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WHAT I LEARNED ABOUT LOVE AT AN ORGY

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The air was thick with perfume and something sweeter, more illicit. A woman in a silk robe caught my eye and offered a small nod. I tightened my grip on my glass. Thierry had called it a party, but this wasn't the kind I knew. The couple at the bar—her in lace, him in leather—moved like they belonged here. I wasn't sure I did yet.

Thierry pulled up in a sleek black car, the kind that promised intrigue before the night had even begun. I was in my early thirties, dating an artist, and still convinced that saying yes—to invitations, to men, to experiences I didn't yet understand—was the same as being adventurous. But deep down, I was less sure: Was I chasing excitement, or trying to outrun something else?

"It's just a party," he had said. And I believed him.

The building was unremarkable, another prewar Manhattan walk-up, the type I'd been to a dozen times for gallery openings or wine-soaked dinner parties. A doorman nodded us in without a word. Upstairs, Thierry took my coat, and I followed him through a doorway, expecting the usual—a poorly lit room, creatives locked in heady debate, someone inevitably passing around a bottle of red.

It wasn't until I passed the coat check that I realized this wasn't *just* a party, and I wasn't just a guest—I was part of it, whether I liked it or not.

We started with wine. There was a dance floor, music with a heavy bassline, and small groups laughing in dimly lit corners—all the familiar details of a party. For a while, I let myself believe that's all it was.

Then I noticed the couple near the bar, their attire nothing like the others—she wore a lace bra, sheer stockings, and barely-there silk, while he was dressed in black leather briefs and a tie. The scene was casual, strangely routine. People moved around them as if this was simply part of the night.

Thierry had kept it vague—a world where clothing and intimacy were optional.

I tightened my grip on my glass. My mind raced to make sense of what I was seeing. Maybe they were performance artists. Maybe this was an avant-garde fashion statement.

Thierry's lips curled at the edges, amusement flashing in his eyes. And that's when I understood: the party hadn't started when I arrived. It had been in motion long before I walked through the door.

Thierry rubbed my shoulders, gently pushing me toward the dance floor. Toward them. I hesitated. Fascinated, yes, but also uneasy. He was watching me, gauging my reaction—not as a concerned lover, but as someone waiting to see whether I would fall in step with his world.

The couple turned to me, their expressions open, inviting. Their fingers traced along my arms, my waist—light at first, coaxing. This was supposed to feel freeing, wasn't it? And yet, a different kind of weight settled in my chest.

I had always thought love was built on ritual—courtship, commitment, the quiet promise of a next time. Yet here, intimacy unfolded without promises, pleasure without possession.

“Relax,” the woman murmured. “Everything will be okay.”

I wasn't sure what had given me away—was it the stiffness in my posture? The way I held my glass like an anchor?

"Are you two together?" I asked as if the answer would explain something.

"We're married," the man said easily.

I glanced over my shoulder at Thierry. He was at the bar, fingers tracing lazy circles on another woman's thigh. But his eyes stayed on me—appraising, waiting. As if I were a performance he had orchestrated, and he was watching to see how I'd play my part.

"We come here once a month," the woman added. "To spice things up."

"Spice what up?" I asked, though I already knew the answer.

As I watched Thierry's eyes, I thought about my parents. Faithful. Traditional. The kind of couple who did Saturday night dinners and movies, who kept sex quiet, hidden, wrapped up in modesty and routine. That was the world I grew up in—the idea that intimacy had rules, that it was something private, even secretive. I'd never considered a love that didn't follow these rules, a love that didn't have contracts or expectations.

I remember being eleven or twelve, sitting on the family couch as my mother showed me a made-for-kids video about sex. It had diagrams, neat labels, a man in a reassuring voice explaining how the parts fit together. This, though—this had no script, no assigned roles, just bodies moving, choosing, crashing. But none of it was straightforward.

I was fresh out of a five-year relationship that seemed to restart each time we had sex—as if desire alone could keep us together.

I wanted to be an artist, but I felt stuck.

Now, standing in the glow of a disco ball, a stranger's hands on my waist, I wasn't so sure.

Thierry handed me another glass. "What do you think?" he asked, but the question felt more layered than it should have—was he asking if I liked the party or this version of myself?

His question pulled me back to the day I lost my virginity at seventeen. It was the same question my then-boyfriend had asked as he hovered above me.

The mind tries to rationalize: love follows a script. A boy meets a girl, they fall in love, stay together, have babies, buy a house, and retire. It was a story I knew well. But that wasn't the script here.

I wasn't looking for forever. And yet, there was tension between ritual and experience—what I had been taught to want and the freedom I craved.

The way Thierry touched her but kept his eyes on me—it turned me on. And that unsettled me. Was I betraying myself? Could I still be marriage material? A respectable mother?

Before I could get anxious, Thierry led me down a hallway lined with doors. As he opened each, I caught glimpses—shapes of people moving in shadowy light, laughter mixing with the smell of sweat, and something warmer, more human.

And so together we drifted in and out of each other's orbit, meeting and parting, exploring separately but always returning with glances and laughter. There was no jealousy, no obligation—only the hushed understanding that for one night, we were free to follow our desires.

Thierry pulled me close, then let me slip into the sea of bodies. Occasionally, he reached for my hand, reminding me he was still there.

But after a few times, I didn't need his reassurance anymore. For the first time, I was moving toward something without asking what it meant. I caught the eye of a man with a shiny bald head who grinned at me like he knew this was what I wanted. He stroked my shoulder with an energy that didn't force me to reciprocate.

Hours later, a man in a Zorro mask caught my stare. He didn't reach for me right away. Instead, he turned to his girlfriend—dressed as a superhero—and asked, 'Can I dance with her?' She gave me a slow nod, a silent yes. I was no longer a girl afraid of taking up space.

As we moved, I felt his gaze linger on the soft swell of my stomach—the part of me I had spent years trying to shrink, flatten, erase.

For the first time, I felt my body accepted—not as something to shrink or hide, but as something to be desired. I wasn't the girl my ex called Ms. Piggy anymore. Under the glow of a stranger's eye, I wasn't just tolerated—I was seen.

After the party, I spent the night with Thierry. In the morning, he made me an espresso. We shared a croissant. He asked if I wanted a cab. I wanted to walk. I didn't need to be tied down by the unspoken rituals of intimacy—the ride home, the follow-up call, the expectation of more. So when he kissed my cheek, I simply said goodbye. For once, I wasn't waiting for what came next.

Later, as I walked through the city, the night still clung to me. I passed couples in brunch lines, parents with strollers. Love looked different in the daylight.

At home, I peeled off my dress, Thierry's cologne still ghosting my skin. I'd crawl into bed and wonder: Had I encountered something profound, or merely something fleeting? Was this intimacy or sex?

The answer wasn't as simple as I once believed.

For years, I thought intimacy required permanence, that desire needed a future to be meaningful. But in that dimly lit room, in the arms of strangers who held no claim to me, I felt something real—acceptance, freedom, even tenderness. Yet as thrilling as it was to belong to no one, I still felt the quiet pull toward something steadier.

Maybe intimacy isn't about bodies colliding. Maybe it's about feeling safe inside your own. Maybe it's about learning when to let go and when to return to what still feels true.

While I didn't see Thierry again after that night, what I knew was this: I had crossed into an unfamiliar territory, bent my own rules, and left unashamed.

I know now I didn't crave the thrill of the unknown. I longed for the steadiness of someone beside me, the comfort of knowing what comes next.

I once thought love was about possession, about holding on. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe love was simply about choice. And in the months that followed, as I found myself reaching for something steadier, I understood: I hadn't left that night behind—I had carried its lesson forward.

Loren Kleinman's nonfiction has appeared in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Ms.*, *Ploughshares*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Redbook*, *Seventeen*, *Good Housekeeping*, *The New York Daily News*, and *The Huffington Post*. She is the co-editor of *If I Don't Make It, I Love You* and *The Forgotten Survivors of Gun Violence: Wounded*, as well as *My Body, My Words*, named a must-read feminist book by *Bustle*. Her poetry collection *The Dark Cave Between My Ribs* was named a Best Book of 2014 by *Entropy Magazine*.