

The Webs They Weave

by Christy Piña

Audrey is dating Kevin. Kevin is dating Sara. Sara and Audrey are friends. Audrey is half-dating Jeanie. Jeanie and Kevin are friends. Kevin is dating Farah*. Farah is dating Audrey.

Audrey met Kevin a couple of years ago. They clicked pretty quickly, but when he told her he was polyamorous, she took it as a sign that he would never truly commit to her.

Then, she met Jeanie.

Jeanie showed Audrey it was possible to have strong, romantic feelings for more than one person. She approached Jeanie about polyamory only to learn that Jeanie was poly, too.

“What? How the fuck did I meet two people who just both happened to be polyamorous?” Audrey remembers thinking. Audrey-Kevin-Sara-Jeanie-Farah make up just one of the many webs that polyamory weaves.

Though Audrey didn’t want to talk to Kevin about her relationship with Jeanie at first, when she eventually did, she felt better than she ever expected to. But her insecurities took over when he tried to talk about Sara. Audrey didn’t want to hear it.

After that, she did what most people do when they’re trying to avoid an uncomfortable situation: She ignored him for weeks, only to find herself depressed and longing for the man she loved. So, she forced herself to become more comfortable talking about Sara but refused to meet her.

Until six months later.

When Audrey and her roommate had a dramatic falling out, she panicked and asked Kevin if they could move in together, to which he replied: If that were to happen, Audrey would finally have to meet Sara. He wasn’t going to ban his other girlfriend from his apartment.

So, she did. Though she and Kevin never moved in together.

Audrey and Sara got dinner at a restaurant before heading to Kevin’s birthday party. *“I walked in shaking, and I’m not that much of a pussy most of the time,”* Audrey recalls. *“It was so scary.”*

That night, Sara went home, and Audrey stayed over. The following morning she opened up to Kevin in a way that was a first for her. *“I was literally saying every insecurity I’ve ever felt, and I’ve never been that vulnerable with a person before,”* she says. *“It was just so beautiful.”*

Now, Audrey and Sara are friends. Sara designed Audrey's website for the reiki healing business she's starting. Sara got Audrey an appointment with her friend who's an acupuncturist so Audrey could offer that in her new business, in addition to healing. Sara, Audrey and Kevin are even considering moving in together.

A similar situation played out when Kevin and Jeanie met.

The two immediately hit it off. Audrey remembers feeling a weight lifted off her shoulders. She could have them both over for parties without feeling weird about asking one to stay the night and not the other. Audrey also became friends with Jeanie's two other girlfriends at the time – one of whom is now her reiki client.

Audrey and Jeanie have been together for about a year and a half, but their relationship dynamic is in the midst of a change. One of Jeanie's partners wants to take their relationship from polyamorous to monogamous because she wants to settle down and start a family, which Jeanie wants also, but Audrey has no interest in at this moment in her life.

"Everybody has to take their own direction in life," says Audrey. "I'm not gonna stop her from growing."

For the time being, Audrey and Jeanie are working toward the possibility of continuing to be emotionally intimate with each other without having sex because they are still very much in love. "I'd be okay having a boundary around sex, 'cause it's not really what's important to me," Audrey says.

The women hope that maintaining a romantic relationship is something Jeanie's partner can accept. The couple loves to grow and learn together, she says, and they want to continue to do so if that's something all three parties can agree on.

As for Kevin and Audrey, they're still together, dating the same woman.

Four to five percent of Americans live the way Audrey-Kevin-Sara-Jeanie-Farah do, as consensual non-monogamists, often called polyamorous.

Consensual non-monogamy is something more openly talked about today, but the practice and concept of polyamorous people coming together to create their own communities, has been going on for centuries.

One such community lies on Troutman Street in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bushwick.

It's called Hacienda.

Just steps from the Myrtle Avenue/Broadway subway station sits one of the community's four properties, a three-story townhouse named Hacienda Villa, which is home to 15 people who practice polyamory.

Like Audrey-Kevin-Sara-Jeanie-Farah's interrelationships, Hacienda, too, challenges the idea that monogamy is the only way to have a successful love life. But in a world where anything that's not believing in "the one" is frowned upon, can their relationships and that community survive?

Andrew Sparkfire began Hacienda out of his house 10 years ago. He'd throw "sexy" parties, where people would, well, have sex. Once they got married, Andrew and his wife, Beth, continued throwing sexy parties at that same house. They stopped a few months ago when they began building their newborn daughter's bedroom.

Of the community's four spaces, three are in Bushwick – the Villa, Lodge, Studio – and one in New Orleans, Hacienda Maison. The Villa and the Lodge, a mere six blocks away from each other, are "intentional living communities," where people who are polyamorous or simply interested in living in a poly community can rent a room. The Studio, located in the basement of the Villa, is where Hacienda holds public workshops such as wax play, rope share and "Become Super F*ckable."

Hacienda, as a community, hosts other public events, like monthly pool parties, brunches and kink tasting nights, which are open to anyone who wants to attend. They also have members-only events where sex actually takes place. These are called play parties.

"At the heart of it, it's really a group of people who celebrate sex and sex-positive values," says Beth Sparkfire, director of membership and events for the Hacienda community.

Though both townhouses are home to residents, that's where their similarities mostly end, Sparkfire explains. The Villa, opened in 2014, is more organized. Its residents have a lot of meetings, follow the house rules they've set together, host potlucks often and are deeply involved in how the community, as a whole, runs.

The Lodge opened in 2019, and its residents chose to define their community differently than the Villa did. Their only requirement was that they had to abide by the Hacienda community's overall values of consent, acceptance and what known as "sex-positivity," the belief that all forms of consensual sex are fundamentally healthy. The Lodge's residents are much more relaxed than the Villains (the nickname the Villa's residents gave themselves).

One of the rules the Villains follow, which the Lodge members don't, is that those who live in the house cannot be sexually or emotionally intimate with each other. But if people do fall in love or become sexually attracted to one another, that's okay. They just have to request permission from every resident in the house to begin dating and/or having sex.

In theory, the Villa's no sex/love rule makes sense, but it's not something that previous polyamorous communities have really followed.

"No fucking each other is more the exception rather than the rule," polyamorous expert Dr. Elisabeth Sheff says about earlier communities. "It might be the exception that makes the household last. ... You add in fucking each other, and it gets way more volatile."

The people who join Hacienda and the people who don't but still practice polyamory, like Audrey-Kevin-Sara-Jeanie-Farah, are a part of a far larger community, one comprised of nearly 10 million Americans. A community that is constantly evolving.

How it looks, who it tailors to and where the community stands today may not be the same in 15 years, clinical psychologist Dr. David Ley explains. There may be more flexibility and availability within non-monogamy that tailors to individuals, instead of the community as a whole. There may be less stigma about non-monogamy and among the members of the community. There may be more places like Bushwick's Hacienda community, or there may be none like it at all.

But for the time being, communities like the Hacienda Villa and the Hacienda Lodge tower over Bushwick streets, and Audrey-Kevin-Sara-Jeanie-Farah continue to show that, despite people's hesitancy to believe polyamory or consensual non-monogamy works, it can, and it does.

Hacienda isn't the first community of its kind. Numerous similar ones have come and gone. In fact, non-monogamy has been around for centuries, dating back to Ancient Mesopotamia when the Goddess Ishtar ruled and celebrated her victories with feasting and *a lot* of sex. But more recently, as in the last two centuries, consensual non-monogamy (CNM) has taken off.

There have been three waves of modern CNM. The first wave, Sheff says, began with one of the earliest and most popular polyamorous communities, the Oneida Community, which began in upstate New York in 1848.

Fast forward over 100 years to the second wave, and there's the Sandstone Retreat, a fully nudist spa in Southern California that ran from 1969 to 1976. The Retreat's members participated in group sex and swinging – two forms of CNM – and its founders encouraged married couples to open up their relationships.

Then, there was the Kerista Commune, nearly 400 miles north, in San Francisco, which ran for 20 years, making it one of the longest-lasting polyamorous communities in modern history.

Unlike Hacienda Villa, Kerista only allowed its residents to have sex with each other. They even had a sleeping rotation schedule, so no one slept with one person more often than another

person. The Kerista Commune began in New York in the 1950s but really began to thrive when it relocated to the west coast two decades later in 1971 and remained open until 1991.

The act of having sex with each other may not have been a problem for the Keristas, but the community's sleeping schedule did lead to its own set of obstacles, the root of which lay in human nature. People are going to like some people more than others, so the vision of equal attraction among everyone in the community didn't exactly live up to the theoretical hype.

None of these communities exist today, and a third wave has fallen upon the CNM community: the internet. The advent of online communication has made way for a lot of new people to enter the community who are violating its primary rule of consent. This influx has caused growing pains in today's poly communities, especially when it comes to abusive people who seek newbies to take advantage of.

One common thread among these past communities, across all three waves, is that they tend to fail when their leaders depart. And this rings true for plenty of groups founded on one, charismatic leader.

The community, says Sheff, "will disintegrate if the charismatic leader leaves."

If this history is any guide to the future of polyamorous communities, it begs the question: Will Hacienda make it?

Though Hacienda seems to be thriving at the moment – they just opened up new rooms at the Villa – social psychologist Dr. Justin Lehmiller points out that the reality is that most people who are not monogamous do not belong to any community besides their own circle.

Which brings us back to Audrey-Kevin-Sara-Jeanie-Farah and how their relationships endure.

Kevin, Audrey and Farah make up what's called a triad, which is when three parties are involved with one another, Lehmiller explains. But Kevin, Audrey and Farah keep their relationships separate.

Kevin is dating Audrey and Farah. Farah is dating Kevin and Audrey. Audrey is dating Kevin and Farah. But Kevin, Audrey and Farah are not a three-way couple, what is known as a "throuple."

Farah came into Audrey's life by way of Kevin. Farah and Kevin had been talking for a while, forming an emotionally intimate relationship but not a sexual one. She and her husband had recently decided to open up their marriage and needed some time to work through their insecurities, so Farah and Kevin chose to take things slow until her husband was completely comfortable with it.

Though hesitant at first, Farah's husband eventually came around. Now, he's kind and inviting, even making food for Audrey when she comes over to their house.

When Audrey found out about Kevin and Farah, she spiraled back into her insecurities. Before the two women met, Audrey, again, began questioning her worth and comparing herself to Farah, whom she felt was so beautiful.

But their meeting immediately shut down those thoughts.

"I wish I could explain to you how odd it was, because me and her, we met, we immediately connected," Audrey remembers, adding that she later found out Kevin would send her a lot of links to stories that Farah had sent him. "So, I'm like, 'Oh my god. Have I been in love with this girl all this time?'"

Unlike Audrey, who kind of fell into polyamory, Kevin's first girlfriend thrust him into it at 16. They met online through a game called Second Life, and three weeks later she left to study in Japan for a year.

She told him she didn't want to lie to him or cheat on him, but she wanted him to know that she was going to sleep with people while she was there, and he needed to be okay with that or they would have to break up. Kevin chose not to end the relationship because he was just happy to have his first girlfriend and didn't want to let that go.

Though she was honest about her sexual escapades while in Japan, she asked Kevin to wait to lose his virginity to her when she returned from abroad a year later, and they would finally meet in person. Waiting taught him patience, self-discipline and made him feel secure, he recalls.

The relationship didn't end well, but it did last four or five years. Kevin's life was dictated by his relationship at the time. He stayed in the area for college to be near his girlfriend who lived on Long Island, and that was only *one* of the many misguided decisions he made because of her.

"That's the one thing I really thank my ex for," Kevin says. "She put me in these very difficult situations where I didn't really have a choice but to stay with her or break up. Through that, I really learned about myself and became, ultimately, resilient and learned to open myself to greater levels of love."

She taught him about "compersion," which is a common practice in consensual non-monogamy and means being happy for your partners when they're happy with their other partners. It's essentially the opposite of jealousy.

Kevin is no stranger to the various forms of consensual non-monogamy, the umbrella term under which polyamory falls. He was monogamish at one point, meaning you can have sex with multiple people but not romantic relationships. He tried an open relationship, where he could love or have sex with whomever he chose, whenever he chose. He was even completely monogamous at a point five years ago, which is the only time he ever lived with someone.

He prefers the terms “non-monogamous” or “relationship anarchist” to polyamorous because the latter has too many implications. It’s an academic term, which in and of itself makes it a more privileged word for something that’s been practiced for centuries.

The book “The Ethical Slut,” written by Janet W. Hardy and Dossie Easton, explores the different forms of consensual non-monogamy and is used as a point of reference for polyamory. Kevin, however, feels the book emphasizes a hierarchical system in relationships that he refuses to enact in his own life. There are primary partners, who are the people you live with and are serious with; secondaries, meaning you don’t live with them, but you do have romantic/intimate relationships; and tertiaries who you just have sex with.

Kevin finds the hierarchies delineated in the book dehumanizing. Though he’s not a fan of labels, if he had to consider himself something, the closest would probably be a relationship anarchist. The term veers away from partner rankings completely and allows the people involved to decide, case by case, what their relationship will look like.

Regardless of which form of consensual non-monogamy a person practices, one central idea applies to all of them: Love is not limited.

“Love is not a scarce thing,” Kevin explains. “It’s an infinite thing.”

He believes a big part of why people think that love is something you can only give to one person, a soulmate or “the one,” is because society has conditioned people to think that way. And romantic comedies haven’t helped either, he adds. They portray idealistic views of how relationships should look.

In his own life, Kevin tries to balance the time he spends with Audrey, Farah and Sara. He plans to see each of them at least once a week but avoids hanging out with them if he’s at the point where he feels like he *has* to rather than genuinely wanting to.

“When you really love someone or something, it never drains you, number one,” he says about how he makes time for all three of the women. “And secondly, you just find time to do it and will get lost in doing that. I’m very much a romantic in that sense. Relationships are a very high priority for me and something I love doing, which is making my partners happy.”

Kevin, Audrey and Farah's triad is just one of the many different forms polyamorous relationships can take, Lehmiller says.

There are Vees, among others, in which one person has two partners, but they're not involved with each other; Quads, which is essentially the same as a triad but with four people; and Open Networks, aka open relationships, that allow people to add new partners as often as they choose.

Two key elements that apply to all of the different shapes consensual non-monogamy and polyamory can take are consent and the belief that love is not finite. But these elements can be difficult to grasp for some people who have only ever been exposed to monogamy.

Lehmiller explains that there are a lot of misconceptions about polyamory, such as how it could never work or that jealousy is bound to emerge. Overall, however, the quality of a polyamorous relationship versus a monogamous one is not all that different.

Audrey-Kevin-Sara-Jeanie-Farah are proof that consensually non-monogamous relationships can and do work, even if jealousy arises at times. They work through it, the same way two people in a monogamous relationship would.

The idea that the polyamorous or CNM community tailors only to white, wealthy liberals is another common misconception, Lehmiller says.

"It can appeal to people across different political classes and racial backgrounds and socioeconomic statuses," he adds.

On the other hand, Ley believes that the polyamorous community is, in fact, very socially and politically liberal because their values tend to align more with the left, like on race and gender equality, than they do with the right.

While social and political values can play a part in who's drawn to polyamory instead of monogamy, a factor that doesn't get much attention is a person's spirituality, Ley explains. CNM attracts people with less traditional religions, like Paganism, Unitarian/Universalism and Non-Denominational.

Beyond people's beliefs and values, their sociological and psychological traits, as well as biological factors, may heavily contribute to someone being more inclined to non-monogamy than they are to monogamy.

An unrestricted sociosexual orientation, meaning you can more easily separate sex from love; being high in Erotophilia, having more positive attitudes toward and responses to sexual cues; and being a high sexual sensation seeking individual, aka living with a heightened need for sexual excitement; can cause someone to lean into CNM, Lehmiller says.

Nonconformity, taking risks and being mega-social (read: having an intense desire for human contact) also play a part, Sheff adds.

“It’s a biopsychosocial phenomenon, meaning that you probably have some biological factors that might be contributing,” Lehmiller explains. “You also have your own individual personality. You’ve got the cultural environment that you’re growing up in. ... All those factors come together to influence whether or not people become polyamorous.”

Despite experts’ insistence that heightened sexuality can increase someone’s inclination to non-monogamy, there’s no use denying that sex has a way of making things more complicated. It can add another level of intensity and may cause people to become possessive of their partners, Sheff says.

Some people see sex as strictly physical and not something worth getting upset over, while others think sex is meaningful and connects people in a different, more intimate way. This discrepancy, alone, can cause issues in all types of relationships – CNM or not.

The initial reaction when these complications arise is to avoid them at all costs, but Sheff says if people were to work *with* the complications instead, it could help move their poly relationships forward.

“Allow it to change things, and renegotiate, and be flexible in relationships,” she adds. “[That] is really the only way for consensual non-monogamy to work.”

Discovering polyamory and how it plays a role in one’s life moving forward isn’t always easy.

For instance, Kevin and Audrey both faced a lot of insecurities and bumps at the beginning of their consensually non-monogamous lives. When Kevin began researching why people were monogamous, he found himself reflecting on his own insecurities and triggers from his past. It helped him see that instead of putting his negative emotions onto his partner, as some people are wont to do, he’d rather dive into why he feels the way he does.

His research caused him to be more aware of how people perceive their relationships, and he understood that the root of his own insecurities was the fear of losing the people he loved. That fear has a way of making people act in ways they wouldn't normally.

Encountering Buddhism in his early 20s gave Kevin the chance to explore his feelings of abandonment further and helped him see that he felt the need to control his partners in order to alleviate the fear of them leaving him.

“I was able to face a lot of demons a lot earlier and sooner through non-monogamy than if I was monogamous and used that as a crutch for my own ego,” he says.

Embracing non-monogamy as a teen allowed him to be confident in himself, instead of latching onto a relationship to boost his self-esteem. It forced him to learn how to be okay with impermanence.

For Audrey, on the other hand, overcoming her insecurities was a longer process and is still something she struggles with. Sometimes, her insecurities stem from the dirty looks she and Jeanie get on the streets when they're holding hands or kissing, like during Jeanie's first trip to visit Audrey's family in Philadelphia at Christmas.

"It's just kind of crazy to me," she says. "Sometimes, I feel like I live in this bubble where everybody's just cool, and people are just really kind and don't care about what you're doing, but when people's realities are being threatened, it very much scares [them]."

Other times, her insecurities stem from bouts of occasional lapses in confidence. Audrey tries not to notice the people who grimace at her in the streets, but when she does find herself caring about their opinions, she'll call herself on it. Though she *is* only human, and it doesn't feel good when people look at her with such disapproval.

"At this moment, I still feel like, even though it's really scary to put yourself out there and say these things, it's still an act of bravery to be yourself in a world of people that are trying to get you to be somebody else," she says. "I still get scared."

Audrey believes that some people are hesitant to accept polyamory as a legitimate relationship that *can* be just as successful as monogamy, because they see consensual non-monogamy as a threat to what they've always known.

That's not necessarily the case.

Consensual non-monogamy is just another way of people living their lives however they choose, which Audrey insists, everyone has a right to do.

In their respective relationships, Audrey-Kevin-Sara-Jeanie-Farah practice autonomy, take responsibility for their emotions, remain interdependent of each other and remind themselves that what somebody does outside of you isn't a reflection of their feelings.

Audrey doesn't see herself settling down with one person for the rest of her life and hasn't thought much about kids because her life's constantly changing, and she's happy with where she's at right now.

But getting to this point took some time and a whole lot of hurt.

“It’s a painful process,” she admits. “It’s not for the faint of heart but worth it.”

**Name has been changed.*