



Left to right: Eddie, Kat, & Lincoln. Photo Credit: Kat Todd

The Three of Them: How Polyamory Maximizes The Love

By Clara Dossetter

A mere two years after meeting Kat, Lincoln types: “What is the most picturesque place to propose in Central Park?”

The couple is set to drive back to eastern Michigan, after visiting Kat’s relatives in Maryland.

Or so she thought.

Lincoln Todd, a thirty-three year old chef from Grand Rapids with a plush auburn beard, bears slight resemblance to *Disney’s* chef Gasteau. He has a different plan for their road trip: “rerouting through New Jersey” to end up where Kat dreams to live someday, New York City.

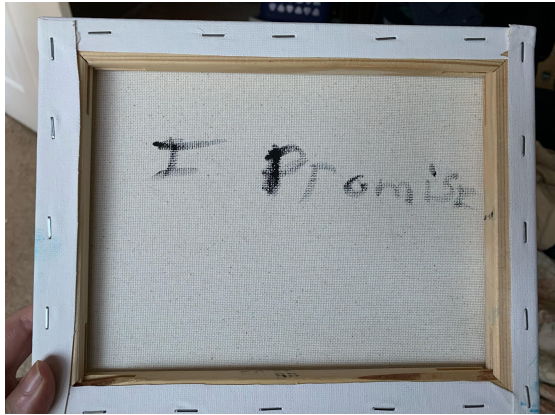
Just after sunset, he brings her where Google told him to: the Gatspow Bridge near the zoo. And when he gets down on one knee, the entire New York City skyline reveals itself from behind his boyish grin.

“I know how much this place means to you,” Lincoln tells Kat.

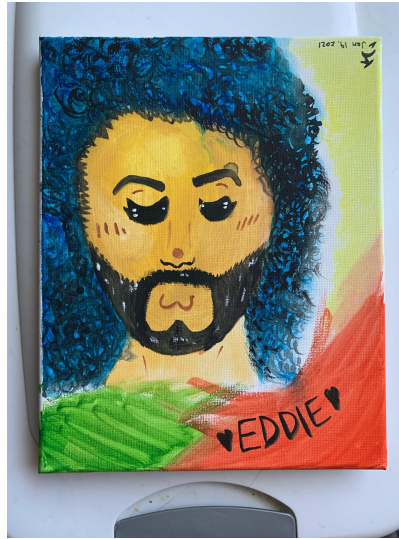
“And I want you to know that we’re not here yet. But I want us to build a future. I want us to reach all the goals we want to reach in life together because there’s no one else I’d rather live my life with.”

Five years after Kat says yes to Lincoln in Central Park, she accepts another proposal. This time, it’s from Eddie.

Only one year since meeting on the dating app Tinder, Eddie – an endearingly shy 27-year old massage therapist – just knows that he can’t live life without Kat. Under the guise of “painting with a twist” – a new dating trend that involves painting blank canvases with the “twist” of a glass of wine or two – Eddie sets up two easels in their Bay Window Suite at the Hyatt Ann Arbor that he reserved for the night, fitted with an L-section couch large enough to enjoy a Red Lobster feast. Kat chooses to paint a portrait of Eddie – she’s the kind of person whose pores ooze love through her every expression. Upon completing his painting of a rosy sun setting over an emerald green landscape, Eddie slyly goes to the back of his canvas, under the guise of “signing it,” and inscribes two words that will define their lives forever: “I promise.”



Eddie's promise to Kat. Photo courtesy of Kat Todd.



Kat's portrait of Eddie. Photo courtesy of Kat Todd.

When Kat finishes her portrait, Eddie flips his canvas around and lands himself in the ready position: one knee, ring up, eyes wide.

“I promise we will be together forever.”

Although not an engagement ring *yet*, the ring is symbolic; a promise to be a staple in her life and work towards marriage in the future.

A year later, Kat and Eddie are solidly committed to each other...

...and so are Kat and Lincoln. The three of them, along with their six cats – Floki, Olivia Boots, Starbuck, Pretoria, Small Fry, and Dobby – and their dog, Sky, all cohabitate as one happy family in their cramped yet love-stuffed two-bedroom condo in South Lyon, Michigan.

It's easy to feel comfortable around Kat Todd. On paper, she's a 25-year old senior at the University of Michigan studying history with a focus on Holocaust studies from Northern Michigan. On Zoom, where we've conducted our interviews, her unruly bleach-blonde and blue streaked curls, wire-framed spectacles, and commandingly compassionate presence likens her to a young Betty White character.

Self-confident but humble, Kat’s “take me or leave me” energy vibrates through everyone in the “Sex and Sexuality in Judaism” seminar she takes via Zoom this semester from the moment she introduces herself to the class:

“Hi, I’m Kat, and I’m a Polyamorous Jew.”

A collective yet silent gasp reverberates along the invisible bluetooth threads holding the class together despite miles of physical separation. It is unlikely that many students have ever met a self-proclaimed polyamorous person. Between [four and five percent](#) of Americans, or roughly 16.4 million people practice polyamory – that is, consensual non-monogamy. Still, more often than not polyamorists may not be as upfront as Kat about their relationship identity.

The internet is no stranger to Kat’s polyamory. Her Facebook cover photo sports a commissioned, hand-drawn cartoon of herself with Lincoln and Eddie on her either side, along with an explanatory bio:



A cartoon drawing of Eddie, (left) Kat (middle) and Lincoln (right) commissioned by Kat.
Photo Credit: Kat Todd

“Wife of Lincoln Todd 8/9/19 & Girlfriend of Eddie Reyes 1/19/20 ❤️❤️❤️”

Kat and Lincoln dated monogamously ever since their first date that lasted a mighty eight hours – the date eventually ended because everywhere they could go to next had already closed for the night. Wandering through Sears’ holiday sales racks on their second date, Kat scoffed, “Your birthday is not May 9.” He pulled out his ID card, eyebrows peaked with astonishment: they were born on the same day.

Kat moved in the following month.

Four years and a set of marriage vows exchanged at the Eilean Donan castle in Scotland later, Kat developed a hearty crush on her Spanish professor. For Kat, a large part of love is feeling comfortable to speak her mind in the relationship. So, she expressed her feelings of attraction to Lincoln, opening up a larger dialogue about how healthy it is to be attracted to other people. Lincoln understood where she was coming from – he’d known many friends to experiment with polyamory, and was interested in it himself. They agreed to try it out, but had no idea how to go about it in a healthy way. Their marriage was young and precious; they did not want to jeopardize what they had. They bought some books, read *The Ethical Slut*, joined private facebook groups such as The Polyamorous Underground (17,000 members) and Jewish Polyamory (520 members) and even signed up for couples counseling. Still, they knew it would not be an easy transition.

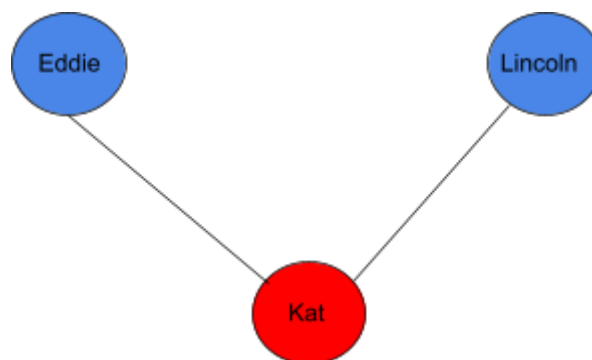
In the husband/wife, Christian values-based society of twenty-first century America, monogamy – the practice of being romantically committed to one person at a time – is the cultural norm. Nurtured by monogamous, heterosexual films like *When Harry Met Sally* or dating shows like *The Bachelor*, many people have a narrow view of romantic relationships with the end goal of committing to only one other person. Polyamory can therefore feel shocking to those unfamiliar with the concept, as if their whole life they’ve had a reservation for two.

Suddenly, the table next to them pulls up another chair. And what's more? They all fit at the table.

“We have been exposed and reinforced that monogamy is the only relationship structure that we're born into as opposed to being able to consider relationship structures as choices,” says Kayla Lajoie, clinical psychologist and chief executive of clinical operations at L & D Consultative and Clinical Services in Ypsilanti, Michigan. The relationship “structure” that Lajoie refers to is literal. Polyamory as a practice – having multiple partners at one time, all of whom consent to be a part of a multi-person relationship – realizes itself in the form of a “polyset” or “polycule” structure.

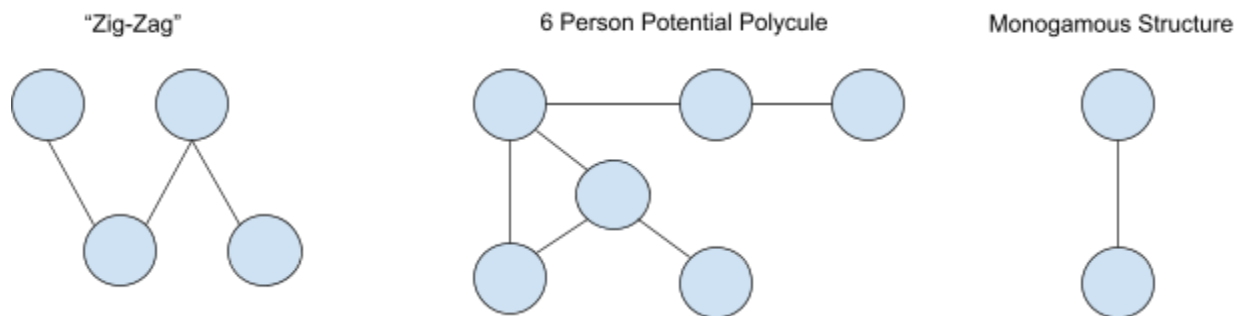
The term “polycule” comes from the metaphor of a molecular structure of multiple atoms and bonds connecting to form a single, unbreakable unit – just like the tedious ones you drew in eleventh grade chemistry class. Viewed all together, each atom is not only connected to the other atom they are bonded to, but also to every other part of the structure.

“We're in a V polycule. I'm in the middle and the two guys are the fingers here,” Kat describes to me, holding up a peace sign and pointing to the webbing between her index and middle finger.



In the same way that all molecules have unique qualities and structures, so do all polycules. For example, if Lincoln and Eddie were to be involved in a romantic relationship

together, there could be another bond connecting their two circles, making their “V” structure into a “triangle.” Or if Lincoln were to take on another partner, with Kat and Eddie both consenting, then their “V” could turn into more of a “zig-zag” formation. Ultimately, there are endless possibilities with how a polyamorous relationship may be structured, depending on the needs of each partner.



The “V” formation that Kat, Eddie, and Lincoln inhabit means that while Kat is bonded romantically to all people in the set, Lincoln and Eddie, although connected via Kat, are not bonded *romantically* to each other.

“That’s one distinction that I like to make. Because I’ve had people be like ‘Oh, they’re really good friends, they get along, oh okay...’” Kat says with a smirk and a cheeky roll of the eyes.

The eye-rolling, toss-of-the-head attitude is often necessary for people in polyamorous relationships to take on – non-poly people are often assuming and judgemental of people with multiple partners.

“Not a fan, personally,” says Tayler Hickey, a thirty-year-old San Franciscan who’s known many people in her community to practice polyamory and was even asked to consider opening up to polyamory by a previous partner. “Polyamory is a way for people to realize

childhood trauma and act on primordial desires and lean into the concept that we're all just animals. Not healthy.”

To Hickey's point, Kat did have traumatic childhood experiences that could be psycho-analyzed to explain her love-centered lifestyle. Kat's biological father and mother were forced into marriage upon her arrival and divorced by the time she was seven. That was only the beginning of Kat's saga of fathers. Shortly after her biological father left, her mother remarried to a man who plagued their home with abuse until Kat was fourteen and they divorced as well. At sixteen, she finally had the picture-perfect father figure she deserved: “a bright sunshine of a person” who treated Kat and her mother with kindness and respect. Tragically, he died of colon cancer eight months after they started dating, leaving Kat, once again, devoid of a loving dad in her life.

And, akin to Hickey's views, many Americans think that polyamory is merely a “modern trend,” in the way that many once viewed homosexuality or transsexuality as something that young hipsters would “try out.” Others may view polyamory as “unholy” or in contradiction with their religious beliefs.

“Polyphobia” is the term used to define those who practice anti-polyamory prejudice and discrimination, as coined by Elizabeth A. Sheff of The Polyamorists Next Door from [Psychology Today](#). Polyphobia can show up through the loss of friends, family, social connections, jobs, housing, child custody, and more. [A 2014 survey](#) of relationships in America from the *Austin Institute for Study of Family and Culture* found that “55% of Americans outright disapprove of polyamorous arrangements” and only “17% [of Americans surveyed] think that a polyamorous lifestyle is acceptable.”

A quick internet search reveals that the stats don't lie, with over six-hundred thousand "anti-polyamory" hits such as "The Case Against Polyamory," "Straight Men Need To Stop Using Polyamory as an Excuse To Manipulate Women Into Casual Dating," and "Polyamory Is Growing – And We Need To Get Serious About It."

Watching Kat's cheekbones inflate with couture love-gas so that they gently cup her glasses while she talks about her "two guys," it's hard to reckon with the amount of hate she must endure because of her happiness. She faces negative reactions from people routinely. "How does that even work?" or "Ew, that's gross," are frequent responses. But Kat's chutzpah and self-affirming capabilities equip her to handle a myriad of reactions from people. She puts most of the furrowed brows and rude remarks off to confusion or intimidation.

"I'm 5'9" with linebacker shoulders," she says. "I walk with my head up high and take long strides. Instead of feeling bad I'm just like 'oh, that sucks for you. I know who I am.'" In Kat's opinion, polyamory is not even the most marginalized part of her identity. Kat explains with a snort and a flick of the wrist that she gets "more hate" for being Jewish than polyamorous. Chiming in, Lincoln suggests that while that may be true, it may more so be a reflection of their accepting South Lyon community than a lack of general poly-prejudice.

On the other end of the spectrum, Eddie is in the closet about his polyamory and hasn't told anyone in his family about his relationship. He knows that he would face judgement and shaming. His typically dimple-filled smile turns to sharp breaths and crushed lips when talking about his relationship – an unsuccessful, heart-wrenching attempt to conceal the pain of hiding his joy.

"I'm very selective [about who I tell] these days," Eddie explains. "It has to be someone that I really trust and am comfortable with."

Unfortunately, his apprehension is justified. After opening up about his polyamorous relationship to colleagues he trusted at his last job as a therapist at a massage clinic, he faced prejudice from his coworkers and bosses, making it a “not good” environment for him. People became unfriendly and avoided conversation with Eddie. That pettiness coupled with overall clinic mismanagement ultimately caused him to be unemployed. A [2018 study](#) published in the *Journal of Sex Research* found that people in polyamorous relationships are more likely to have a lower income level than people in monogamous relationships. Workplace discrimination like Eddie faced could be part of why that disparity exists. Imagine clocking in for your shift, only to have a coworker nudge their elbow, bounce their shoulders, and ask, “So how does the sex part work?”

When non-poly-knowledgeable people envision the sex life of a polycule, they tend to come up with crazy sex caricatures of graphic threesomes and kinky behavior. In reality, however, sex’s function as an expression of physical intimacy is the same whether you’re poly or not. In Eddie’s case, he only experiences sex with his partner; Eddie is monogamous.

You read that right – someone can be involved in a polycule while personally identifying as monogamous. When Eddie and Kat started dating, she was clear about the fact that she is married and identifies as polyamorous. Although he wasn’t interested in dating multiple people, he *was* interested in dating Kat – regardless of her being married.

“You never know what you’re okay with until you try it out,” he says. “Of course there are growing pains, but you work everything out just like a normal monogamous relationship and eventually you reach a point where you’re comfortable.”

“Work everything out” is a codeword for communication. Cutting to the chase: polyamory involves *a lot* of talking and self-awareness.

“Poly is to be efficient with communication,” says Kayla Lajoie, clinical psychologist. “Poly work is sitting down with the whole system and understanding boundaries, attachment styles, and how to express and get your needs met.”

Attachment style is the primary focus of Lajoie’s work when she meets with polycules. She looks to identify the way that someone explores trust, expresses needs, receives love, and gives love in order to tackle any issues that may come up.

“What is your emotional awareness? Are you able to really feel what it’s like to be you?” asks Laurie Ellington, founder of *poly-coach*, a service for polyamorists in need of guidance based out of Austin, Texas.

Her approach, curated through twenty years of experience in the field and being on the inside, as a polyamorist herself, is similar to Lajoie’s. The coaching involves rooting around for why someone’s feeling the way that they are. Take jealousy, a common difficulty found in all types of relationships. Jealousy in polyamory, however, often comes with an embarrassing stigma – didn’t you know what you signed up for?

“Everyone’s trying not to be jealous, but jealousy is a natural emotion,” Ellington preaches. And with a shrug, she proclaims, “It’s energy that needs to move. You have to be able to identify what emotions come up and figure out how to address them within yourself and your relationships in a way that honors yourself and honors them.”

Prior to Eddie’s induction into the polycule, Kat dated Chris. He was tall and handsome, and it was not long before Kat’s eagerness took hold and moved him into her and Lincoln’s cozy South Lyon condo ... without communicating much with Lincoln first. Lincoln felt like an afterthought – fleeting and insignificant. Eventually, Lincoln couldn’t hold it in; he had to speak up and express his feelings to Kat.

“It takes a lot of courage to talk about the things that upset you. But it wouldn’t work if your partner only listened to what you have to say but then never did anything to change,” Kat tells me. “It was a very hard lesson to learn, but I’ve moved on and changed.”

Chris didn’t last. And a few months after Kat and Eddie met in January 2020, she introduced him to Lincoln. Perched on the right side of the tan sectional in their living room, Lincoln sized up the kind set of dark brown eyes and thick rectangular glasses in front of him. Lincoln’s superpower is reading people via body language and eye contact – a skill he picked up from his younger years as a semi-amateur poker player. Within minutes, Lincoln relaxed into a slouch; Eddie was a good one.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in March, about three months into Kat and Eddie’s relationship, Eddie was out of his job at the massage clinic and his apartment’s lease up for renewal.

“For me it was a no brainer at that point,” Lincoln exhales. “Kat and I talked about it. ‘Eddie needs a place to live and we’re not gonna let him live on the streets.’ I already had a much more open line of communication with Eddie than I had with Chris. It was a natural thing.”

Today, Kat, Lincoln, and Eddie regularly sit in their designated spots on the couch – Eddie on the left, Lincoln on the right, and Kat in the middle – to discuss anything and everything as it comes up. They have boundaries set in place: They can show limited PDA in the living room, such as cuddling and kissing, but no sex in the shared spaces. Kat can be nude in the living spaces, but the boys never have their shirts off or traipse around naked. If one couple plans something for just the two of them, they have to be clear and open with their planning from the beginning so the other member of the polycule is kept in the loop. They even have a system, strictly adhered to, when it comes to sleeping arrangements: Kat alternates where she sleeps

every other night, falling asleep with Lincoln in their bedroom one night while scrolling through Tik Tok and cozying up with Eddie in his bedroom while watching anime the next.

“They're both very, very supportive of the affection for the other one. And they're both fully aware that, like, we are a family,” Kat explains.

Expanding their three-person, six-pet family is part of future plans. First on the list? Purchasing a house together. Lincoln, although not involved with anyone else right now, is interested in exploring relationships that may be potential additions to the polycule. Kids are also a possibility for the family. If Lincoln and Kat, who have been married for five years at this point, have a child together, Eddie says that he’s “all in for it.” Eddie would treat the baby like one of his own.

Eddie and Kat do hope to formally get married. At the moment, however, United States law hasn’t caught up to their modern love story. Currently, all fifty states except Utah criminalize the act of being married to more than one person at once. In Utah, Mormonism reigns with 62 percent of the population being of the faith. Although the Church of Latter Day Saints formally rejected polygamy – having multiple spouses at one time – in 1882 as a response to the federally enacted Edmunds Anti-Polygamy Act, some fundamentalist Mormons still practice polygamy today. Hence, as of 2020, the crime in Utah has been reduced to the equivalent of a traffic violation.

A big reason why being married to more than one person is illegal in the U.S. has to do with the misogynistic stigma surrounding Mormon polygamy. In the case of Eddie and Kat, the two simply desire to do what any other American couple is allowed to do: have their commitment recognized by their community and country. But as much as legal marriage is very much a goal for the couple, Eddie doesn’t see why they can’t be married in the future, in their

own way: “To me, marriage is not just the legality of it, but just more of a mindset and more of an ideal.”

When working through challenges with her clients, Lajoie sees the real consequences of the lack of recognition of the growing polyamorous community. Employment-issued insurance is only provided for one spouse. Banks are not set up to lend mortgages to polycules. Even taxes are by nature oppressive to the polyamorous community. Lajoie believes that it will take a fundamental culture shift to adopt polyamory as a valid lifestyle in the U.S. Likening the type of shift needed to the increasingly normalized usage of personal pronouns with introductions, she feels the cultural movement towards acceptance will come once polyamory is known as a real, active lifestyle rather than a trendy phenomenon.

Scream it high and low, people. Polyamory exists, and it is here to stay.

Even if the rest of the world can't reckon with it yet, the three of them – Kat, Lincoln, and Eddie – live the average, idyllic, American-family life together. Lincoln's the early riser of the group, so he goes grocery shopping for tonight's dinner in the early morning. When he returns home, he drives Eddie to work at a new clinic. In between classes, Kat feeds the pets. On Lincoln's breaks from classes at Washtenaw Community College to complete his bachelor's degree in history, he takes the dog on a walk or works on his young adult fantasy novel about “a girl's journey finding her heritage while battling sexism and xenophobia.” If Kat has some time, she may clack away on her typewriter to write a few pages of her historical fiction novel “following life in Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong from the 1940s - 90s.” When Eddie gets home from work, they gather around their coffee table – they don't have space for a full dining table – and enjoy tonight's feast á la Lincoln. Eddie and Kat do the dishes, and they retire to their spots on the couch to watch TV or engage in a session of their Dungeons and Dragons campaign.

In early May when Kat graduates and Lincoln is on summer break, the three of them have plans for a standard American vacation. Camping at the Sleeping Bear Dunes near Traverse City in Northern Michigan, they'll cozy up in a tent – Eddie on the left, Kat in the middle, and Lincoln the right – with the dog somewhere between them.

“One more thing,” Kat tells me before ending our Zoom call. “I know people like to dissect things, psychologically. But I want you to know that I’m not poly because I had a rough upbringing with a lack of love. I’m poly because I have a bright future full of love as an adult...and I want to share it and collect it like Pokemon cards.”

Seeing Lincoln and Eddie, on her either side, tear up from hearing those words, it becomes hard not to ask yourself, Am I maximizing the love in *my* life?