



FEATURE

by KARIN WILSON

# Behind Closed Doors

The sun is shining, the air brisk but not so cold that a daring woman couldn't comfortably stroll along wrapped in her husband's arm and a long, warm coat wearing only panties underneath. Not that Kamloops is like that. Not at all. But residents might be surprised by what some people wear here on special nights. In recent years, Kamloops has developed a reputation as home to one of the longest-running swingers clubs in the B.C. Interior.

Today is a big day for this tight-knit crowd – the Saturday before Valentine's Day. While radio shows jam their signals with love songs, and restaurant owners cry they don't have more tables for two, swingers revel at the prospect of flaunting what they have with whoever they want. Every couple at the Between Friends dance is out to arouse others without a whiff of jealousy. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Meet Heather. She and her husband put these dances together, and she's been doing it for the last 11 years. By day, she's a bookkeeper, her husband Al is a carpenter. The two met line-dancing more than 15 years ago and soon learned they were interested in what insiders call "The Lifestyle". Dances are held every six weeks, and on a big night like Valentine's, as many as 50 couples (single women are permitted, but no single men) will turn out for some of the bigger dances.

It's mid-afternoon when Heather greets me at the door of a local motel where she's hosting the second of two meet-and-greets. It's a single room, with just a couch, a few extra chairs, plus a small table with the Between Friends newsletter Heather edits, and coffee brewing. She and Al are chatting with a couple from Chilliwack. Marcos and Elena have been married 25 years and took up the lifestyle more than two years ago, following an adventurous visit to Las Vegas, where their experience with an escort added some hot pepper to their already spicy love life.

And love life it is for these folks. Every one insists that no one should enter the lifestyle unless they are truly in love, and open, with their partner. This is about fun, not love, about friendship, and yes, about sex. But swingers' etiquette stipulates that if love enters the scene, move on. And if relationships break up, and some do, the couple was teetering on the brink anyway and should have known better.

As for the legalities, the Supreme Court of Canada took care of that last December when it threw out bawdy house charges laid against two members-only Montreal sex clubs on the grounds that "community standards" is an outdated idea.

"In a diverse, pluralistic society whose members hold divergent views, who is the 'community?'" wrote Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin for the majority. "And how can one objectively determine what the community, if one could define it, would tolerate, in the absence of evidence that community knew of and considered the conduct at issue?"

According to the courts, the only legal question now is whether harm has taken place in a way that undermines values reflected in the Constitution. A consensual members-only club for sexual purposes doesn't fit that definition. The decision didn't go by without comment from dissenting justices Michel Bastarache and Louis Lebel who wrote the ruling removes social values from Canadian society.

"This new harm-based approach also strips of all relevance the social values that the Canadian community as a whole believes should be protected. The existence of harm is not a prerequisite for exercising the state's power to criminalize certain conduct: the existence of fundamental social and ethical considerations is sufficient." Heather sees it quiet differently.

"Basically, the court said: 'We don't care. These are consenting adults behind closed doors and you're wasting the court's time,'" she says. Like other folks in the lifestyle, she's well-up on the legalities. As long as there's no money exchanged for the services, it's now a-okay. "Damn it all anyway. We're not ashamed of this, and we're hoping that society will say, that's okay, but not for me."

## Warming Up...and Chatting Up

Heather explains the meet and greet gives couples a chance to feel more comfortable before arriving at the dance. Newcomers can quickly spot someone familiar, and it gives both her and Al another chance to learn more about the people, and do a bit of casual matchmaking.

Another couple arrives. Unlike Marcos and Elena, these two don't reveal their sexual escapades, preferring instead to engage the group in typical cocktail chatter. Marcos and Elena ask Heather for tips on the best local strip bar, then head out for dinner, but not before inviting others to join them. "Just look for the sexy woman in the red leather jacket," Marcos says with a smile. As they leave, four more couples and a single woman walk in. The room quickly takes on a reunion atmosphere. Russ, a gregarious 40-ish fellow, quickly takes a seat next to me. His wife, Simone, parks herself across from him on a chair next to another man. These two take their flirting seriously—it's hard

to tell whether they actually know one of the other couples or whether this is simply a quick hit.

The other couple, Mark and Meagan, tries to keep the conversation going at a cocktail level, but the energy has clearly shifted towards the more boisterous. Russ takes a sip from his stubby beer bottle and sidles up to the quiet blonde perched by the door. Meanwhile, Simone chats with the woman's partner. Sizing up the situation, Heather sits down next to the lone woman in the room, Jeanine, who's left her boyfriend at home to fantasize about her escapades. "Brave girl," come the comments after Heather introduces Jeanine to the crowd. Single women are highly sought after in swinger circles. Many women swingers are bisexual and the men, well, name one who hasn't fantasized about a threesome with two women. As the voice levels rise, I leave, but not without a few asking me whether I plan to come back. Yes. Later.

## Drinks and Dirty Dancing

There's no time wasted at these events. Where the typical nightclub might not get hopping until 11 p.m., things are already happening within half an hour of the 8 p.m. dance. Their solo musician Axel hasn't even plugged in his speakers and already couples are milling around the small banquet room carrying drinks in their hand and quickly chatting with each other.

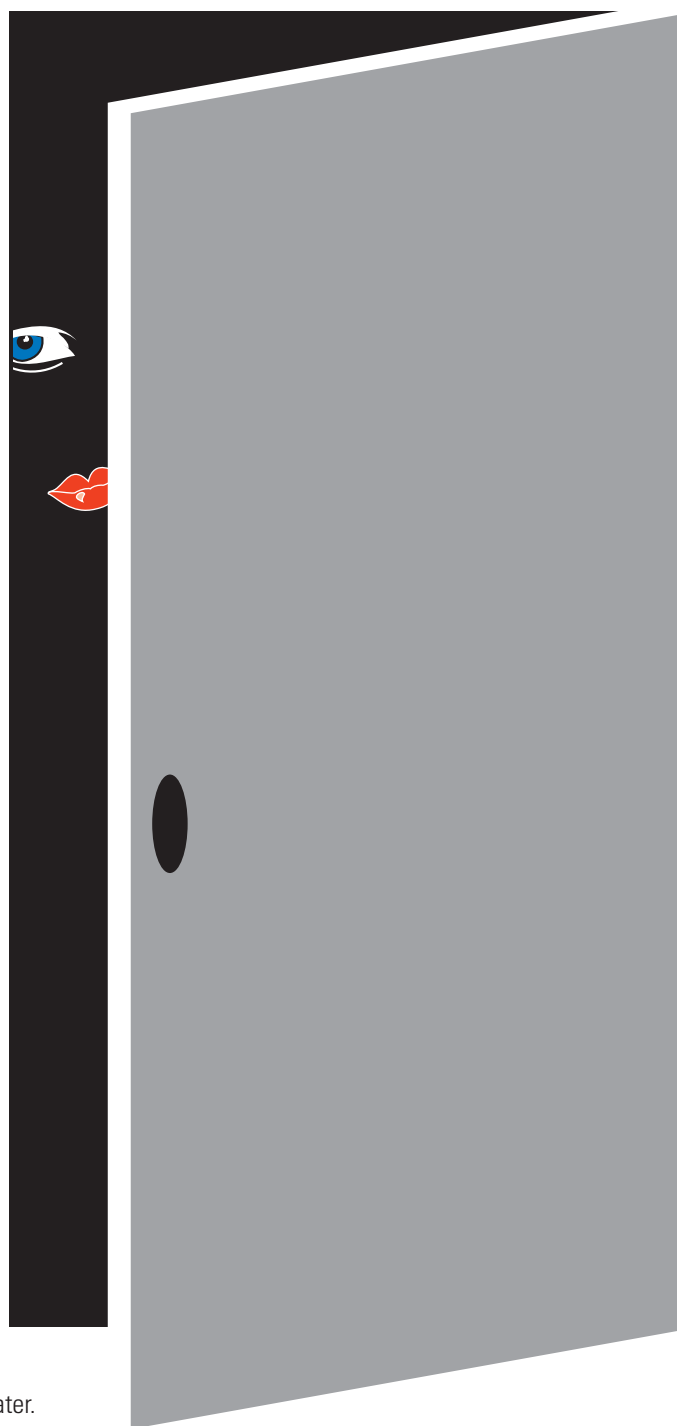
"We call this our ice-breaker," Heather explains, conjuring up images of a rotary convention. Across from her, two of the women I met earlier in the day are busy laughing with couples as they trade in little cards.

"You have to find someone who has the match for your card, and once you find them, you both have to go back and get another one," she says, and hands a card over – "Tongue

Bath" it says. "They've all got words on them that fit with the lifestyle, like nipples, or braless. The fact that you have to find a match means even people who are shy are drawn out."

There are other hints this isn't Rotary, or even the raunchiest nightclub in town. First, there's the woman in the full-length see-through white lacey dress. She's in her 50s, and not shy at all. As soon as she hears I'm a journalist, she sidles up to let me know she sells non-piercing erotic jewelry, and she's wearing it right now. Her voice is that of a professional salesperson. She hands me a sealed package and explain that these sterling silver items with jewels are nipple dangles and she's donated them as a door prize.

"We sell all over the world," says Deb. "My neighbours just think we do regular jewelry, and we do, but this is what really sells." We chat a bit about the Supreme Court decision and she breathes a sigh of relief.



# The Swinging Scene in Kamloops

"We're not criminals any more," she says. It's hard to believe anyone could think that. Aside from her attire, she could be my mother – a creative, kind, intelligent woman with a unique take on the world.

There's also an acknowledgement that "The Lifestyle" has benefited by the gay rights movement, and even the legalization of same sex marriage -- something Heather notes as well.

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Exhibitionism, for instance, and a true sense of comfort in personal sexuality regardless of what the "societal norm" may be. Another woman, this one heavy-set, saunters by wearing a thong with a see-through black negligee over top. While many of the women flagrantly, yet elegantly, reveal their sexual side, the men are more sedate. There's more than the usual number of men with pierced ears, a few with tattoos, but aside from that they could fit in anywhere. Clearly, it's the women who set the sexual pace here.

As folks arrive, Heather introduces me. One tall slim man quickly asks if I'm planning on removing my clothes later. When I say no, he quickly explains that he was joking. There's no question he was teasing, but people here are very sensitive to others. "No means NO" isn't just a saying. Even drinking stays to a minimum – enough to shake the edge off. No one wants

husband. Clearly their foreplay, they'll dance again later, but not before they charge their batteries perspiring on the dance floor with a few others.

"It's great because you never have to worry if a guy gets a chubby while he's dancing with you," comments one woman. "That's what it's all about."

At the back of the room I find Marcos and Elena. After the kids left home, they decided to explore their adventurous side. Elena, another raven-haired yet quiet beauty in red, took the lead, prompted in part by the magic of turning 40.

"I thought about that kind of stuff in my twenties, but I'd kind of forgotten about it," Marcos says.

Then there's that other hurdle to get over – the big psychological one that hits many men new to the lifestyle – impotence.

"I hadn't made love to any other woman my whole life and I didn't know if I could do it," he admits. "For a lot of guys, it's very nerve-wracking." His openness is charming, and it's obvious these two have had fun these last two and a half years.

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to be accused of coercing someone into doing something they later regret.

Back at the bar, the bartender is teaching her sister the ropes. As emcee, Heather jokes about 'the sisters' and how long one has been working the dance, but reminds everyone that they are not in the lifestyle. You can dream, but there's no playing. "Playing" is what sex is here. Another reminder this is all about fun. The music starts and there's no waiting to get out onto the floor. Simone and Russ, the two extroverts, quickly get moving. Simone, impossible to avoid noticing with her long black hair and red silky nightgown with plunging neckline, brushes seductively against her



"That's the whole key," Marcos says. "I am who I am, and I like who I like. I don't have to pretend that I'm some kind of macho guy."

Marcos and Elena consider the lifestyle a "hobby" because they only take part about once every two months or so. For others, swinging really is a lifestyle. Hobbyists call them "hard core".

Over the last 40 years there's been increased academic research into the field of non-traditional marriages, where swinging is classified as the most common form. Back in 1974, estimates were that between one and five percent of married people have taken part at least once, about one to two percent continue to do so. Today those figures are higher. Research has also shown that unlike many other sexual preferences, there are very few distinguishing characteristics as to those involved. The lifestyle crosses all socio-economic brackets, racial and religious barriers. However, there is some indication that a higher than average number of swingers experienced their parents divorce as children. Studies have shown that while wives may at first be repulsed by the idea, once they begin enjoying swinging they may be more enthusiastic than their husbands.

## Two Virgins

Later in the evening, Marcos and Elena move closer to the dance floor and sit with Mark and Meagan. The second couple are "virgin" lifestyle. Meagan looks comfortable with the rural lifestyle she leads. There's no

negligee from her, no low-cut outfit. Whether she wears a thong would require me getting way too personal. Mark looks like a software technician – white shirt, jeans; he's sussed the place out pretty quickly.

"There's an emotional maturity here," he says. "Nobody's here to prove anything." They've been married 14 years and decided while they are still in love (and yes, it shows), they wanted to add some "vitality".

"We figured Noah built the ark before it rained," Mark says. Meagan nods in agreement. The two admit they never would have imagined themselves at a dance like this 14 years ago.

"Sexuality wasn't discussed in my family," Meagan says. "We were almost led to believe it was dirty, well maybe not dirty, but it was not emphasized as part of a person's being."

Now they're experimenting with that being, but before I leave at 11 p.m., the two are happily walking out the door, alone. Maybe they have a room upstairs. Maybe they'll come back. One thing's for certain: they missed the door prizes. Elena snapped up the nipple dangles with enthusiasm.

"We'll have fun with those," she says. The crowd applauds in agreement.