

swinging **in the** suburbs

The key parties and wife-swapping of the seventies are history. Today it's the hardware-store guy doing your bank teller in the Interstate Holiday Inn ballroom. The new suburban swinging: taboo-free but still as disturbing as ever.

by kevin gray | photographs by peter rad



THE SWEAT IS BEADING ON PATRICK'S FOREHEAD AS HE PUSHES TOWARD THE end of his Easter-morning workout. The bedside clock reads 12:32 A.M. Just outside the walls of this Holiday Inn in Batavia, New York, semis roll past moonlit pastures toward the Canadian border. Another blip of the clock and now Patrick is huffing heavily. He grunts, shudders, and collapses. He is winded but happy. The woman beneath him begins to purr. His wife, sitting in a straight-back chair 12 feet away, seems satisfied too as she quietly flirts with a naked accountant.

It's not easy to watch a guy you just met have sex, to see his unvarnished ass pistoning in the air. It's not much easier to listen to the gull cries of the 26-year-old whose jackknifed knees are gripping the sides of his rib cage. But this second-floor hospitality suite is full of people who have no trouble taking in such spectacles. At the moment, a handful of them are leaning against the wall—members in postcoital repose, breasts still heaving—like athletes between meets, ready to cheer on their fellow Olympians.

Such is the cozy life of the suburban swinger, a breed that national organizers loosely estimate at 3 million strong, filling countless hotel rooms, nightclubs, and homes across the nation. I've known Patrick for only six hours. We have shaken hands, shot the shit about Iraq and NAFTA, complained about that putz Kwame on *The Apprentice*. He seemed every bit the 36-year-old stay-at-home dad from Rochester that he is. But that was before the hotel bar, before the plates of fried mozzarella, the Playboy Bunny-themed dance in which half-naked women fished chocolate eggs from men's G-strings using only their teeth, before Patrick hefted the breast of a nursery-school teacher at a banquet table and began suckling to the sounds of "Night Moves."

Now here I am, surrounded by 30 copulating couples, being beckoned by the sweaty redhead beneath Patrick. Ever the gentleman, he steps back and says in a winded Barry White baritone, "She wants you, dude."

IN THE SEVENTIES, SUBURBAN SWINGING MEANT KEY PARTIES, CONNECTICUT ranch houses, guys with Donald Sutherland mustaches fast-humping women with Julie Christie shags. Today, swingers are still ordinary people, with lots of ordinary pimples and spare tires and bad haircuts. In fact, the first thing you notice at a swinger swap is just how god-awful ordinary and predictable and often plus-size everyone is.

Their demographics are evenly divided between blue-staters and red-staters. They are nurses, teachers, bikers, CEOs. They are eating lunch in the next booth at Arby's, running your company, riding your ass on the Interstate, caring for your kids or your sick mom, the wives of soldiers fighting in Iraq.

What separates them from their undermanicured ancestors is technology and big business. These days swingers post his-and-her photo ads—in matching G-strings—on the Internet. They belong to thousand-member clubs. They take over entire hotels at Caribbean resorts. They have Vegas conventions, advocacy groups, civil-rights lawyers. "The whole movement is very well-organized, very mature," says Tony Lanzaratta, executive director of NASCA International, the North American Swing Club Association, which boasts some 700 member affiliates. "It's growing again in the cities. But the suburbs is still the hottest place for swingers."

It's easy to see why. The entire straitjacketed landscape makes you squirm for escape. Just hop on the expressway flanked by condo clusters, power lines, graffitied rest stops. Pull off at an exit, smack into Saturday mall traffic, and meet the gaze of just one hyperthyroid-eyed dad driving a pissed-off Nick or Sam or Trevor to karate class while a carload of Britneys in tube tops and scrunchies speed by in mom's Chrysler convertible.

"The suburbs suck," Patrick told me over the phone before I arrived. To ease the pain, he and his voluptuous wife, Jenn, 35, a cheery oncology nurse with a rose tattoo on one breast, manage the CandleLight club in Niagara Falls, where they dance with friends, drink, and enjoy a recreational shag. "We're not in the 'burbs to die," said Patrick, a warm-hearted jokester who, at 260 pounds, looks like a chubby Enrique Iglesias. "We're not old fuddy-duddies. We call ourselves the immortals

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because people in the Lifestyle are ageless. We're not looking for new relationships. It's like chewing spearmint gum all the time and you want to try bubble gum. We're not gonna just give up our sexual appetites, roll over, and call it quits. We like to have a good time."

Right now, his good time—the redhead named Laura, a bisexual swinger with Pam Anderson breasts who told me earlier in a packed room, "I'm gonna fuck you tonight"—is beckoning me with a finger. Another guy steps up, but Laura says no. Not wanting to be rude, I walk over to where she's lying, bathed in blue light, and give her ass a friendly swat. I begin to step back, but she grabs my wrist.

AT MOST SWING CLUBS, CONDOMS ARE ENCOURAGED during intercourse but seldom used during oral sex. No one I meet is too concerned about HIV or even STDs. "People tend to self-police, and if they have something they wait till they get treated or it goes away before they come around," says NASCA's Lanzaratta, noting that anyone who spreads an STD would automatically be ostracized. "We don't have a single documented case of a swinger getting AIDS. We've understood for a long time that AIDS is a problem associated with drugs and with anal sex, and you just don't see that stuff at swing clubs."

Joining most swingers' clubs today is no more difficult than joining a Sam's Club. Like at any suburban cooperative, there are fees and rules of engagement. At CandleLight, couples pay a \$35 yearly membership fee, plus \$35 for each event. As with most swing clubs, single women can join but single men cannot unless they are sponsored by a couple, who often bring them for their own MMF fun. (Tonight there are two single men, one known as the Trunk and the other as the Guy Who Sweats, who will service several wives each before the night is out.) Though male bisexuality is treated as an oddity, other fantasies do come true: Female bisexuality is widespread, and it's not always look-but-don't-touch for the boys.

Other clubs are more choosy about their members and require intensive screening, asking for full-length photos, even essays about why prospective members think they're sexy enough to join. Most of the time, this is all just a way to keep out the riffraff. But it's also a way of keeping the physically undesirable in their place. "We call those people the Ken and Barbies," says Patrick, who felt wounded when a nearby swingers' group refused to "play" with him and Jenn after they joined.

CandleLight has chapters in Syracuse, Niagara Falls, and the one here in Batavia, which draws good-timers from nearby Buffalo and Rochester. Its parties are held on the edge of town, within sight of the harness-race track, simply because the hotel welcomed its business. (Tonight, 16 couples will book off-season rooms at about \$100 in this otherwise-empty hotel hard against the highway.) With 700 member couples, CandleLight Associates—which also runs a Web site that sells adult toys and recommends resort vacations for swingers—pulls in about \$24,500 a year in annual fees. "You don't make a ton



of money from it," says Angie, 42, a Web designer who owns CandleLight with her husband, Bob, a DJ turned middle manager. "But it's a decent sideline. Plus you get fucked by some really great people."

Patrick, like everyone I meet tonight, has a Nick at Nite sense of humor about sex: When asked if it's permitted to watch others, he says, "Yeah, you just can't heckle. But you can applaud, especially if it's me." At the start of each event, he runs a Swinging 101 seminar for newbies. Unfortunately, only 65 people showed up to this evening's Easter dance, and most of them were recidivists. So early in the night he spent most of his time playing Photo Match on the bar's video machine, noshing Buffalo wings.

He reels off the strangest questions he's been asked by people who call for information. *Can I bring my mother? Can I bring a blow-up doll as my date? I'm a trucker and I can't leave the Interstate—can you bring the party to me at the rest stop? Can I still come if I'm having my period?* "The guy with the blow-up doll was so persistent, we eventually agreed to let him come," says Patrick, licking his fingers and looking through the personals in a swingers' magazine; one ad shows a naked man and his dog, both with black bars over their eyes. "But he still hasn't shown up. I can't blame him."

"Whatever the variety of sexual appetites," says Jenn, towering over us in stilettos, a black mini hugging her hips as a push-up bra lifts her breasts above the neckline of a tight white sweater, "that's the combinations you'll find at a swing club." But those combinations aren't available to everyone. In the world of swinging—unlike in the world of bars, nightclubs, and frat-house keggers—no is always graciously accepted as no. If you're pushy, you're out. If you're needy and whiny, you're out. If you beg, well, that can work if it's on someone's kink list. But overall, swingers are disturbingly . . . polite.

"If you're a dork to someone, you get cut off. No one will party with you ever again," says Dave, 35, a trained veterinarian who, unable to find work in this depressed region, has taken a job at a chain hardware store. "And you can't take it personally if someone says they don't want to have sex with you. If you stand there and ask why, they might tell you. And do you really want to know that?"

We are lingering in a corner of the hotel's Crystal Ballroom, which holds the strong odor of chlorine from the nearby pool and is decorated with plastic ficus trees tangled in dusty Christmas lights. The hospitality suite upstairs opens in an hour. The DJ is spinning "Just Can't Get Enough."

The mood is wedding-reception goofy, less titillating than a middle-school prom, which might have more sexual tension because of the uncertain outcome of the evening. Here, getting lucky is a sure thing. The guy in the silver banana hammock and plank ass on the dance floor—he's getting some. So is the woman whose husband has hepatitis C—he refrains from sex but brings her water and whispers in her ear while she's being serviced.

So is Dave, dressed neatly in jeans, sneakers, and a

black Gap tee. Slender, dark-eyed, puppy-happy, he has come with his fiancée, Michele, 37, a gym-fit redhead and local factory worker whom he met online. This is their third event (at the first, they dove right in, eschewing Patrick's go-slow guidelines, and swung). The couple plan to marry in June and take their honeymoon at Jamaica's Hedonism II resort, during CandleLight's annual July club vacation, with Patrick and the others in attendance. "These guys are like family," says Michele, dressed for pajama-party fun in a cheeks-length Playboy T-shirt and peekaboo thong. "They go to dinner, comedy clubs, babysit each other's kids, become godparents."

TONIGHT, MICHELE AND DAVE ARE LOOKING FOR A COUPLE "THAT MATCHES our body type." They've run into a pair of newbies from Buffalo: Ken, 38, a good-looking advertising executive, and Valerie, 35, a flirtatious Realtor (both asked that their real names not be used). They claim to be sexually adventurous, having tried bondage and outdoor sex, but Valerie, a dark-eyed beauty with a sarcastic wit, seems uncertain about whether this is the next step.

"I'm definitely nervous," she tells me as Ken strokes her black hair.

"That's okay," says Ken. "We don't have to do anything. Just watch."

Valerie, who is petite, is wearing a black patent-leather mini and a transparent leopard-print shirt.

"Should I take off my bra?" she asks, as a busty woman wearing only a tuxedo jacket, a bow-tie collar, and a thong with a white rabbit's tail walks past.

Ken is looking at the dance floor, where a pretty woman with fairy-tale golden hair and a gymnast's body is on her knees plucking chocolate Easter eggs from Silver Hammock. (Swinger events have games like this, in which men are given eggs—or Mardi Gras beads, or fake money—and women earn them by exposing their breasts, bestowing kisses, or whatever.) The DJ starts playing "Addicted to Love."

"Let's dance," says Valerie, grabbing Ken by the hand.

"She seems supersweet and so does he," Michele says to Dave after the couple move on. "They are definitely at the top of our list."

"You have to leave your ego at the door," says John, 49, who is wearing a leather Harley vest and says that like most men it was his idea to swing but his wife's idea to keep coming back. "At first you're thinking, I'm gonna fuck some chicks tonight. And then you see all these guys hitting on your girl, and you're like, What the fuck? But if you want the action, you have to play by the woman's rules. And they really love the attention."

Just then, Michele walks by and drags a fingernail across my neck.

"We're going upstairs," she tells me. Dave's arm is slung across her waist in a way that lifts the back of her shirt to show her perfect ass. "Are you coming?"

THE HOSPITALITY SUITE IS QUIET WHEN I ARRIVE. THE ROOM, FURNISHED WITH a sectional sofa bed, glass dining table, and exposed ironing board attached to the kitchenette wall, is dark except for the blue rope lights snaking around the floor. Angie has already spread free condoms—supplied by Trojan as a goodwill marketing move—around various tables and chairs. No one is allowed to smoke, wear shoes, or carry drinks. "I've had too many drinks spilled on me," says Angie, "and too many high heels in inappropriate spots."

Once my eyes adjust, I can see the naked bodies and the various paces, techniques, and furniture preferences of the participants. They are spread in threesomes on the floor. They are clustered in foursomes on desk chairs near the window. They are humping side by side on the raised platform bed. Some are groaning softly. Others are silently intent on the job at hand. One man sits fully clothed watching the others.

"I can't," Valerie says to Ken. "That guy is creeping me out."

With her skirt hiked around her hips, she sits in a chair, Ken's head buried in her crotch. Nearby, Goldilocks is completely nude and on her knees simultaneously servicing her husband and Silver Hammock. A few feet further, Melinda, 43, of the hepatitis-C husband, is attending to a shy 23-year-old computer grad student

named Charlie, who has tagged along with Dave and Michele. (The earlier small talk involved a lot of painful hardware/software double entendres.)

Valerie closes her eyes and tries to concentrate. There is a staticky talk show suddenly coming over the bedside radio alarm clock that no one seems willing to turn off. Dave, naked from the waist down, moves over and stands beside Valerie's chair. Michele kneels at his feet, even with Ken, and goes to work on Dave. I can see only the backs of those active heads and the closed eyes of their passive partners. Dave is smiling.

Soon Ken slips a hand into Michele's thong. Quickly reciprocating, Michele reaches over with a free right hand. The scene becomes a daisy chain when Dave starts rubbing Valerie's breasts. But Valerie opens her eyes and looks startled.

Then Michele smoothly uncouples from her husband and bends to the floor, switching her ministrations to Ken. Dave, meekly standing there, flagpole in the air, is waiting for Valerie to complete the circuit. She manages a tentative open-handed pat. And then Ken, looking up at her, makes the classic rookie mistake. As Michele quickens her pace on him, Ken whispers to Valerie to go for it with Dave. She's whipping her head around, laughing, breathing hard, almost choking. "I'm feeling overstimulated," she stammers.

Suddenly she yanks her skirt down, pushes Dave and Ken away, and leaves the room. The others immediately break off. Michele and Dave whisper worriedly, "Is she okay? Should we all go after her to see if she's okay?"

"No, no," says Ken, awkwardly pulling on his underpants and laughing. "She's fine. I'll go get her."

ANGIE AND BOB STARTED CANDLELIGHT AFTER ANOTHER COUPLE INTRODUCED them to the Lifestyle 10 years ago. They began throwing parties at home, with Bob as DJ, attracting up to 100 people. Their expansion into hotels mirrored that of many home-based swing clubs at the time, which often ran afoul of the law—not vice law but mundane zoning-code restrictions on noise, parking, and dispensing liquor without a license.

The grandpappy of modern-day swinging is Bob McGinley. In the seventies, McGinley noticed that home-based swing clubs in Southern California were often at war over recruiting. One club would send a poison-pen letter to another club's neighbors, attempting to shut it down and steal its members. To solve this, McGinley launched an association to bring them all together.

Today the former aeronautical engineer sits atop a multi-million-dollar empire called the Lifestyles Organization, an association of five companies with fingers in resorts, convention planning, and tour packaging. It also owns NASCA. McGinley won't say how much his company makes, but his tour group puts 500 couples in rooms at Hedonism II in Jamaica every January, for which they shell out a collective \$1.25 million for a weeklong party. His yearly Vegas conference, with 100 vendor booths packed with sex toys and lingerie, draws 4,000 swingers, who drop \$3.75 million during a four-day stay.

Two years ago, Cendant, one of the world's largest hotel franchisers, found itself in the crosshairs of religious conservatives following an S&M party held at one of its hotels. In a statement, Cendant warned franchisees it would "respond aggressively and immediately" if they allowed activity that "is harmful to the goodwill of the chain." After outcries from the National Coalition for Sexual Freedom, a swingers' advocacy group, a hotel official publicly insisted that while sexually oriented parties may offend families and business travelers, the company does not discriminate against its guests. On the flip side, other hotel chains have begun openly courting that same business.

"Airlines and hotels now have their own alternative marketing departments to broaden their economic base," says Bob Hannaford, 38, who was forced to retire from the Coast Guard for throwing swingers' parties and is now acting president of the International Lifestyle Association, a trade group that advises clubs on legal and management issues. "It started with gay and lesbian markets and has now grown to include the swing market." In fact, over the next few

months, as the American Society of Travel Agents updates its consumer Web site's search engine, it will look into breaking down its broad "special interest" category to include the terms *gay*, *nude*, and *swinger*.

Hannaford and McGinley believe that social objections to swinging are poised to crumble. They and other swingers make comparisons to the acceptance of gay culture in America over the past several years—driven not only by street activism and a gay-friendly media but also by economic power. "When someone's livelihood becomes dependent on someone else's lifestyle," says McGinley, speaking by telephone from his 12,000-square-foot headquarters in Anaheim, "then that lifestyle becomes acceptable."

ON EASTER MORNING, DAVE AND MICHELE AND KEN and Valerie meet for breakfast in the hotel's ballroom, which has discarded last night's Playboy motif to make way for a brightly lit post-church Easter brunch for an expected 300 Batavia residents. Except for two nearby families in bonnets and bo-peep dresses, the couples have the vast hall to themselves. Two room-length buffet tables gleam with silver trays and inflated purple rabbits.

"This is nice," says Michele.

Across from her, Valerie is wearing her sunglasses, looking morose.

Between trips to the buffet, I learn that after the incident last night the foursome returned to Dave and Michele's room, where they smoked cigarettes and talked for an hour about their lives, their families, their work. Michele apologized for not asking Valerie's permission before servicing Ken. Eventually, Valerie agreed to have side-by-side sex with the other couple while a porn movie played on the TV in the background, which their own sex outlasted. "It was more of a voyeuristic thing," Ken tells me. "But it was pretty hot watching Michele."

The brunch conversation is vague and restless, about the drive back to town, how cold it is outside. Michele fields a cell-phone call from her mother and tells her she was at a dance last night and to "kiss the girls." When Valerie gets up to refill her plate, Dave and Michele bombard Ken with concerned questions and advice. Does she feel okay? Have you talked with her? Maybe you two should take it slower. We'd really, really like to see you both again.

At the buffet table, Valerie uses metal tongs to pick at a mound of French toast made from leftover bread. When I join her, she laughs about the whole *Eyes Wide Shut* feel of the night before. She explains that she was about to have an orgasm and felt such a strange rush that she had to leave the room. ("I tend to get noisy," she says, ladling on the syrup.) She says she's happy Ken enjoyed it and that the side-by-side swinging was "no big deal" since she had experienced plenty of it while sharing a dorm room with another girl in college.

"I do feel embarrassed," she says, looking at me. "I'm sort of glad I did it, but I don't think I'll do it again. I like to get wild with sex . . . but not like that." ■