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Modern Love

## The Third Half of a Couple

By HOWIE KAHN

IT'S a big morning for me: a breakfast date at my place, and I'm cooking. I've scoured the markets and rounded up the best of everything: oranges for zesting, pears for roasting, balsamic for drizzling, goat cheese for crumbling and, to amp up my French toast, a vial of organic Mexican vanilla beans for eviscerating and flecking. I even grated the cinnamon myself. That's just what you do when someone special is coming over.

After completing my knife work, I set the table (folding the napkins in caterer's shapes), float pink peony blossoms in a glass bowl, take a quick shower and put on a well-worn black T-shirt and a good pair of ripped jeans. At 11 a.m. - right on time - the buzzer sounds.

I answer the door, and there they are, my "date": eager, radiant and, most appealingly, married.

I know this setup sounds potentially kinky, but there's no sexual dynamic to report on here. No threesome will commence once the fruit is caramelized. My guests, Cory and Jake, are faithful to each other, and I'm not looking to mess that up. On the contrary, I depend on the stability of their marriage; I need them to stay together so I can go where they go and do what they do. Simply put, I'm their third wheel.

With them it's a role I was conscripted to from the start. When I moved to New York (for graduate school), Cory, my friend from college, already lived there and, luckily, had a spare bedroom. I promptly rented it and soon met Jake, her new boyfriend. Since he was on hiatus from his work in finance, and I only had class twice a week, we spent a lot of time together, mostly tossing around balls of various dimensions.

About a month before Jake proposed to Cory, he came into my room - the one right next to Cory's - and held out a small lacquered box.

"Hey," he said casually, "can you hold onto this for me?"

I looked at his offering and gulped. My eyes misted over.

Proudly Jake gave me permission to open it and carefully I did: the ring was glimmering, perfect, surprisingly tall.

"I don't want Cory to find it," he said. "So if you'll take it for now, I'm giving it to you."

"Yes," I whispered and deposited the diamond into my drawer on top of my graphing calculator.

Soon after, Jake took Cory to a farm in Pennsylvania to propose, and like me before her, she accepted. When they returned from their Dominican honeymoon, it became evident that married life fit us all handsomely. Their needs were fulfilled by each other; my needs were fulfilled, in tandem, by them.

BY then they had a home of their own but always had food and a seat for me at their table (this at a time when I owned no furniture and bought very few groceries). Cory invited me over to talk about books and movies. Jake brought me along to play pick-up basketball with his friends. Cory and I attended theater and museums. Jake and I went to a Rangers game and watched the World Series. Cory counseled me on what I fondly referred to as the ever-widening gap between me and every woman on the planet. Jake weighed in on that one too.

We had a good thing going, a completely heartening domestic routine. Our dinners and talks took up entire nights. Cory would often fall asleep in the middle of the conversation, and I'd exit quietly, feeling satisfied, loved.

It didn't take long for me to stop dating entirely. It seemed pointless, since I already had a part in a very solid marriage.

I'd always coveted this sort of steadiness, always aspired to have my own share of it. But it's never been easy. I'm no lothario, after all, and I've long felt cut off from any dating ritual that doesn't include leaving behind a calling card with an overweight and overcorseted aunt.

I'm anachronistic: more at ease pursuing one emotionally intimate moment than braiding bodies for hours on end with some smoky-haired stranger. That and the rigors of dating have simply pushed me to unhealthy extremes - even to the hospital.

A few summers back I endured a bout of chronic stomach pain. At the time the thing had its own seismic agenda: rumbling, simmering, gurgling, even spurting little smoldering bits of itself up into the back of my throat. This was my body's response to a brilliantly sassy but ultimately unreachable woman for whom, at the time, I lived and breathed.

In the examining room a doctor pressed his fingers into my midsection and probed my chest with his stethoscope. "Heart sounds fine," he said. "Very strong."

I wasn't surprised. Women don't begin to do damage to my heart until they've utterly ripped apart my stomach. I told him this. He nodded sympathetically, then sent me packing with a prescription for a bowel relaxer.

Post-hospitalization I began seeing other women. But the result, sadly, was a brand new set of pseudo-gastroenterological dilemmas, which made me late, loopy or a little green when I arrived for a date. As I was getting ready, my stomach would churn until it felt like it was on the verge of popping out a stick of butter. It would take at least 25 minutes for my discomfort to pass naturally. Or 15 minutes and a Xanax. Or five minutes and a finger down the throat.

Cory and Jake proved to be my panacea, better than all the other remedies (Tums, psychotherapy, Julie Delpy in "Before Sunrise") that made love seem to me, momentarily, like a thing without fangs. So I got close to them, clung to them fiercely. It felt almost as if I were following a biological directive, the one that permits little creatures to seek protection and nourishment by piggybacking on the hide of a much larger animal.

Some of what we did as a threesome, although my participation was de rigueur and always welcome, I probably should have let them do alone, as a couple. Like dimly lighted birthday dinners at which Cory looked like a bigamist sandwiched between Jake and me, or the trip to the Bronx Zoo, where we all shared ice cream cones and, at my urging, rode the Skyfari cable car four times.

At one point I noticed a few baboons cavorting on a grassy slope below: three of them tumbling down the hill. At the bottom, though, a pair of them, holding hands, started climbing back toward the top while the third strutted off alone.

Primates weren't the only ones sending me signals. Cory and Jake now had a message for me too. I don't remember exactly how they said it. Did they announce over dinner that they were leaving me for another city? Or break the news under a streetlamp just as it started to rain? Or send carnations with a note? I have no idea.

Whatever the case, their explanation that they were moving from New York to Portland (Oregon! Not even Maine!) slid, as if lubricated by its absurdity, in one ear and out the other. Having been blissfully sheltered for so long by the elemental passivity of third-wheeldom, I didn't hear them, or couldn't, because I was no longer fluent in the language of breakups and relationship anxiety.

Leaving? Moving? Goodbye? The words all sounded tangled and distant, as if from an Urdu phrase book or a Kelly Clarkson song.

The night Cory and Jake left, I cried so hard that I hyperventilated for the first time in my life. Without a paper bag in sight, I stuffed an unlaundered hand towel into my mouth like a horse's bit and huffed out what felt like the holdings of my entire pulmonary cavity.

When I finally caught my breath and extracted the towel (it left gauzy strands of lint on my tongue and between several of my teeth), I was shivering on my bathroom floor, knees tucked up against my chest. Out loud I said: "What the hell is wrong with me? People leave all the time. Deal with it."

But I couldn't deal with it, so I called my dad. "What's wrong with me?" I asked him.

"It's hard," he said, "to have your safety net yanked out from under you. It hurts."

At this point - it was 2:30 a.m. - I slid a couple of melatonin discs under my tongue.

Dad paused. "Being on your own for a while - it's probably going to be good for you."

Next thing I knew the sun had come up, and my face was half frozen, striated from the air-conditioner I'd used as a pillow.

I always knew that going through a divorce would crush me, send me over the edge, induce beard growth and religious indoctrination and spectral dreaming. But I'd never said any vows of my own, so I couldn't let things get that far out of hand. Besides, I could still fight this, couldn't I? I could move to Portland too.

I REALLY thought about it: about leaving New York and incorporating granola into my diet. I'd learn to recycle, strap on the Gore-Tex and spend weekends tromping around sub-alpine berry patches. In Oregon I could preserve my date-free, risk-free reality.

But that would be pathetic, cowardly. Even the baboon at the zoo was able to walk away, and he's supposed to be my evolutionary inferior.

I started focusing on my convalescence. Rilke and Grey Goose and Häagen-Dazs mango ice cream each played pivotal roles. But the real defibrillatory jolt came from what I now consider to be an alternative source of healing: online dating (Cory's idea).

I didn't go on any dates right away, but the shock of getting so much attention from strangers based solely on my posted photograph lifted my spirits considerably. I even started believing that some special girl out there just might have something more sublime to offer me than the usual ulcer. This sudden surge of faith wasn't exactly matrimonial bliss, but it felt like progress, an opportunity to get back in the game.

I would rebound, I realized, and that deserved a reward. So I decided to take a little trip. To Portland of course.

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