

Love *in the* Time *of* Plethora

Searching for permanence in a promiscuous city.

BY ROBIN RINALDI

I had drinks recently with my oldest childhood friend in a bar near my hometown, two hours equidistant from Philadelphia and New York. Outside, it was below freezing. Inside, the bar looked exactly like the ones patronized by the townies in rom-coms set on the East Coast: a cozy, neon-lit oasis of Yuenglings and shots and Neil Young covers, a bulwark against the approaching winter and all manner of problems beyond the saloon door. My friend—let’s call her Teresa—was with her husband; we’ll call him Joe. They had just returned from two weeks in Hawaii, a celebration of their 30 years of marriage.

I tried to wrap my mind around that: At age 50, I have a friend who has been married 30 years. I was there when Teresa, at 16, met Joe in a bar (they didn’t card much back then). And I was there at the church when she pledged her life to him three years later.

I, on the other hand, left this small, blue-collar town in eastern Pennsylvania early and spent my adult life bouncing between big cities on both coasts. In Sacramento, I fell in love with the man who was to become my husband, moved into his house, and got engaged. In Philadelphia, the two of us rented a brownstone, ate out constantly, socialized with other couples, and took the train to New York. And then, when I was in my late 30s, we came to San Francisco, and it all got weird. We bought a house, threw parties, and

took vacations in Europe. Then I spent a year sleeping around and three months living at an orgasmic meditation commune in SoMa. My husband reciprocated by getting a girlfriend. The relationship crumbled from there.

I’m not claiming that San Francisco was responsible for the hedonism that I introduced into my marriage. That probably had more to do with midlife angst, the estrogen surge that accompanies perimenopause, and a dearth of youthful sexual exploration that had left me, in my 40s, still yearning to sow some oats. Anyway, I tend to mistrust the correlations that people make between the city that they live in and the sex that they have. I’m referring to that old yarn about how difficult it is to find love in San Francisco, where the men are passive and the women wear fleece, or the one that says all the real men live in New York, while Miami is teeming with skilled seductresses. Statements like these don’t take into account two of the most important factors governing the quality of a person’s love life: absolute personal responsibility and dumb, random luck.

But still, there’s something about San Francisco, isn’t there? The endless combinations of daring strangers gathered at the far-flung crossroads. The way that a simple trip to the grocery store can be interrupted by a view so arresting that you’re suddenly cast back to an earlier version of yourself, or forward to a future version. The silicon dendrites running underground and up into the ether from Mountain View and Cupertino, a power grid of aspiration.

Cities spark dreams, and iconic cities spark even bigger dreams. When I moved to San Francisco at age 39, everything seemed possible—and a sense of potential is the very fuel of romance. Romance is blustery and unpredictable, like weather blowing in off the Pacific. It runs on motion: the unexpected text message, the rush to the train, the kiss outside the crowded restaurant, the taxi ride back to your place or his, the falling—for minutes or hours

or days—into the sheets. The air in the bedroom rearranges itself around the newly developing reality. We say “falling” in love. San Francisco induces one to fall.

The month that I arrived in San Francisco, I met an engaged couple at a friend’s birthday party. She was a newspaper reporter in her late 20s, and he was a software engineer in his late 30s. In the course of a 15-minute conversation, she divulged that they had an open relationship. I didn’t press her with the many questions that immediately sprang to mind: Can you have sex with anyone you choose? Does your partner have to approve? Do you see others separately, or is it a threesome-foursome-group thing? I merely registered the fact that an attractive, successful young couple had just casually mentioned that they were not monogamous. I’d never met a couple like that in any other city.

And these rule benders were everywhere. There was the burner who balanced his 51 annual workweeks as a buttoned-up financial analyst with seven naked, promiscuous days in the Nevada desert, returning to the city covered in dust and ready to crunch numbers

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again. There was my gay friend, who longed to marry his partner but thought nothing of blowing strangers at the gym. There was my closest girlfriend, who dispensed with the men she was dating and went to the sperm bank in Potrero to get knocked up. The development of these friendships preceded my own turn to the tantric workshops where I tried to locate my divine feminine, the pole-dancing lessons where I embodied my inner sex goddess, the ads outlining my rules for casual sex that I took out on Craigslist and Nerve.com, and the commune where I practiced orgasmic meditation (that’s 15 minutes of focused clitoral stroking) at 6 a.m. every morning.

It all struck me as unconventional, but then again, convention

is relative. I lived in the Castro, and every time I left the house, I passed someone who was breaking far more barriers than I was. I couldn’t help feeling, as I gazed upon my queer and transgender neighbors with a mixture of admiration and awe, that my straight, white, newly open marriage looked almost quaint by comparison.

Could I have found all that fluidity and exploration and openness in Philadelphia or New York? Could I find it in my current home, Los Angeles? Could I walk from my front door in Atwater Village over to hipster Silver Lake tomorrow and encounter anything even resembling it? Are the times that different? Is it just that I’m not looking for it anymore? The questions far outweigh the answers and are tangled with unknowns: fate versus control, chemistry versus hard work, giving versus losing oneself, good timing versus a lack of it. What answers do exist can’t be found in a book or a therapist’s office, or in your friends’ well-meaning advice. You have to live them. You have to roll the dice and hope for the best, knowing that everything you get will come with a price.

Take Teresa and Joe. Nostalgic as a tale of small-town sweethearts may sound in comparison with my own freewheeling San Francisco arrangements, the circumstances under which my friends married— young, pregnant, lacking college degrees—are all major risk factors for divorce. Toss in the tragic death of Joe’s brother much too soon, the bouts of cancer that Teresa’s two sisters suffered in their 30s, and the horrific car accident that laid Teresa up for a year and still causes her daily pain, and it’s a wonder that they’ve come through it all.

Yet there they were in the hometown bar, Joe cracking his wife up with his black humor while Teresa called up shots of their two baby grandkids on her phone. Teresa described how Joe has taken an interest in cooking, poaching salmon so that it’s ready the minute she walks in the door from work.

Teresa once told me that her marriage had been rough in the beginning, but that “things got a lot better after year 13.” Somehow, she and Joe have summoned the staying power that Hollywood only hints at when the screen fades to black just as the couple approaches the altar. Teresa and Joe have paid for their long marriage with their freedom. Whereas I, in a twist that surprised absolutely no one, paid for my freedom with my marriage.

In a perfect world, we’d all get to experience both ends of the love-sex spectrum in the ideal order: several years of urban exploration—online dating, hookups, a little kinky fun—followed by a lifetime of commitment and baby-making with a well-matched lover. We’d go broad, and then we’d go deep. At some point in the latter phase, we might leave the city and retreat to the suburbs, relying on memories of wilder times to counter all that comfort. Or we’d stay in the city but surround ourselves with other growing families, an urban village of hipster mamas equally concerned about school test scores and Michelin stars—and all of it captured on Instagram.

Some hardworking, lucky people manage to grab it all and hold on to it. But most of us struggle, either during the search or after we’ve gotten what we claimed to want. And what was it that we wanted, again? Adventure, security, mind-blowing sex, intimate conversation, a 401(k), real estate, startup stock, organic food, Twitter followers, two children (a boy and a girl), one dog, lifelong friends, yearly vacations, and to not be alone at the end of the ride.

That’s all. ■



Robin Rinaldi is the author of *The Wild Oats Project: One Woman’s Midlife Quest for Passion at Any Cost* (Sarah Crichton Books/Farrar, Straus and Giroux), out next month.