, is the first to answer. “When you put a bunch of people together, one thing that happens is there is more sensual energy to tap into than when there’s a couple living together. You often find that with couples, after the honeymoon period it dries up a little bit unless you get really creative. But when you have more women around specifically, you may be feeling kind of flat, then your friend walks in the room and she’s all perked up and turned on, and it’s contagious.”

“So do you have any rules about sexual interactions in the group?”

“Our rule is really the one no vote,” Ilana says. “We think people ought to be able to do whatever they want to do as long as everyone who’s involved agrees. If me and my husband want to have an open relationship, that’s up to us and it’s about whether I’m in agreement with what he’s going to do and vice versa.”

“That just may be the best definition of a relationship I’ve heard so far,” I tell her. “But how do you handle jealousy if it comes up in the group?”

Judy is quick to answer. “Jealousy is a big issue. There’s one kind of jealousy that can come up because someone feels excluded. But as long as one of you knows that you can take that energy in your body and have fun with it, things work out.”

It sounds a lot like compersion, the word invented by the Kerista commune. Yet amongst this group, unlike the communes I researched while I was in San Francisco, I don’t pick up on any controlling, self-deluded, or proselytizing energy.

“However,” Judy continues, “there’s another feeling of jealousy that’s

experienced as betrayal. That's when you feel, 'You're doing something I don't think we agreed that you would do.'"

"So what do you do in that case?"

"You bring up the deal you made with that person. And the deal always starts with the lowest common denominator. Say two couples are mixing it up, then whoever is the most skittish of those four people, that's where the bar is. We don't go beyond that until that person is okay with that thing." It's advice I should have taken in San Francisco. "We have a lot of open relationships in our community, and we've noticed that you can say, 'Look, please do not make google-y eyes at her over dinner, I can't take it. I lose my appetite. Could we contain it to other locations?'" If people honor that no and don't give someone the cold shoulder because they set the bar, after a while that person is usually willing to raise the bar. When people feel safe and like things aren't going to spin out of control, they're more willing to open the door."

"The best way to have strange ass is to be sure the primary woman you're with is totally gratified and you have her agreement," Colin says. "She has to feel she has enough of you and has a surplus of you. Overall, the viewpoint we take is if that extra person does not add to the primary relationship, it doesn't go anywhere."

Like Pepper, they teach me new terms such as the concept of *strange ass*, which is that sometimes a new sexual experience can bring the "juiciness" back into a more stagnant relationship. (The word juicy seems to come up a lot in the alternative-relationship community to describe the joy of free sexuality—among other things.) They also discuss *new relationship energy*, which is the obsession and fantasy that can accompany a new affair (and can often feel threatening at first to someone's primary partner).

Their answers are clear and direct, and so forthcoming that I work up the courage to ask one of the most awkward questions in this lifestyle. So I ask the commune council, "What about STIs? How can you be sure no one's passing them around?"

Not surprisingly, they have the solution worked out. "There was a time back in the seventies when we were more open as a group," Ilana answers. "But now we have a deal amongst ourselves that if you find somebody outside the group, you have to bring them into the group and they have to jump through all the hoops."

"And the hoops are getting tested," Colin says.

“The CDC, the Center for Disease Control, has a standard and they say to get tested six months after exposure,” Ilana continues. “But we’re a little more cautious than that because we’re such a large group of people, so whatever happens would affect fifty or sixty of us. And with a lot of exchange between people, we have not had a case of AIDS in our group, knock on wood.” She raps on the side of the couch. “If anyone wants to make out or have sex with someone outside the group, that’s fine. We just will not have contact with them until they go through the waiting period and get retested.”

In fact, Colin explains, they even have a member of the group who serves as screening director, keeping track of everyone’s test dates and results.

“We do that because it’s the most selfish thing we can do,” Judy interrupts. Perhaps they’re not so much cutting Colin off, but they just know each other so well that they can continue each other’s thoughts. “This way, we can have all the fun we want with no regrets. It’s no fun getting in bed with someone and hoping you make it out alive. And this goes for us all the way to sharing water bottles and forks with people who aren’t in our group. The odds are lower, but they’re still there.”

I wonder if sex can ever be free when it comes with so many potential consequences. But so too does driving.

“The waiting period can be a very romantic time,” Judy says. “Colin and I have had a love affair for fifteen years and we both have other partners. When we first started our love affair, he had joined the group way past me, so he started getting his tests and it was quite a while before we kissed because kissing is actually more exposure than using latex gloves and contacting each other’s genitals. But we had a wonderful time when there were things that we couldn’t do.”

I ask a few more questions on the subject, until something incredible happens: They invite me to stay with them. “We actually formally researched this stuff: Sensuality, communication, relationships,” Judy tells me. “Our course on basic sensuality can move you forward light years. It’s very efficient: You don’t have to reinvent the wheel for every single thing that might come up. We have a few guest rooms on our property, so you could also stay here.”

“We don’t talk to many people we don’t know,” Judy says. “But you are so responsive and such a quick study. There was a good connection there.”

I end the conversation uplifted by the idea that it is possible to make a free group relationship work, to live by common agreement rather than narcissistic dictatorship. Then I immediately call Violet to fill her in.

“Let’s do this!” she exclaims afterward.

I email them a revised manifesto for the Treehouse Commune and we resolve to spend the next few weeks searching for the right people, knowing that one will be the Biggest Asshole and hoping it’s not any of us. However, there’s one guideline missing from the manifesto that the Lafayette Morehouse elders didn’t bring up: No attempted murder.



“I’m beginning to think that monogamy is not natural.”

The voice belongs to Dawn. Since that accidental text, we’ve been talking every night.

“That’s what I’ve been thinking,” I tell her excitedly. “I pledged that my next relationship would be an open relationship.”

“We should have sex, then be in an open relationship,” she says dryly.

All the fantasies I had about her in rehab flood into my mental cinema and I think, “This could work.” Beneath every joke, there’s a seed of truth.

“So when am I going to see you?” she asks before I hang up.

“Funny you should mention that. I’m putting something special together, and it might be cool if you wanted to be a part of it.”

After taking a few days to think about it, Dawn agrees to come out. She’s still living with her ex-boyfriend, and wants to get away. Whether or not it works out with us on a physical level, I probably know her more intimately than most other people in my life.

The next potential housemates I talk to are Lawrence and Leah, the friends I ran into at the polyamory meet-up where I met Orpheus Black. They have five years of experience in an open relationship, and Lawrence even teaches polyamory, sexuality, massage, and meditation. With his expertise, we can have regular meditation and massage sessions in the house.

Next I visit Nicole and James in San Francisco. They’re in, are already non-monogamous, and actually know Lawrence and Leah—so, like Isis Aquarian recommended, there’s a pre-existing bond. I talk to Pepper about joining, but he tells me he’s busy with his pre-existing relationships. And I visit Reid, who promises to come by and help set the perfect mood on the

first night of the commune. Already, I can feel my non-monogamy knowledge and network has improved.

With a drummer named Arthur, a lover of Violet's named Angela, and a friend of Violet's named Nadine (who we both recently had a threesome with) also joining us, that makes ten people, including me—which is forty-five relationships according to the Gauss Polyamory Formula. Ten emotionally mature, open-minded, presumably intelligent people ready to pioneer a new way to live. There's only one thing that remains to be done: Find a place to live. So at the end of the month, I move out of the guest house I've been renting and into the Treehouse I saw with Rick while I was dating Ingrid.

A couple nights before we're all supposed to start our mini-commune in the Treehouse, however, Nadine calls.

“Can I bring my soulmate?”

“Who's that?”

“Matt. I told you about him. He's the guy in my band who I've been dating on-and-off.”

“Is he a positive guy who will get along well with everyone else?”

“He's great like that.”

“And is he open-minded and sharing, like everyone else?”

“For sure. We'll probably end up together in the future, but right now I'm not taking things that seriously with him.” Her voice softens, almost pleading. “He's got such a sweet and gentle soul, and he's so talented as a musician. But he's not making a living it at it yet, so right now he wouldn't be able to contribute much to any costs. I hope that's okay.”

The Lafayette Morehouse people said to take someone in on sanctuary, so perhaps Matt can be that person. “If everything you said is true,” I tell her, “it sounds like he'll be a great addition to the group.”

While putting everything together, I continue to read and talk to people. One of them is Barbara Williamson, who with her husband James ran the Sandstone Retreat, the famous swinger's haven in Los Angeles in the sixties, which had a mix of live-in residents and commuting members. Like Orpheus Black and Lafayette Morehouse, she says that having a common goal is important. When I ask her about dangers to look out for, she says, “There has to be a lot of respect among the individuals. Possessiveness and jealousy can also be problems.”

“What did you do when that happened?”

“If there was jealousy or possessiveness, you could work it through. I

wasn't exempt from it either, but the easiest way to get over it was to watch other people having sex: Then you have to ask yourself, what's the big deal?"

As she talks, I wonder if the problem in San Francisco was that I didn't push the boundaries enough. In order to grow, someone has to step outside their comfort zone and take a risk. I was so worried about hurting someone's feelings that I wasn't true to myself.

To create the sense of purpose, passion, and community that seem essential for these groups to work, I ask some of my future housemates to help furnish the Treehouse and plan the events with me.

Lawrence and Leah come over and we contact friends who teach yoga, tai chi, meditation, and communication to lead morning activities, so we can become better people together. We fill the refrigerator with natural, organic food, so we can become healthier. We buy plants, candles, and soft mood lighting for each room, so we can create an intimate vibe. We buy an enormous refurbished hot tub and put it in the yard, so we can act on that vibe if necessary. And we put mouthwash, lubrication, condoms, and latex gloves in each bathroom, so it can be done safely.

And, lastly, we purchase from a wholesaler we find on Craig's List a lot of fucking mattresses.



In the afternoon, I pick Dawn up at the airport. She's wearing a black tank top and black leggings. As we hug, our mouths find each other, and soon we're passionately making out. It is like the crescendo of a symphony that started a year ago.

"I've missed you, Neilio," she says.

Back at the house, we disappear into one of the bedrooms, which consists solely of four mattresses on the floor. I slowly take off her clothes and enjoy every inch of her pale skin. As I enter her, and her body quivers and seems to disincorporate underneath me, I think: I fucking love life. It does feel dangerously like the rush of heroin through the veins. At the same time, it also feels like a religious epiphany. So who's to say what's a drug addiction and what's a religious experience? What matters is whether it's positive or

negative for the soul, and as she holds me afterward and says, “I’ve waited a long time for that,” it feels very positive.

When we emerge from the bedroom, most of the group has arrived—Nicole, James, Nadine, and her soulmate Matt, a tall, husky indie-rocker with a tangled mop of hair that both rises two inches over his head and drops down his face to form a full unkempt beard. They’re talking and laughing with Lawrence and Leah in the kitchen, and we reunite with hugs and handshakes. Perhaps because there’s an equal amount of men, there’s no discernible sense of competition or forced bonhomie, just excitement and anticipation for what’s about to happen tinged with a slight nervousness about venturing into the unknown.

As soon as the last members of the household—Violet, Angela, and Arthur—arrive, we arrange the living room couches into a square and gather on them. Everyone is dressed casually, except Arthur, who’s wearing a three-piece grey suit with blue-framed sunglasses and a matching pocket square. With his tousled black hair and a soft face that looks like it could start growing jowls at any minute, he looks like an alcoholic rock star on his way to the Grammy Awards.

I look at the rest of the eclectic group sitting there: Violet looks like a goth fetish model, Matt like a disheveled indie-rocker, Nadine like a miniature Lady Gaga, Lawrence like a new-age Ben Kingsley, Leah like an all-American cheerleader, and tall, blond Angela like a sunflower. Add to them anorexic prom-queen Nicole, manchild James, and the tough, confident Dawn, and it may be the coolest-looking commune ever. Not one of them even looks like a hippie. Yet they all sit there, open to anything and waiting for something. It’s my move.

From the Lafayette Morehouse communards, I learned to lead what are called Mark groups. These are exercises to perform with a circle of people to foster intimacy, honesty, and sharing. So I run them through some of the exercises, starting with one in which each person shares candid first impressions of two others in the group.

Matt is the last to share. He lounges on the couch in bare feet. One foot is up on the cushion, the other splayed casually on the floor. He’s wearing torn jeans and a brown-checked button-down shirt that’s been washed so much it’s faded and shrunk into something that’s more a relic than a piece of clothing. His eyes, rimmed dark, stare somewhere below the level of my eyes. “When I first met you,” he says to me, “I was upset by your weak handshake.”

Something about the comment rattles me. It's not the criticism I mind; it's that he was upset by a handshake. It seems like an overly strong emotional reaction to a soft grip.

Gradually, however, nervousness is replaced by laughter as we answer challenging questions and get to know each other better, and I forget about Matt's comment. Already the advice from Lafayette Morehouse is bringing us closer together.

To end our informal Mark group, I ask each person what they want to get out of the experience. "I need to hit a reset button on my life," Violet says. "I keep dating these guys in rock bands who have no idea how to be in a relationship, so I keep getting rejected and hurt. I need to fix my picker."

"For me," I tell them when my turn comes around, "I want us to walk into a room, and have a group energy between us so powerful that other people can feel it."

Lawrence and Leah are excited to build a group relationship as well; James and Nicole want to work on strengthening and expanding their connection through new experiences; Nadine just wants a break from the reality of her hectic and stressful life; and Arthur wants to work on his relationships with other people. "Inside, I'm very lonely," he confesses.

Matt is last again. He drops his right leg to the floor and leans forward. "I'm such an angry person," he says. "I get so angry that I want to kill people. I'd like to work on this."

He says the last sentence casually and everyone smiles, trying to pretend like he said he wanted to work on intimacy instead of murder. We try not to make eye contact with each other, to give away the thought we're thinking: How could Nadine have let this guy into our house?

I broke the one rule I'd made for myself—that I'd carefully pre-screen each person—and now I'm paying for it. Then again, the Lafayette Morehouse elders did say to take someone in on sanctuary, to unite behind the common good of helping someone. So clearly this guy is going to either unify us or destroy us.



A few hours later, as everyone is settling into their rooms, Reid arrives in his ever-present *Sex Geek* t-shirt. “How can I help?” he asks with a lop-sided half-smile.

“We’re starting to create psychological intimacy,” I tell him, “but after dinner, it would be great if you could help everyone cross the physical barrier and connect on that level.”

“No problem. That’s what I do. Anything else?”

“Yeah, I’m worried there’s a homicidal maniac in the group. So let me know if you notice anything strange.”

For dinner, we eat Thai delivery food around a large circular table with ten folding chairs squeezed around it. We ordered coconuts from the restaurant, but they arrive unopened. So Lawrence grabs an axe from his truck and Reid hacks them apart. Dawn suddenly jumps up from the table, as if struck by a brilliant idea. She pulls a bottle of Captain Morgan rum out of a kitchen cabinet, and pours it liberally into each coconut.

“Is it okay for you to drink?” I ask her.

“Is it okay for you to have sex?” she snaps back.

Touché.

After dinner, we adjourn to the living room, where Reid and Lawrence have spread blankets and pillows across the floor. I get comfortable between Nicole and Dawn, who’s sandwiched with Violet on the other side. Everyone lies close together, with a body part sprawled over at least one other person.

In that moment, everything feels as it should be. It’s only been a few hours, and already the Treehouse Commune is much closer than anyone in the San Francisco harem was. Everyone seems positive and excited, and no one is acting possessive or jealous. Even Matt appears relaxed. It’s not like the Bliss party, because not everyone here is in a couple. If anything, it’s closer to the flexible group relationship described in *Sex at Dawn*.

Reid sits cross-legged in front of us on the floor and introduces himself. “I’m queer and only date lesbians,” he begins. Already, he has confounded every sexual stereotype there is.

Reid walks us through what he calls his safer sex elevator speech, in which he tells partners about his likes, dislikes, safe-sex protocols, STIs, and the

last time he was tested—he has oral herpes, he informs us—and asks for the same honesty from his partners.

“What’s most important to me is to always ask for permission,” he continues as the anticipation builds. “If you ask, ‘May I touch you,’ a no is a no, a maybe is also a no, and a yes is only a yes if it’s sincere and enthusiastic. If you feel like people are complying just because they’re uncomfortable or feel it’s expected of them, then ask again.”

“Are you supposed to ask someone that as soon as you meet them?” Arthur asks. I notice that he doesn’t appear to be completely present, as if he’s always somewhere else in his head, struggling to give off the impression that he’s in the moment. Perhaps he fills the role that the Lafayette Morehouse people described as the space case.

“No, but when I meet a woman, I ask for permission about other things. I say, ‘May I hit on you?’ And if she says no or maybe, then I say, ‘Thank you for taking care of yourself.’”

The women in the group watch Reid rapt. He’s an artist, and his craft is making women feel safe. Asking for permission, respecting all spoken and unspoken boundaries, making sure even a yes is really a yes—everything he says is what society needs. In a world in which most men strut around fearless while a woman in a short skirt walking alone to her parked car at night is terrified for her life, Reid is the remedy to the monster of unrestrained male sexuality.

If every male respected every female’s boundaries as clearly as Reid appears to, then maybe women would feel safe enough to explore their sex drive and fantasy life more. And perhaps we could actually return to the Garden of Promiscuous Eden promised in *Sex at Dawn*.

“Does asking a woman for permission to hit on her actually work?” Arthur asks, fascinated and befuddled, scratching into his dark curls.

“When I say that, I’m not trying to seduce a woman,” Reid explains in his slow, measured, rehearsed voice. “My intention is just not to violate her personal space before hitting on her.”

The men in the group don’t appear to grasp the concept: It seems as if it’s hard for them to understand the point of saying something that may actually be detrimental to the outcome they want. As Arthur blitzes Reid with questions about it, Matt, who’s lying slightly separated from the group next to Nadine, suddenly chimes in: “I wish that worked with hitting someone.”

“What do you mean?” Reid asks.

“I wish sometimes I could just ask someone, ‘Can I beat the shit out of you?’ so I could hit them as much as I want.”

“Are they allowed to fight back?” Reid asks, remaining impressively empathic to this line of questioning.

“If they want.”

“And you would just go until one of you taps out?”

“No, I’d just go until someone dies.”

Suddenly, the circle doesn’t feel so safe anymore. Guys like Matt are the reason women are scared to walk to their car at night in the first place, so instantly all of Reid’s work unravels. However, since we’ve all gathered under the rubric of positivity and tolerating individual differences, no one says a word to Matt or anyone else about it. Now I see why well-intentioned gossip may be a good thing in a group.

Instead, for the next hour, Matt, Violet, and Arthur ask Reid about his philosophy of life and sexuality, and the conversation veers further away from play.

The only excitement occurs when Arthur puts his arm around Nadine. As he does, Matt starts staring at her with his mouth open, his eyelids blinking rapidly, and the corners of his eyes twitching. He’s a thorn in the energy, slamming shut whatever small crack of window remained open.

This first night was important to set the tone, and I suppose it has: The Treehouse is a couple’s retreat with a homicidal maniac on the loose. My pod has already turned into a horror movie.



In the morning, everyone except Nadine and Matt gather for yoga in the living room. We stretch and hold uncomfortable poses together as sunlight dapples the floor and a breeze blows through the screen door. A sense of tranquility and community settles on the house, and in that moment, it seems like we *are* creating a better way to live.

After lunch, we clean up the suspicious blanket pile from the night before and gather on the couch for our first guest teacher. She is a tiny grey-haired woman who’s an expert in what’s known as Non-Violent Communication, or NVC. Though the name makes it sound like it’s something for wife-beaters,

it's not really about physical violence, as the teacher explains, "but about the violence we do to one another—and ourselves—with words we don't realize are harmful."

Matt and Nadine join us on the couch for the lesson, and I hope this will soften his edge and bring her back into the fold. Maybe Kamala Devi's right and I just need to be a benevolent dictator and kick the both of them out, but at the same time what kind of Utopian community is this if we just remove anyone we don't like? And besides, someone else will become the biggest asshole anyway.

Non-Violent Communication, she explains, was developed during civil rights negotiations in the sixties by a mediator named Marshall Rosenberg, and is perhaps one of the best tools there is for improving relationships, whether between friends, lovers, or families. One of the best things about it is that it only takes one person to do it: The person you're speaking to doesn't have to know anything about NVC.

"Anytime you use words that blame, judge, criticize, insult, diagnose, compare, or punish someone else, it is a recipe for misery," the grey-haired teacher explains. "We call these words jackals. And all jackals do is make your life and your relationships more difficult. No one can listen to you if you communicate like that, because you're instantly putting someone in an inferior position where, most of the time, they're going to automatically start defending themselves."

She pulls a puppet of a jackal out of her bag and puts it over one hand, then fishes out another puppet of a giraffe and puts it on the other hand. She explains that giraffe statements are positive and life-affirming, while jackal statements are negative and life-denying. Then she flaps her hands inside the jackal puppet as she gives examples of those statements: "you're annoying me," "you're doing it wrong," "it's all your fault," "the problem with you is that you think too much."

"So if someone is doing something wrong, how are we supposed to tell them?" Arthur asks.

"You stick to the facts and completely neutral observations," she responds. And though the puppet show seems like something out of *Sesame Street*, what she teaches us next changes every one of our lives—even, eventually, Matt's.

It is a deceptively simple-sounding four-step process for communicating:

1. **Observations:** Start with factual observations, not

subjective interpretations: Instead of saying, “You’re always late,” which is a huge and probably untrue generalization and accusation, the sentence would become, “The movie started at 8. You arrived at 8:15.”

2. **Feelings:** Next, move on to feelings. The key here is to make sure that you are actually communicating how you feel, not using “fake feeling words” that are hidden accusations (“I feel betrayed”) or thoughts that simply have the word “feel” in front of them, like “I feel you should have been here on time.” Instead, you can simply say, “I feel angry and confused.”
3. **Needs:** Afterward, state your needs: This is the hardest, and also most crucial, step in the process. All feelings, according to NVC, come from unmet needs. For example, feeling angry may come from a need for respect that wasn’t met; feeling confused can come from a need for honest communication that wasn’t met.

Be careful, however, not to confuse needs with strategies. Needs are basic necessities that the body, mind, and spirit yearn for, such as for connection, trust, and safety. Strategies are ways of getting those needs met. So “I need you to be on time” would be a strategy in this situation, and one should instead communicate the deeper needs: “I need communication, honesty, and respect.” Rosenberg says that people may have strategies that conflict, but no two people’s needs ever conflict.

4. **Requests:** The process ends with making a request. A request can be for an action, for further conversation, or just to make sure everyone understands each other. The distinction here is to make a request, not a demand or ultimatum. With a request, someone is free to say *yes* or *no* without consequences. So instead of demanding, “From now on, you need to be on time or this friendship is over,” the request could be, “In the

future, if you're running late, could you let me know at least half an hour in advance?" And if the person says yes but is still repeatedly late, rather than making your life miserable trying to change them, you can simply stop expecting them to do something that isn't natural to them.

As she explains this, I notice Matt tapping his foot on the floor anxiously and staring into the distance. Meanwhile, the rest of the group tries to grasp the concept.

"The goal of non-violent communication is to honor both what's alive in yourself and what's alive in the person you're talking to," she explains, "without either person trying to control the other's actions, thoughts, or feelings."

After running James through some examples of conflict resolution with situations with Nicole and with his clients, most of us begin to see that it's a great way to live, and to have a relationship without arguing about who left the cap off the toothpaste.

Matt, whose anxiety appears to have reached a boiling point, interrupts her. "I had to go to this private school where I was trapped in class and couldn't smoke," he says. "And I hate authority. This is starting to drive me crazy. Can I just sit on the balcony and smoke? I'll still listen."

She puts into practice what she's taught us and simply tells him what his needs appear to be: "It sounds like that would make you more comfortable and receptive."

"It would," he says, and moves outside.

It seems like a great process. If she tried to control him, he might have punched her.



That night, I make another attempt to turn the heat up in the house. I invite a guest named Jaiya to join us. She's not just in an apparently sustainable open polyamorous relationship, living with two boyfriends and her son, but she's a sexual expert like no other I've met. She does her work hands-on. In

order to teach people to be better lovers, she strips them naked and shows them how to touch and be touched. By her estimation, she's had her hands on over two thousand men and women, and knows penises and vaginas the way a jeweler knows emeralds and diamonds. And she's coming over to teach us what she knows.

So what's the difference between Jaiya and a prostitute? A hooker will get you off, but Jaiya won't. Instead, she'll teach you how to get others off.

As we eat dinner together and wait for her to arrive, I think about why it seems important to get an orgy started, especially after all my experiences with them. It's not that I particularly need to sleep with anyone: I've already had sex with most of the women here. I suppose it's that if we don't mix things up physically, then rather than being an alternative to monogamy, this will just be a free-love commune stuck in the friend zone.

As Dawn pours herself a heavy Jack and Coke, Jaiya arrives. She has a beguiling Mediterranean look, with long brown hair, a svelte body, full lips, and golden skin. She has a big blue dildo with her, and as she talks to us in the living room, she holds it at the top and slowly, with varying pressure, slides her fist up and down it in a twisting motion. No man in the room is listening to her speak: Each is fully entranced by her hand. It is the most simple, sensual, and seductive dance there is.

She then demonstrates blow job techniques, with both hands twisting in opposite directions on the dildo while she goes down on it, humming so her lips vibrate. It is the sexual equivalent of touching the head and rubbing the belly at the same time, and is the best blow job I've never gotten. I look for Dawn, who's nowhere to be found. I really don't want her to miss this.

Jaiya then selects Arthur for her first demo. She lies him on the carpet, helps him remove his shirt, and shows us step-by-step a sensual above-the-waist massage. Then she sits Nicole in a chair across from us, asks her to remove her jeans and panties, and teaches what she calls pussy massage. What a computer is to an abacus, pussy massage is to fingering.

At this point, I notice Dawn standing in the kitchen doorway, leaning against it, almost begging for help with her eyes. I excuse myself. She's wasted.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Do you have any cocaine?" she replies.

"We're trying to build a better way to live here, so cocaine isn't really part of that."

"But I'm not used to getting drunk without cocaine."

I try to conceal my disappointment. Another non-monogamous relationship up in flames. Any idiot could have told me: Rehab is a horrible place to find a girlfriend. But I enjoy her wit, confidence, and attitude, and had assumed she'd stayed sober. Sheila once told me that, with my personality and background, it was just luck that I met someone as grounded and balanced as Ingrid. I guess Dawn is more on my level.

Dawn's eyes suddenly roll back, and she starts to lose her balance. I grab her. "Are you going to be sick?"

She nods yes. I walk her into the bathroom, and after a few seconds, she shoos me out.

I close the door just in time.

The biggest disappointment is that, of all the nights she drinks herself senseless, it's the one in which Jaiya is teaching how to be a better lover.

"Next I'm going to demonstrate cock massage," Jaiya says as I return to my seat. "Can I have a volunteer?"

On one hand, there's nothing I'd like more than to be, for a brief shining moment, a human substitute for that blue dildo. On the other hand, the last thing I want to do is put my erection on display for my friends. But if I want openness, if I want a community like Sandstone, this is the kind of thing I need to be comfortable with.

I shoot my hand into the air. When Jaiya selects me, my heart pounds and my face flushes. It's like winning the sexual lottery.

"Take off your pants," she orders.

"I hope I can get it to work with everyone watching." I apologize in advance.

"I'm only going to get it half to three-quarters hard to demonstrate what I'm talking about," she reassures me.

She's clearly a master of the instrument. Even I don't know how to get myself just three-quarters erect. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Dawn emerging from the bathroom and stumbling downstairs to the bedroom. My partner's checked out for the night.

Jaiya rubs coconut oil on my body, then starts massaging my legs, including my penis in each stroke like it's a muscle in my lower abdomen. Soon it's at three-quarters, just like she predicted. She then demonstrates different rubbing motions—the fire-starter, the around-the-world, the twist-and-shout, other names that I can't remember because I'm too busy enjoying them. Next, she shows the group how to find loose bits of circumcised skin

underneath the head where there's extra sensitivity. I suppose we've officially surpassed friend zone as a group, and at least entered the voyeur zone.

Suddenly, Matt interrupts. "Obviously this is performance," he says.

"It's a demonstration," she corrects him.

"In a way it's theater, so it isn't real. Doesn't that change things?" His brows knit, as if this is a serious conundrum he's trying to work out.

"I can connect with him, if that's what you mean," she struggles to understand the question.

To demonstrate, Jaiya gazes softly but intensely into my eyes, starts breathing in sync with me, and begins the twisting stroke she was using on the dildo. Her hands feel so good that, soon, Matt's questions and the fact that he's watching me disappear from my mind, along with all performance pressure. But just as I'm at full mast and about to release anchor, she says, "I'm going to bring him down now."

Before I can protest, she instructs me, "Breathe quickly, like sucking air through a straw, and contract your PC muscles."

I suck air in and out rapidly as she rubs my chest in long soothing strokes. Somehow, she gets it soft within sixty seconds. Then, once it's fully resting, she brings it up to three-quarters again. She's a cock jedi.

As I pull my pants back up, pleasantly dazed from quite possibly the greatest learning experience of my life, I look around hopefully for Dawn. She must have passed out downstairs.

Meanwhile, Matt blitzes Jaiya with questions about sex as theater, and gradually everyone grows tired, loses track of the discussion, and drifts off to bed.

I find Dawn in our room asleep. A few minutes later, Nadine sidles into the room, followed shortly afterward by Matt. They drop onto the mattress next to us, as if preparing to sleep there. I feel like they've come with a specific purpose, but I don't know what it is. Perhaps after the non-violent communication talk and Jaiya's lecture, they want to connect.

Dawn wakes up, and soon we're talking about Jaiya and living together. When Matt falls asleep, Nadine inches closer to me. I look at Dawn, to see how she feels about it, and she moves closer to me as well. Soon I'm making out with both of them. Nadine breaks away for a moment and nudges Matt to make sure he's sleeping. When he doesn't respond, she whispers "I love you" to him. It's difficult to tell whether she's saying those words to reassure him or apologize for what she does next.

She unzips my pants and begins to practice some of Jaiya's moves.

"Is this okay?" I ask Dawn.

"Isn't that why we're here?" she responds.

Evidently she doesn't have any problems with this scenario. Matt, however, might. But Nadine said they weren't dating exclusively and he knows she sees other people. And Barbara Williamson did say that the best cure for possessiveness and jealousy is for someone to witness a scene like this. However, just to be safe, I switch positions so that Dawn is in the middle instead of me. This way, if Matt wakes up, I'm as far away from Nadine and him as possible.

Clothes start coming off, and soon Dawn has her hand between Nadine's legs. A low moaning fills the room. It's a male voice—and it's not mine.

We look over and see Matt with his eyes open, his hands pressed against his temples, his forehead knitted, and his face completely red. It seems as if his head is about to explode.

"Are you okay?" Nadine asks.

He keeps moaning, as if he's being repeatedly kicked in the head.

"She tried to wake you," I tell him. I don't know what my point is. I think it's for him to know that although he was sleeping, we were making love to his soulmate with complete and total respect for him. "And she said she loved you," I add uselessly.

I realize I pushed it too far, just like in San Francisco. I rationalized myself out of following the rule about the least comfortable person in the group. Maybe I actually am a sex addict.

Nadine helps Matt to his feet and walks him out of the room, playing nurse to her emotional invalid. Dawn and I make love. And, in the language of non-violent communication, I feel sad because my need for non-monogamy is not being met.

Though I suppose non-monogamy is just a strategy to getting an actual need met: freedom. And this is the second night that's gone by here without it.



After the house meeting the following morning, Nadine pulls me aside. “Matt and I would like to speak to you in private.” Her tone is serious: There is drama afoot.

I follow her and Matt downstairs to the bedroom they share with Violet and Angela. Matt drops onto a mattress and speaks softly. “You’re causing problems in our relationship. My usual response would be to get angry and resentful, but instead I want to try non-violent communication and bring it up directly with you.”

“So you’re feeling anger?” I ask non-violently.

“Yes, he is.” Nadine speaks for him. “He feels that I like you more than I like him, and that’s causing a spiral for him. And we don’t want to hurt this relationship, because it’s so longstanding and because we have a band together.”

Matt starts to grow tense. He rubs his forehead. Not a good sign. “So, Matt, because you used to date Nadine, you have a need for respect and security from her?”

“Yes,” he says. “And love and trust.” They are a perfect example of a male who’s a love addict and a woman who’s a love avoider.

His eyes soften and his breathing calms. “So would you like to make a request?” I ask him.

“Yes,” he says. “Don’t interfere with our relationship.”

That sounds more like a demand, but I let it go. At this point, I’m over both of them. So I respond, “I’ll be aware of this and careful of your connection.”

“Thank you,” Matt responds. And for the first time, I see him smile, relieved. It’s a win for non-violent communication.

I add, hopefully, “You don’t have to stay here, you know.”

“No,” Nadine says quickly. “We’re learning a lot and I think it can be really helpful for us.”

“I didn’t even know what you were doing here,” Matt adds. “Nadine just said we were staying at someone’s house, but she didn’t tell me what this was all about.”

And that’s when I realize: Nadine brought him here like it was an intervention. She thought the lifestyle we’re trying to build would somehow

help or heal him, and doesn't appear to have cared at all about our goals for the experience.

As I reflect on the conversation afterward, I wonder whether Matt's talk about murder is just a plea for attention or if he's actually a violent person. So later that day, when we're hanging out at the kitchen table, I take the opportunity to find out. "Have you ever killed anyone?" I ask him point blank.

"No," he says. That's good. I just have one follow-up question.

"Have you ever killed small animals?"

"Yes, mice." As he tells me about finding a mouse with a broken neck lying in a trap, he becomes more talkative than I've ever seen him. "I went over to the mouse and watched him as he was underneath the bar of the snaptrap, breathing his last breaths, looking at him like, "You little fucker. You're so fucking gross. Why do you have to come in here? I want you to know as you die that I fucking hate you."

He speaks each word slowly and venomously, as if savoring the image. His voice sounds as if it's coming from a far away place, where the memory vividly lives. In the moment, he reminds me of every serial killer from every movie discussing his first kill.

He continues, still in a trance, deep in what they called in rehab *euphoric recall*. He may be a death addict. "I'm envisioning back to watching my father kill a deer with a hammer when I was younger. And I've also seen a homeless guy strangle another homeless guy. When it comes down to it, watching a human die by strangulation and watching a mouse die by mousetrap, it's really the same thing. We're all the same fucking thing in the end."

I imagine myself as the mouse, with Matt looking at me, emotionless except for his disgust at my pathetic humanity, watching me expire in front of him. All it takes is one bad egg, and suddenly a happy family becomes the Manson Family.

He hunches over the table, as if the mouse is prostrate in front of him and he's intoxicated by his own power over life and death. "And as it really gets down to the last breath, the body starts to just wig out, and that's the beautiful part, because it's so fucking awesome"—his voice starts trembling with what appears to be ecstasy—"to watch the soul just beg and scream to be let out of its cage. And the body is just freaking out as the soul is trying to come out of it. And then just—*pssshhh*—the silence as the soul escapes and the body is just left as this organic disgusting matter."

Note to self: Do not touch, speak to, or look at Nadine again.



The next morning, Lawrence wakes us up early and tells us to pack a bag for the day.

“We’re flying to Sedona to meet some special people,” he announces.

Nadine and Matt decide to stay in the house to rehearse for a show they’re playing in L.A. while the rest of us pack day bags.

We climb on the plane, followed by James, Nicole, and Dawn, who buckles into the seat next to me. As we near Sedona, magnificent red mounds of earth and giant red-and-brown-striped archways push upward into the sky, announcing a new environment that requires discarding the mundane and accepting the fantastic.

Three of Lawrence’s friends meet us at the airport—Cheryl, Seva, and Aliyah. They’re three-quarters of a poly pod living nearby. They greet us warmly, place beaded necklaces around our heads as if we’ve arrived in a new-age Hawaii, and drive us to a place called Airport Mesa.

“There’s a vortex about two hundred meters up this hill,” Cheryl explains. She’s a middle-aged woman with shoulder-length red hair and the glowing complexion of someone who spends a lot of time outside and eats really healthy food.

She’s holding hands with Seva, a well-built black-haired yoga stud who looks a decade her junior but is actually a few years older and eats even healthier food. The quickest way to tell the difference between spiritual and religious people is the volume at which they speak. And Seva speaks in the soft, slow-paced voice that characterizes the group that believes heaven is for everyone in the here and now, not just for some people later. “If you stand in the vortex, you can connect to the energy of Sedona and meditate on something you want to let go of,” he explains. “The vortex will take it from you.”

The whole concept is a little new-agey for me, but this is the kind of belief system Sedona attracts. It seems that most roads in polyamory either lead to the dark side (the BDSM community) or the light side (the new-age world). The middle, where I want to be, seems very empty. I hope it’s possible to have a non-traditional relationship without having to take on the baggage of a whole non-traditional belief system and lifestyle.

We arrive at a plateau where a smattering of rocks has been arranged in a circle bisected into four quadrants. I place one foot in the lower left quadrant, the other in the lower right. I close my eyes, make the decision to let go of my fears, and wait to feel the energy of this supposed vortex. I feel nothing.

Afterward, Lawrence's friends take us for lunch at a local hippie hangout, where everyone's glowing even brighter than Seva, as if they've been exposed to nuclear radiation. As we're eating our meat-free, preservative-free, gluten-free, dairy-free, cruelty-free raw lunch, a nebbishy bearded man arrives with no glow. He introduces himself as Cheryl's husband, Paul.

He sits next to me and I ask about their relationship. It turns out to be one of the most unique stories I've heard yet. Cheryl and Paul were married and monogamous for twenty-six years, living a seemingly happy and ordinary existence with their two children in the suburbs of Chicago. But one day, Cheryl went to Sedona, met Seva, and instantly connected with him. So she came home, and told her husband that she was falling in love with someone else and wanted to act on it.

As she told him the news, he broke down crying on the spot. Nonetheless, she returned to Sedona to stay with Seva. However, she missed her husband. Seva, who'd been in polyamorous relationships before, told her that love didn't have to be an either-or proposition. Affairs in this relationship paradigm don't have to destroy marriages; they can enhance them. Now not only is Cheryl having her cake and eating it too, but so too is her husband, who recently started dating Aliyah.

Over the course of the day, however, I learn that this new relationship isn't exactly a happily-ever-after situation. Cheryl and Seva sleep in the main bedroom of the house, and her husband sleeps in an adjoining bedroom alone. The recent addition of Aaliyah, Cheryl confesses, "has caused a lot of conflict because I was used to being the queen and getting all the attention."

She goes on to explain that she's not allowing her husband and Aaliyah to have sex yet: "It's so new and we have kids, so we need to make sure we're ready for that energy." Like Kamala Devi's pod, it seems this one also has a benevolent tyrant—and possible narcissist—at the center.

After lunch, the group takes us on a whirlwind tour of Sedona's vortices, swimming holes, and crystal shops, culminating in a visit to their poly house. Without Nadine and Matt, who would've hated these things, we're bonding well as a group. As the day progresses, the glue that holds together the couples in the group starts to dissolve and we feel, for the first time, like

we are all in one relationship. Perhaps it's because now that we're interacting with other people, we're starting to see how close we've become. We are simply one pod meeting another pod. Unlike the San Francisco harem, this actually feels like it could work.

Since we missed our morning house meeting in our rush to catch the plane, we decide to check-in and share our feelings back at Cheryl's house. Everyone is in great spirits, and appreciative of each other and the experience. Dawn gives me a big hug and, with tears in her eyes, says, "For the first time in my life, I feel safe."

Afterward, Cheryl leads us to her basement, which consists solely of a beige-carpeted floor, piles of pillows, and a stereo. I start to wonder if the whole day has been leading toward an orgy with Lawrence's friends. A pod-on-pod experience. A podsome.

As I take a seat on the floor between Dawn and Violet, James suddenly crosses the room and sits on the other side of Dawn. Instantly, a jackal thought rises in me and I think, "Fuck, he's creeping in there to make his move."

"If everyone could pair up with a partner for this next exercise, that would be great," Lawrence instructs. "Preferably someone you don't know well."

And so I'm faced with a decision: If I turn to my right and pair up with Violet, then everything I want to happen this weekend will. We'll truly be a pod and I'll push through to the other side of any fear and jealousy. However, if I turn to my left and pair up with Dawn, we'll just be a couple, watching everyone else hook up. The choice is mine: poly or mono.

I pledged to push through my fear, so there's only one right decision. As I'm deliberating, however, Dawn slides closer to me and asks, "Do you want to be with me?"

Next time I'll step outside my comfort zone. Next time.

I look around: Nicole is with Seva, Leah is with Arthur, James is with Violet, a female friend of Cheryl's is with Angela, and Lawrence and Cheryl are sitting in front of the stereo with a microphone, leading us in what they call a sensual energy meditation.

It's basically a puja without the spiritual mumbo-jumbo, and thus much less ridiculous. "Sit back-to-back with your partner, close your eyes, and allow yourself to be supported by your friend," Lawrence begins. "Imagine that your friend is always there and always has your back, and how nice and safe that would feel."

Soon, unsurprisingly, things escalate. Some Sedona equivalent of Yanni plays from the speakers as Cheryl urges, “Hug your partner now, and hold onto them and don’t let go of them as you imagine what it would look like if you allowed yourself to freely express yourself, without any inhibitions.”

Quickly, the inhibitions go away. The other difference between the poly conference pujas and this form of guided foreplay is that I actually want to connect with the people in this room.

Soon, Leah is grinding on top of Arthur, moaning, almost at orgasm. I look at Lawrence to see if he’s bothered in any way. I scrutinize his face and body language for even a flicker of jealousy or concern, and there’s nothing. He’s placid and unaffected, solely focused on guiding the bacchanalia. It could be anybody giving Arthur the lapdance of a lifetime. Meanwhile, Nicole is topless, grinding on Seva. And James seems cool with it too. I need to let go.

“Let go of everything that holds you back,” Cheryl encourages as Lawrence walks through the room lightly brushing a gong. Soon Leah is topless as well and working Arthur’s crotch, using some of Jaiya’s massage strokes. Ashley and Seva are dry humping, as are James and Violet. The only people who are cuddling and not getting sexual are Cheryl’s husband and Aliyah.

I give myself over to the moment, and throw Dawn down and finger her to a soaking wet orgasm. After it seems like just about everyone’s come through their pants (except Cheryl’s husband and Aliyah), Lawrence and Cheryl end the puja.

As soon as it’s over, Seva and Aliyah run up to each other, hug, and start making out. It seems like Seva only exists to emasculate Cheryl’s husband.

Afterward, Seva drives us to our plane, and we hop in and fly back home. Everyone is buzzing on the flight, connected no longer as curious couples but as a unified group. Finally, we are a real free-love commune.

There’s just one thing holding us back, though: Me. I was the only person who didn’t share.



Today, we’re supposed to begin our timelines.

It was Dawn’s idea, inspired by rehab. If we all do our timelines, not only will each person get to know themselves better, but it will make us more

intimate as a group and more understanding of each other's triggers and where they come from.

We've also invited a woman named Lindsay over to do Somatic Experiencing. It was one of the trauma-reduction treatments I signed up for in rehab, but for some reason an appointment was never set up. Maybe Joan didn't approve it.

Lindsay sets up a table in one of the downstairs bedrooms, and we decide that since Nadine didn't get to go to Sedona, she should get healed first while we have the house meeting.

"I really think this is starting to work," Violet says. "I feel closer to all of you than my actual family, like I can talk about anything with every person here. And I like how in the days we work on improving ourselves and in the nights we snuggle."

As the rapturous check-ins continue, Matt, who's lined up to speak last, seems antsy, as if he has something burning he needs to share. When the talking stick finally comes around to him, he snatches it and says, "I've been feeling a lot of rage lately. And it's directed at you."

He lifts his arm and points a long finger directly at me. My breath catches in my throat. The finger is a pin pressing into the bubble of positivity we've created.

"I feel like you're the master of the house and you have all this power and control," he continues. "And you say you don't want to lead, but you are the leader and the guy with all the power. And I feel sometimes like I want to kill you."

Killing is a strategy, not a feeling.

The incredible thing about a talking stick is that no matter what anyone says, they have the floor as long as they're holding it. And so we sit there shock-still, trying to keep the poison from dripping into the group energy we built in Sedona.

"Last night, I was watching *Sid and Nancy* with Nadine," he goes on, referring to the movie about Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols and his dysfunctional heroin-shooting relationship with girlfriend Nancy Spungen. It culminates with him stabbing her to death, then overdosing. "I was really happy, but then while we were watching it, I got filled with rage and flipped." His hands and voice start shaking. "I'm worried if I do this work that you all are doing, I'll lose my ability to have happiness." He pauses and rubs his hands along his pants to soothe himself, then continues. "The only things

that make me happy are drugs and other people's pain. And if I don't have those things, will I ever find pleasure again?"

Our newly raised spirits are not strong enough to keep out the darkness. As he speaks, a gloom descends on the microcosm we've created. I realize he has all the traits of a psychopath, from torturing small animals to enjoying the pain of others. And that not only is Nadine his Nancy Spungen, but I'm the obstacle that stands in the way of his dark dystopia.

He finishes and hands me the talking stick. I want to say that I'm pissed at Nadine for bringing him here. I want to say he needs to get the fuck out of the house. I want to say that he's not doing a very good job on his goal of not wanting to murder people.

But instead, I take it as a test: Can I stay in the adult functional? Can I respect the communication boundary I learned in rehab that we set down as a house rule? After we complete our check-ins, we can gossip and figure out what to do about Matt. The Lafayette Morehouse people mentioned the role of the Biggest Asshole, but they didn't mention the Greatest Evil. I suck in a deep breath of air, and try my hardest to accept my part in the situation. And what is my part? On some level, perhaps I have been trying to save him and Nadine from each other. And perhaps that's because I could never rescue my parents from each other.

"When I see you and Nadine together, what that brings up from my past is seeing my parents," I begin. "They are completely co-dependent and hold each other back from life. So maybe I can—"

"But," Matt starts to protest.

"I listened to your check-in without interrupting, so wait until I'm finished, then I'll give you the talking stick and you can say what you want."

He squeezes his lips tight and his eyes drill deep into my skull, as if trying to drive a railroad spike of hatred through my head.

"I guess I'm done," I say. There's nothing I can communicate that won't exacerbate his anger, unless I just completely ignore the fact that he just said he wanted to kill me and check in about the weather or something.

I flash back to rehab, where Lorraine said the payoff of anger is that it gives people control, helps them feel one-up instead of one-down, and pushes others away. That's certainly how it's working for Matt right now. He has taken control of the meeting, our mood, our ability to express our truth, our entire house. And so we sit on eggshells, trying not to acknowledge the obvious for fear of setting him off.

“I feel like you’re being really aggressive toward me,” he suddenly says.

And that’s when I lose it. “What do you mean you feel attacked? You just said that you had rage at me and wanted to fucking kill me. How are you the victim here?”

Suddenly, his face starts twitching, but much more severely than it ever has. Every muscle seems to be in motion: his lips are trembling, his nostrils are flaring in and out, even his pupils are shaking. Perhaps I should have stuck with the NVC.

The best actor in Hollywood couldn’t replicate Matt’s reaction, because the twitches are so rapid and involuntary. It’s as if he’s fighting a demon trying to burst through his skin. And that demon is clearly intending to snap my neck like a mouse and turn me into useless organic matter.

Unfortunately for my neck, Nadine is still downstairs getting healed, so she’s not around to soothe him, to talk him back in the direction of sanity, to lead him out of the room like she has before.

He stands up, rearing to his full 6’4”. The trembling slows, replaced by a deep red flush. The demon is out: His face doesn’t even look like that of a human being anymore. He’s broken with our reality, in which there are things like self-restraint, conscience, and consequences.

Fortunately, he doesn’t lunge for me right away. Some small tenuous thread of humanity restrains him. If I stand up, if I say a word, if I lift a hand, if I run, if I even blink in a way he sees as condescending, he will attack me in a feral rage that may be too much for any of us to overcome. He will, as he told Reid, keep hitting until someone dies. And so everyone sits still, careful not to make a sudden movement, even a deep breath, that will trigger him.

I envision the newspaper headline: “Murder at the Love Commune.”

This experiment has gone horribly wrong. In San Francisco, at least only feelings got hurt. Here, I may physically be hurt.

Suddenly, there’s a movement. It is small, but it registers. Lawrence’s gaze drifts toward the countertop next to Matt, where the axe Reid used to chop open the coconuts on our first night is still lying, unsheathed.

Like a chain reaction, each person notices it and the fear thickens.

That’s when the very thing we want to prevent happens: Matt’s gaze follows ours and he notices the axe. For a moment, it seems as if our relationships won’t be the only things opening up here.

However, that fraction of a second, that distraction, the irrevocable violence of that blade, is enough. When Matt’s head turns and moves towards

the axe, he breaks his focus on me and a few sharp breaths escape from his mouth, as if something human has broken back through and is gasping for air. He then storms out of the room, leaving a thick acrid residue of hate and fear behind him.

“Fuck,” I say, exhaling.

“He was gonna kill you,” Lawrence says, stating the obvious.

“I think we should call the police,” Nicole says nervously.

“I should have trusted my instincts and just had them leave.” I feel no longer scared, but apologetic. I promised everyone a love commune, and it took less than a week for the whole endeavor to turn into a hate cult.

“Someone needs to get rid of that axe right now,” Lawrence says.

But before anyone can grab it, Matt strides back into the kitchen and stares at the group. His face is red and damp—and he’s standing between us and the kitchen counter. The axe is less than a foot away from his hand.

If there was a moment to prevent something from happening, to call the police, to take him down, to run away, it has passed.

“I need you . . . to help me . . .,” he implores the group, his voice trembling. He doesn’t say the rest of the sentence, but it’s implied: “. . . help me not kill Neil.”

Lawrence eyes the axe, deciding whether it’s possible to lunge for it in time.

“Somebody help me,” Matt hisses through his teeth. His hands slowly clench, like he’s about to be consumed by the fire of his own madness. He doesn’t move, yet every part of him is moving. Even the veins in his neck are throbbing. “Somebody. Help. Me.”

A window has opened. A window into non-violence. And if someone doesn’t jump through it soon, it’s going to close.

An interminable second passes until, finally, James says, with as calm an affect as he can muster, “Let’s go for a walk.” They are the perfect words. Matt says nothing in response, but the tension in his jaw releases slightly and his eyes dart to James.

James stands up and walks toward the front door, as if Matt has already consented to accompany him. The rigidity in Matt’s neck snaps loose, and his head drops a few degrees lower as he turns to follow, almost docilely. “I want to go destroy or burn something,” he tells James as he exits the kitchen after him.

Lawrence jumps up and grabs the axe as Nicole gives voice to the words in everyone’s mind: “He has to leave.”



“I should have said something,” Arthur tells us while we wait for James and Matt to return, “but last night, he started talking about having psychotic breaks and about voices he sometimes hears in his head. He told me he once saw the devil. And as he said that, I thought, ‘There *is* a devil in this house—and it’s him.’”

For some illogical reason that is most likely a symptom of trauma-bonding, I feel like I’m responsible for setting him off. “They did warn me to stay out of their relationship, and I guess I did start talking about it.”

“That doesn’t make it alright for him to kill you, though,” Nicole says. “Good point.”

When Nadine comes upstairs from her healing Somatic Experiencing session, we traumatize her and tell her what happened. “Oh my god, I’m so sorry,” she gasps. “I thought this would be good for him.”

“But was it good for us?” I ask her coldly. “When he comes back, you guys have to go.”

It’s too little benevolent dictator too late.

After two hours, when James and Matt still haven’t returned from their walk, we start to worry. But shortly after Arthur and Nicole head out to look for them, we see James emerge from the forest path. Matt walks a few steps behind him.

When he enters the house, he sees me standing at the top of the stairwell and makes a beeline in that direction. His feet shuffle and his face is visibly calmer. Clearly whatever James said has taken effect. “Maybe we can use this as an opportunity,” he tells me. “I can learn from you to be less reactive, and you can learn from us how to deal with your parents’ dynamic.”

What I want to say is: You guys need to get out of this house. However, what I say instead is, “That sounds like a great idea.” I can figure out how to get rid of them later.

He studies my response. I’m careful as we talk to hold my hands open and palms up, so he knows I’m not a threat. Nadine tiptoes up the stairs and says, “I’m not listening to anything.” I shake my head in annoyance.

“What did you just think?” Matt suddenly asks.

Fuck, this is emotional terrorism. The whole reason we’re in this situation

is because no one has dared to speak the truth to him; they keep putting it off for later like I just did. But this can't go on any longer. It has to stop now, as does my trauma-bonding.

"I thought," I tell him, "that if you want to keep your happiness and do what's best for your relationship with Nadine, maybe this house isn't the right place for it. Especially since you have a show to rehearse for."

I watch carefully—but not too carefully—for his reaction. When I was writing a book on survival, I met a lion handler. And he taught me how to behave around his pet predator: To approach slowly from behind it because anything in front of it is considered prey, not to put my hand in front of its nose or mouth because it will think it's food, not to show my teeth because it will interpret that as a signal to fight. And talking to Matt feels like I'm handling that lion.

"You're not trying to get rid of me?" he asks in an uncharacteristically timid voice.

Of course I'm trying to fucking get rid of you. You've turned my *Woodstock* into *Altamont*. "If I wanted to get rid of you, would I still be coming to your concert tomorrow?"

"You'll come?" he asks, his eyes brightening.

"Yes."

"Promise?"

"Of course."

He studies my face, not to make sure I'm telling the truth but to make sure I'm communicating with him as an equal, then disappears downstairs, hopefully to pack.

"Thanks for stepping up back there," I tell James. While I admire the way he handled things, a small part of me is envious that he became the hero in that moment while I was frozen in shock. "So what happened when you guys left?"

"I walked Matt to the beach and tried to keep him from destroying any trees. He was really angry and convinced that the only reason you invited them there was because you wanted to break them up. So I told him that wasn't true, and that being in this group was a good chance to grow and heal his past. At one point, a little dog ran by and he got fidgety and said he wanted to kill the dog. He also said when he sees nice cars and expensive houses, he just wants it all to burn."

“Thank God they’re leaving. But what happens if he and Nadine break up and he blames it on me—and comes back to kill me, then himself?”

“I’d like to tell you that that’s not true and you don’t have to worry about it,” James replies. “But I can’t.”



And then there were eight.

With Matt and Nadine gone, we vacillate between feelings of relief and failure as we begin another day at the Treehouse Commune: yoga, check-in, house meeting, and then the day’s activity.

One by one, we go through our timelines and, much like my experience at rehab, each person discovers the elusive obvious in their lives, the glaring truth they were previously blind to, and, in almost every case, the driving reason behind their choice of relationship style.

Over dinner that evening, we are connected like we never have been. Going through timelines, knowing the darkest corners of each other’s upbringing, sharing secrets not even our closest friends know, and supporting each other emotionally, has forged what feels like a lifelong bond.

There’s just one problem: We’re supposed to see Nadine and Matt perform that night.

“Why do you feel like you have to go?” James asks as we sit around the table, finishing our meal.

“Because I gave Matt my word, and my word’s important to me.”

“But what about your trauma bonding? Wouldn’t not going be a good way to get over it.”

“That’s a good point. Why do I feel like I have to honor my word to someone who threatened me?”

“Exactly.”

“On the other hand, I think going will lower my chances of being killed by him. If he can maybe not see me as an authority figure and feel like I support his relationship, then he’ll be less likely to see me as the cause of their breakup if they ever do split up.”

“I had nightmares last night of Matt coming back and killing everyone,” Leah confides.

“I know,” Nicole agrees. “While I was doing my timeline, I started thinking about where I was going to run if he burst into the house and went crazy. I think we should go and make nice, just for the peace of mind.”

When we walk into the bar where they’re performing, it feels like the crowd parts for us. A cute indie-rocker in a furry hat walks up to me and asks, “Do you have a light?”

“Your cigarette is already lit,” I tell her blithely, and she slinks away, embarrassed.

Women usually don’t approach me and hit on me, I realize afterward. And I usually don’t blow them off like that. In the moment, I don’t feel like I need anyone else in my life. I have my tribe, my pod.

I think back to my goal for the weekend, which was to exude a powerful group energy, and we are most definitely exuding.

The show is surprisingly good: Nadine is charismatic and hypnotic on stage, equal parts Lady Gaga and Mick Jagger. And Matt strikes his guitar strings raw. His playing is strident and hard, yet with little emotion and sensitivity. “He’s not strumming that guitar,” Leah whispers to me, “He’s killing it.”

After the show, we wait for our former commune-mates to emerge. Nadine runs up to us first. “The techniques are really working,” she exclaims. “I used non-violent communication with him and he was so happy. He felt heard for the first time.”

Behind her, I see Matt sit on the top step of a small staircase and light a cigarette. I walk up and kneel on the ground, so I’m below him and not threatening. It’s showtime.

I tell him I enjoyed the concert and mention a few songs I particularly like. Until finally, the moment comes where I tell the big lie: “Your chemistry is incredible onstage. I really see why you’re together now.”

Is it okay to stretch the truth to save your life? Rick Rubin would say no. My mother would say yes.

Matt grins, ear to ear. Just a few days ago, I was telling them how unhealthy they were for each other and now I’m trying to keep them together. I guess ultimately my life is more important than their relationship.

“I’d love to hear the songs with electric guitar,” I tell him, changing the subject.

This leads to a ten-minute discussion about music until, finally, he says,

“When you’re next in New York, we should all go out for a drink, without all this stuff.”

I agree, and something in my chest releases. I’m his friend now, not his mortal enemy. I can sleep at night.

He lifts his right arm and extends his large guitar-murdering hand. As I reach for it with my puny hand, he gives me a wry look and nods his head, letting me know this is my moment to rewrite past wrongs.

“Okay,” I tell him. And I grip his hand firmly, not weakly like last time. He smiles. I smile. I’m going to live.

As long as Nadine doesn’t break up with him tonight.



It is our last day together as a group, and I wake up next to Dawn, trying to determine whether the house was a success or not.

On one hand, outside of the mini-puja in Sedona and letting everyone see my junk during Jaiya’s demonstration, we remained mostly bound in traditional couples. It was monogamy with a little coloring outside the lines.

On the other hand, especially at Matt and Nadine’s concert, we created a powerful group energy. And as a pod, after removing the destructive element, we developed caring, harmony, and intimacy, irregardless of the sex. So it has been, in some sense, a successful group relationship.

When we sit down for our final house meeting, it is not so much a check-in but a check-out.

Arthur has developed a crush on Leah since the Sedona dry-humping session, so he sits next to her on the couch, his head on her shoulders. Lawrence and Violet, who’ve developed a close connection, squeeze next to each other, his arms wrapped around her knees. Maybe this was more of a success than I thought, and the physical intimacy is developing naturally rather than being forced by a gimmick like a play party.

“We have to leave at noon to visit Nicole’s parents,” James says as we begin.

“We’ll try to finish before then,” I reply. “But let me start this meeting with an important question: ‘Is this lifestyle sustainable?’”

“If you’d asked me a couple days ago, I would have said no,” James responds. “All the effort of trying to make it work and not hurting people

in the process was getting exhausting. But now, I say yes. When we were at the concert, I felt very lucky, and like everyone should be with a pod and have the synergy of a group. I mean, wouldn't the world be better if everyone communicated as honestly and openly and vulnerably as we have?"

"I was actually thinking last night that we're onto something better than everyone else," Angela says.

Even Dawn agrees: "It would be great to always have a group of best friends to do things with and give each other life advice and have fun together."

I agree: It has been great. The main disadvantage I can see is that the more people in a tribe, the more time it takes to deal with the feelings and needs of each individual. If you have eight to ten people, there's likely someone going through something every single day, so you need to spend a lot of time processing.

"If we did this in the long run," I ask, "would you all prefer to be closed as a group or open to bringing in new people?"

"I wouldn't want this to be monogamous," Leah quickly says. "I'd want to be out and gather more energy. People could come in when it's right for them and leave when their journey is done, so it's always evolving."

I take a deep breath and give voice to the thought that's been on my mind all week: "I regret that we all never got to sleep together, because I wonder how that would have changed things, whether it would have made things more or less complicated."

"Sex always makes things more complicated," Nicole sighs.

"It would be worth it for me for the sex," Leah cuts in. The talking stick has been abandoned, and that's fine: we have no rules, only guidelines. "Plus, we'd get to discuss whatever comes up right away during our check-ins and deal with it."

"You're right!" Nicole lights up. "With this kind of thing, you have more people to give you insight than in a relationship—and you have seven awesome options."

"I like the idea of getting to cuddle and sleep with different people each night," Violet adds. "I think Matt's hate made everyone uncomfortable and kept stuff from happening. It definitely did for me. I could feel it every time we started interacting."

As we sit together talking about it, the energy swells between us and each person, in their own way, starts imagining an alternative version of our time together, one much closer to everyone's original vision.

“So the consensus is that it would have worked with the sex?” I press for confirmation.

Everyone nods yes, though I notice Dawn hesitates a fraction of a second longer before giving her consent. And we sit there in silent regret over not having pushed past what they call at Lafayette Morehouse a fundamental and counterintuitive human resistance to pleasure.

Leah is the first to break the silence. “Now that we’re all in agreement, can we hook up?” Everyone laughs, but she’s not joking. “I brought over a bag of sex toys and never got to use them.”

“And I brought outfits for everyone,” Violet adds.

James turns to Nicole and asks, “Honey, is it okay if we stay here one more day and play with everyone, then see your parents tomorrow?”

“I think that’s okay.”

And now I’m certain that this relationship is sustainable: because everybody actually wants to sustain it. Unlike San Francisco, where even I wanted to leave early, this pod is actually opting to stay longer. And contrary to what Rick and the sex addiction people have been telling me, getting to know each other intimately hasn’t made sex no longer desirable. It’s actually increased the anticipation for it and the safety we all feel in having it.

“Since it’s still early in the day,” I suggest, “why don’t we all go to the beach, then afterward we’ll take a nap in our room, change into Violet’s outfits, and play.”

“Nice job,” James says to me when everyone goes off to their rooms to change for the beach. “I think we all wanted it, but it takes somebody to say, ‘Is anybody down to get dirty?’” He pauses and lowers his voice, “Do you want some tips on what to do next?”

“Definitely. I’m way outside my comfort zone”

He shares with me four directives of group sex he’s learned from years of swinging:

- I. The magic number of people in a group is 6.*
- II. The temperature in the room should be at least 80 degrees.*
- III. A costume change is key: Having everybody put on a different outfit, preferably a sexy one, creates a vibe and encourages playtime.*
- IV. Someone, preferably female, needs to take the lead and*

*start the action, whether through bringing it up directly or physically starting the action.*

We walk to the beach, and sunbathe and surf. Our connection, camaraderie, and energy, perhaps thickened by the anticipation, are stronger than anything I've felt with a new girlfriend. Perhaps it's because we're not a couple but a gang.

After a few hours, people start drifting back to the house. When I return, I open the door to our room. Lawrence is asleep, cuddling with what appears to be Leah. There's another girl sleeping at the end, probably Violet. I squeeze in next to Violet and fall asleep.

When I wake up, I notice that the person in my arms is Leah, and Lawrence has actually been cuddling with Violet the whole time. When Leah opens her eyes, we make out lightly. "I'm trying to be good and save things for tonight," she says, "but I so want to straddle you right now."

After dinner, everyone gathers on the couch, waiting for the promised playtime to happen, for someone to say something to kick things off. I notice that the thermostat has been mysteriously re-set to eighty degrees. It reminds me of our first night together with Reid. Now we have a second chance. But, like before, the right word can be a match that sets the energy ablaze, but the wrong word can slam the window shut.

Fortunately Lawrence starts things gracefully. "Let's go around and everyone tell me what would make this the most delicious night for you."

"My period just started, so I'm okay if nothing happens or we just snuggle," Violet says.

I worry that too much time has passed and the window has closed, but then Leah speaks. "What I'd really like is to be tied up. And, while I'm having sex, to have someone put toys in my ass." The window is evidently still open. "And I'd trust Lawrence and Violet with that."

"I can do that," Violet steps up. And the match has been lit.

Leah continues: "I'm also thinking that maybe I'd like to have a gangbang—with all of you guys." The match has just turned into a blowtorch. "I just want to add that I have a sensitive cervix, so don't go in all the way. If it opens up, I'll let you know. But be gentle and connect. I don't like hard pounding. And also obviously switch condoms between girls, and use hand sanitizer or even gloves if you're going to use your hands. Especially after you've touched another girl."

It is definitely on. Safe and on.

“I’ve never talked about it like this before,” James says. “It’s weird. But one thing you should know about Nicole: If she has a hard clitoral orgasm, she’s done. She’ll go to sleep and that’s the last you’ll see of her.”

It’s so on. Awkward but so on.

Unlike the women, who are honest about their sexual desires, the men play it cool. “Other than that,” James concludes, “I don’t have any expectations. I just want to enjoy whatever happens.”

Like the rest of the guys in the house, I want to get a blow job and fuck every girl there. But I see Dawn sitting nearby, looking incongruously timid and nervous, and what I say instead is, “What’s most important to me is that we share intimate space together. If anything happens from there, great. And I only want to do what Dawn is comfortable with. So if you’re uncomfortable with anything I’m doing or someone else is doing to me, just use a safe word and let me know. Oh, and my anus is a no-go zone.”

That that last sentence are the only true words I speak. I wonder how much of the rhetoric of everything from the sexual revolution of the sixties to the new-age Tantric poly people of today is based around men concealing their base needs with a higher spiritual and idealistic vision that appeals to their target audience.

Half an hour later, all the women are in our room in sexy lingerie, the guys in unsexy boxer shorts.

This is the awkward part of an orgy. Until Leah brings in her sex toys and passes them around, explaining each one. “This dildo is nice, because it hits your g-spot and your clitoris. And this jar of coconut oil works great both as a sexual lubricant and as an oil for genital massage.”

Slowly, everyone couples off: Violet and Lawrence, Leah and James, Nicole and Arthur . . . and Dawn and me. I’m the only dude still with his primary. And that’s when I realize I’m not the one having problems sharing anymore: It’s Dawn.

“Do you want to switch at all?” I whisper to her when Leah works her way over to us.

“If you go make out with her, then James is going to be all alone. And I don’t want to feel peer pressure to be with James.”

“You don’t have to. You can just stay with Leah and me.”

“Then what’s he going to do: Sit there and jerk off?”

I realize that this is similar to the spaceship room where Ingrid and I

broke up, with the mattresses on the floor. Same room, different house. And this is what I supposedly wanted at the time: openness, variety, sexual liberation. Yet here I am again, negotiating for my freedom. Perhaps all this bird has done is flown into a bigger cage. Maybe the only true freedom is being single. As Chretien de Troyes writes in the King Arthur romances of the twelfth century, “Anyone who loves is a prisoner.”

In the meantime, Violet ties Leah up on her back, with her hands bound to her ankles and her legs wide open. Lawrence sticks a glass dildo up her ass. It looks painful, but eventually Leah relaxes into it as Violet pinches her breasts between nipple clamps.

“Can someone just press their cock against my face,” Leah asks.

I want to volunteer, but James beats me to it. Soon we have physically merged. We are not just a group now, but a pile.

I suppose the mission of this commune has been accomplished: We’ve connected in every way. And, at least with the right mix of people, it has been a better way to live—at least in the short term. But running a commune is a full-time job. It takes a lot of work and energy—and much more commitment than a monogamous relationship.