

POLLY: SEX CULTURE REVOLUTIONARY

Polly

Sex Culture Revolutionary

a memoir

Polly Whittaker



Moral Minority Press
San Francisco, California

Copyright © 2014 Polly Whittaker / Moral Minority, Inc.

[Hardcover]

ISBN 13: 978-0-61586-490-7

[Paperback]

ISBN 13: 978-0-99040-981-6

[E-book]

ISBN 13: 978-0-99040-980-9

Library of Congress Catalog Number Forthcoming

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. Printed in the United States of America. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted without express written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations in critical articles or reviews

For information contact: polly@sexculturerevolutionary.com

Book Cover Design By Dominic Tinio

Book Interior Design By Mark Weiman / Regent Press

Cover photo By Darren Cavanagh

Makeup By Shelly Manser-Cavanagh

Manufactured in the U.S.A.
San Francisco, California

FOR SCOTT

*This story would never have been told without your love and
unconditional support. Thank you.*

Contents

Foreword	11
Introduction	15

PART ONE

My Three Lives	21
Four Hundred Thousand Perverts	24
My Unconventional Upbringing	29
Toasters	35
House of Harlot Fashion Show	37
The Moral Minority	41
The Sexual Revolution Keeps Turning	45
My First San Francisco Parties	51
Vegas, Baby!	53
Mission Control	58
Daddy Issues	62
Life Is Just a Game	68

My First Burn	73
My Diamond Superpower	82
Sex Is Simple; Culture Is Complicated	93
Sex, Power, and Pain	96
Be Brave and Bold	105
It Looked Like Hollywood	116
The First Kinky Salons	121
Phoenix	128
To Love Unquestionably	131
Beat Me and Fuck Me	136
Jealousy	139
Strategic Planning	142
The Press	145
Our First Balls-to-the-Wall Sex Party	148
Club Kiss and the Lifestyle	154

PART TWO

Seven Stars	161
The River Delights to Lift Us Free	164
I Love My Life	172
Climax	177
Another Level of Strangeness	181
Numb	185

The Cosmic Scouring Brush	191
Nuclear Family	202
Dark Night	207
Sparklepony and Peepshow Mini Golf	216
XXX Haunted Funhouse	228
Global Emissaries of Cultural Change	237
Trapped in a Utopia I Don't Want	244
Heartbreak	248
Fuck Your Boner	253
Rats in a Cage	263
The Shadow of Scarcity	269
Fuck	272
I Wept for All My Failures	281
Mission Control Changed My Life	286
Sex Is Art, and Art Is Everything	288
Hold Me	293
Goodbye	296
Never Not Broken	300
The Dream	304
Epilogue	302
Historical Timeline	303
Notes	306
Gratitude	308
Acknowledgments	309
About the Author	313

Foreword

Robert Lawrence, Ed.D.

THE PRECEPT that “sex is art, and art is sex” has long colored San Francisco’s tumultuous history. I’m glad to say that this concept has played a central role in my life as well. For generations, I have boldly shared with other San Franciscans a love for a city where expression is the rule.

My grandfather, a Texas-born drag queen, came to San Francisco in the 1950s to pick up movies for his “events” in the Central Valley. I wasn’t aware of how cool my grandfather was or how hot San Francisco was...I just knew that sailors loved it. And, I knew sailors. It made sense, therefore, that in the late ’60s I began sneaking off to Polk Street to visit The Haven or The Swallow. I won’t say how old I was, but they would let me in. I would slink into the Tenderloin wearing Fredrick’s Little Lies and a Jon Kloss bra. Later on when I was in the US Army on the Presidio, I lived in the Tenderloin and occasionally wore the same lingerie. Except for the loss of so many gay bars, the Tenderloin hasn’t changed much in 40 years.

Herb Caen called San Francisco the “Baghdad by the Bay” for a reason. From the Devil’s Triangle to the furred interior of a Pacific Heights mansion (which I petted), the draw for sailors and heartland expatriates alike was etched in the streets named

after whores like Grace and Minna. It was 1975 when I heard about John Wickett's house from a friend. It was the kind of place that you had to hear about from someone. His home, the ultimate buffet flat, was the staging ground for parties that were truly legendary, including that room with furry walls. (How did he clean it? He must have vacuumed it. I never did figure out how he washed the fur sink.) Wickett collected erotic objects from around the world. He also had two stuffed tigers. (I'm sure they had an erotic function, but I never asked.) And up on top of it all was a giant marionette called "Laughing Sal" who scared the hell out of me. Needless to say, I was getting my first real introduction to life as performance, sex as art.

Then, in 1979, there was a rumor of Hep B hitting the bathhouses. I backed out of the scene and played with a close circle of friends in the East Bay, keeping sex and art alive in my enclave. By 1980, Dr. Maggie Rubinstein had pressed the big red button: there was something going on, and we didn't know how it was passed. The AIDS crisis had begun. I was suddenly afraid of kissing. Did it pass through sweat? We didn't know. The word from local health educators was that it passed through blood. But nobody knew for sure. We were all worried... Do we have it? Do I have it? We formed chains of support taking food to friends' houses. Doing dishes. Vacuuming. Changing sheets over and over. The hospital finally formed "Ward 5-B," a euphemism for goodbye. There were countless funerals. A sign at the Rose Garden in Golden Gate Park read, "Please Do Not Dump Ashes in the Flowers."

Finally in 1984, Dianne Feinstein et al shut sex down in San Francisco. The bathhouses were closed. Any publicly advertised party, any backroom of any bar—the health department shut

them all down. Sex was outlawed in San Francisco.

But you can't keep a good cock down. Sex and art in San Francisco will not be stopped. The outlaws—we simply went underground. In 1989, the underground safer-sex education program I created with my partner Carol Queen found a home in the sex clubs at 890 Folsom. These clubs were also public venues with open doors...so of course, the cops busted us. Our protest became the Coalition for Healthy Sex. We reminded the City that we were promoting safer sex, and that this little thing called the Constitution guaranteed us the right to assemble. Perhaps more importantly (from the point of view of politico egos), we simply asked them what we had to do to stay open. After all, performance art and consensual sex between adults is truly a common interest.

The result: new rules. We began to design parties where guests were met, greeted, given a guide who explained the boundaries, and taken through the space. There were endless bowls of condoms, lube, and dental dams. Hundreds of people at a time in various stages and styles of dress and undress, enjoyed quiet space to chill, loud space to spank, music (sometimes live and sometimes canned), and always a moment when the host would bring everyone together. The Queen of Heaven parties were a panoply of lust. By 1993 we moved into 848 Community Space. It was the only open-gender, pansexual, safer-sex art orgy in town.

Into this rich, sometimes contentious world came Polly Pandemonium. I was standing on Folsom Street in my booth one bright and sweaty Folsom Fair day in 1999 when down the street came what I thought was a delicious, latex-covered drag queen. It took a moment for my gender sense to realize that this towering piece of wonder had natural boobs the size of Kansas.

The other queens were looking at her with a respect that they rarely give to outsiders. Polly was charisma personified, bravado with an innocent smile. I was transfixed. In my heels, I was easily six foot nine. In chains, corset, and skirt, I strolled over to make her acquaintance. She said, “Hello, I’m Polly.” And this was my first glimmer of the new San Francisco, and its new underground boss.

Polly made latex fashion outfits. She made Carol an outfit when she was Grand Marshal of the Pride Parade. We fell in love with Polly’s art. Most of the latex fashion in SF at the time was black. Polly’s introduction of color and costume was a radical shift—mourning was broken. And it wasn’t just a color here and there. Polly threw in the whole fuckin’ rainbow. She threw out the rigid noir concept and created looks that simply can’t be described. A cow with functional udders? Why not! If you could think of it, Polly could and would make it. We giggled as she persuaded the community to accept whatever latex or spandex or fur covered creature walked out her door.

She was (and is) Polly Chromatic. When she went to bars, there was suddenly a bright tableau full of promising sexy joy. People at Polly’s events performed as characters just by attending. Sex in her world was not a single intention, but a part of the lovely menu. Carol and I have always been proud to carry the San Francisco sex/art banner...and when Polly took it up, we cheered. She charged into San Francisco, and San Francisco followed.

Polly is a hero in one of the biggest, most beautiful art and erotic scenes in the new century. Reader, beware: your heart will open. And you will follow, too.

Introduction

Polly Whittaker

I REMEMBER the sting of my father's hand on my face. We stood for a moment, defiant, each equally appalled by the other's behavior. My hand fluttered to my cheek in disbelief. I stormed out of the room and locked myself in the bathroom, screaming the angry sobs of a defeated twelve-year-old. I smashed the cup of toothbrushes against the wall. My boot left a dent in the side of the plastic bathtub.

I eventually came out of the bathroom to a quiet house. I found my father in my room, sitting on my bed in the dark. I could see his black silhouette framed by the streetlights outside the window. He clutched my teddy bear, contemplating its chipped, black plastic eyes. When he looked up there were tears in his eyes. I had only ever seen him cry once before. His friend had died in an accident. I had seen him through the crack in my parents' bedroom door. He kicked it closed when he saw me. But this time he wasn't trying to hide. I sat down on the bed by his side and cried with him.

When I first started this book I didn't know I would write about my father. I thought I was writing the story of Kinky Salon—that quirky, erotic party I've been throwing for the last

decade or so in San Francisco. I wrote the fun stories, the sexy stories. I didn't want to look at my past; I told myself it was irrelevant. I wrote for a whole year before I understood that I couldn't leave out the painful stories. I realize now that I didn't really know what this book was about until I finished it.

Would my father have approved of what I do? My guess is that it would have challenged him, but he would have tried to be supportive. I don't expect everyone to understand what I do. There are times that even I have questioned its value.

It's true: I throw parties where people have sex. We fuck all together in a big room with lots of beds. There are dark corners for shy people, and exposed areas for exhibitionists. One of the rooms is a dungeon, where we tie each other up to specially designed furniture. We call it the Fun-geon. Some people like to spank each other, or use crops and floggers. Some prefer a softer touch, with feathers or silk.

But *sex culture* isn't just about sex.

It's about art, community, spirituality, relationships, gender, family, self-expression, and—most importantly—love. Sex is a normal and healthy part of life, and sometimes it can also be difficult. Sex culture isn't going to tell you what's right or wrong, or put you in a box. It just acknowledges that human beings are *designed* to be sexual. We have a spectrum of self-expression available to us, and sexuality is part of it, whether that's exploring the smorgasbord of sexual opportunities like an adventurer, or choosing to stay celibate until you meet someone who makes your knees wobble. Sex culture supports all choices and orientations between consenting adults, and sees them as part of a complex, crosscultural, sensual, and aesthetic exploration. Sex is something to sing songs about, and write poetry to.

The superficial story of Kinky Salon would be a fun read. A sordid tell-all exposé of the interpersonal drama that inevitably comes from so many people fucking would be riveting, no doubt. A chronology of my sexual exploits might satisfy some prying curiosity seekers. Apologies in advance if that's what you were looking for. Although much of this story is set in a modern world of open relationships, sexy parties, and alternative lifestyle, that's not what it's about.

You might be surprised to hear that the majority of people who come to Kinky Salon don't come to get laid. They are *deep* hedonists. They come for the community, connection, and sense of family. Wait, now it sounds like a weird sex cult.

Fuck it; maybe it *is* a weird sex cult.

But it's *my* weird sex cult.

PART ONE

My Three Lives

I 'VE BEEN born three times in this lifetime so far. The first was pretty standard. Pink and screaming I entered the world, confused, bald, and cross-eyed in Queen Charlotte's Hospital, London, England. I still have the hospital wristband they wrapped around my tiny wrist when I emerged from my mother's womb. It fits around two of my fingers. I keep it because it reminds me of where I came from. It says "Whittaker, Girl."

The only notable difference with my delivery was that my father flirted with the pretty midwife. She slipped her hand under the blankets between contractions, to feel the bump in my mother's belly. My father saw his opportunity, and his hand went up the other side, meeting hers in the middle at the top of the bump. "We must stop meeting like this," he said, with a charming smile. My mother laughed.

When I was a child, my parents recounted this story of my birth repeatedly. That might give you a little insight into my upbringing. "Daddy, Daddy, tell me the story again of how you flirted with the midwife when I was born."

Birth One. Polly Whittaker. July 31, 1974.

Polly Whittaker is a Londoner. She says she's a nihilist, but really she's just unhappy. She grew up too fast. She gives the impression that she knows what she wants to do with her life. She's an expert at pretending she's okay. She knows how to use her sexuality to get what she wants. She knows how to use her sexuality to get in trouble. She knows how to use her sexuality to numb the pain. She dreams about being an artist, a singer, a writer, a poet, but she knows she's not good enough. She's pretty sure she's broken. She had a perfect childhood until it ended. She was a daddy's girl.

My second birth happened when I moved to San Francisco. I left behind my family name and became Polly Pandemonium. Renaming myself was a rite of passage. It felt empowering to be in charge of my identity, to create a name for myself. I took control of who I wanted to be, and in one bold gesture I wrote my own future, and left all the baggage of my past behind. I became a new person.

Birth two. Polly Pandemonium. September 23, 1999.

Polly Pandemonium is a hellion and a rabble-rouser. She loves to dance on tables. She wants to collaborate. She likes to make an entrance. She forgets to listen. She throws fetish parties and makes latex clothes. San Francisco isn't just her hometown; it's her religion. She wants to talk about the sexual revolution. She's quite passionate about it. Sometimes she gets angry about the injustices of culture. She's a feminist. She writes manifestos. She doesn't want to talk about her past.

My third birth happened when I got an arc of rainbow stars tattooed on my belly. I readied myself to heal the wounds from my painful history, and stopped burying them. The stars helped. They marked the beginning of a mythic adventure of self-discovery. A spiritual awakening, I guess. I sought out mystical allies and learned about synchronicity. I met a unicorn and a guru, and I thought I could change the world.

Birth three. Polly SuPerStar. Sometime in 2005.

Polly Superstar is infinitely optimistic. She's intensely empathic. She believes in the power of positive thinking. She practices yoga and mindfulness. She loves deeply. She's got her eye on the big picture. She perceives patterns and meaning in everything. She sends messages back to her previous incarnations, reassuring them the future is amazing. She loves her life. She believes that humanity is on the edge of an evolutionary leap.

Four Hundred Thousand Perverts

Polly Pandemonium

I ARRIVED IN San Francisco on September 23, 1999, which by happy coincidence was the weekend of Folsom Street Fair.¹ Unlike the unfortunate tourists who stumble across this San Francisco tradition unawares, I was prepared. At the tender age of twenty-five I had already been working in the fetish industry for eight years. I'd had a string of jobs in shops and clubs in London, and designed latex clothes.

My friend Zari was the one who convinced me to come to San Francisco. We went to school together in London, and hung out in the fetish scene before she relocated to the West Coast a couple of years earlier. She's a buxom Persian princess with long, dark, but slightly disheveled hair. Her powerful maternal urge can sometimes come across as pushy, but most of the time I'm grateful for it. She knew I needed to get out of London. I had been lonely and depressed for years, and Zari suggested that making bold changes in my life might help. She had called me on my birthday, when I was wallowing in self-pity.

"Polly, *you need to get out of there*," she had urged. "Why are you so stubborn? What's keeping you in London?" Her voice was full of concern but my chest welled in indignation at her suggestion.

“It’s not like I have a choice, Zari. Who’s gonna wave a magic wand for me? You think I’m choosing this?”

“Things are going really well for me here,” she persisted. “Why don’t you come? Take a long break? I will take care of you. You can sleep on my couch. I would love to have you here for a bit. It would be fun.”

I sniffed.

“Come on, this place is amazing. I know you will love it here. You don’t have to be miserable, you know. You just need to get the hell out of London. You’ve got some savings. *What’s stopping you?*”

So I quit my job and left London. At first it was just a vacation. It didn’t take me long to realize I had found my new home. I had been in San Francisco for just two days when I found myself standing in Zari’s cute little apartment perched on the top of Liberty Hill, wearing a handmade, custom, silver latex minidress. Cut like something from *The Jetsons*, it had a short hoop skirt sticking out sideways, matching silver shorts, and a sculpted hood reminiscent of a ’50s swimming hat. Outside the window the San Francisco skyline stretched out in front of us. I could see the Bay Bridge peeking out from a glowing downtown skyscraper.

“*Really, Zari? This is okay?*” Although my years of experience in the fetish scene meant I’d worn some outrageous outfits in unlikely situations, on this occasion I was tired, jet-lagged, and not sure I wanted to be so conspicuous.

“It’s perfect. You look great,” Zari nodded approvingly as she rearranged her boobs in her corset.

“But it’s the middle of the day. I don’t think I’ve ever worn latex before sunset. It’s hot outside. I’m gonna sweat!” I complained.

“Just trust me. You look great. Come on, we don’t want to be late.” She picked up her spiked collar and fixed it around her neck.

“Late for what?”

“I signed you up for a volunteer shift. You can’t go to Folsom Street Fair without volunteering,” she said, and smiled. “This is how it’s done in San Francisco. Trust me.” I was wary.

On the way to the fair, we drove past a building with couches, lamps, and chairs exploding out of the windows. It looked like the furniture was escaping and running down the walls. I stuck my head out the window, trying to figure out what I was looking at. Then I realized it was art—a kind of art I’d never encountered.

“I know the guy who made that,” Zari said nonchalantly as she sipped whisky from her flask in the back seat of the cab. She’d been telling me about the art scene in San Francisco since she first arrived here, sending me photos from the Burning Man festival,ⁱⁱ which appeared to be somewhat like Woodstock, but in the desert: naked, body-painted people dancing in the dust. She proudly showed me a photo of a long-haired hippie wearing a diaper shooting a flamethrower off the back of a pickup truck. I didn’t get it.

As we got closer to Folsom Street, the population around us began to change. In front of the cab, two men with bushy beards, dressed in leather harnesses and big boots, walked confidently across the street holding hands. A gaggle of drag queens tottered by in high heels, feather boas flying. By the time we turned the corner to be dropped off, the streets jostled with thousands of colorful, sexy, outrageously dressed people. I’d seen crowds like this before, in the fetish clubs of London, but this was *outside*, in broad daylight, and it went on for *miles*.

There were spanking areas set up with people strung up on medieval-looking bondage devices, pink asses exposed to the warm sun. A tall, naked, muscular man with a dark tan and an enormous cock was masturbating on the sidewalk with an audience of people cheering him on and taking photographs.

A tall drag queen met us when we reached our destination. She wore a red PVC nurse's uniform, and a huge, white head-dress, which stuck out on either side of her head like something from a classic Flemish oil painting. Her painted white face, and exaggerated eye makeup, indicated that she was one of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.ⁱⁱⁱ These nuns are a common sight in San Francisco. They do outreach, raising money for AIDS awareness and other charity organizations in the LGBTQ community. This particular Sister was leading the station where Zari had signed us up, collecting donations from people as they entered the fair.

"Oh my goddess, look at your fabulous dress. I love it!" exclaimed the Sister.

"Thanks," I answered a little sheepishly. "I made it." "Shut up. Really? Oh, honey, it's *fabulous*." She grabbed the arm of a woman who was passing by, "Lily, check out this *amazing* dress. She made it *herself*."

The woman nodded approvingly. "Really, you made that?"

"Yeah. I'm a latex fashion designer. I just arrived here from London," I answered, a little self-conscious at suddenly being the center of attention.

"Do you have a card? I would *love* to buy a latex dress from you."

I didn't have any cards made yet, or even a phone number, but I wrote my email address on a piece of paper at least a dozen times that day.

An hour later, I skipped down the street, sweating in my latex dress, beaming a genuinely happy smile for the first time in as long as I could remember. People were so friendly and supportive. I met the buyer from the local fetish shop, and a man who wanted me to throw a party in his bar. I reeled from all the opportunities, encouraging conversations, and a sense of community I had never experienced before.

As I turned the corner, I saw a huge crowd swelling around a sound system. The beat was pounding, and an expanse of sweaty male torsos was gyrating in time to the music. Dangling from a crane above the crowd was a cage with a go-go dancer perched inside. I elbowed my way to its base.

“What do I have to do to dance up there?” I asked the operator.

“*You*,” he said, pausing to look me up and down, “just have to ask.” He brought the crane back to street level and a skinny boy in black leather shorts stepped out, beaming. He held the door open for me.

“It’s so fun up there!” he gushed enthusiastically as I stepped inside. The door swung closed behind me, and I lurched into the air. I sucked in a breath as vertigo swooped in and then subsided. I marveled at the extent of the street fair, seeing it stretched out into the distance: An ocean of leather boys, drag queens, and dominatrixes. I peered through the bars underneath me at the smiling faces of thousands of men cheering. It was their day to be out, open, and free. I gripped the edges of the cage and started to dance.

My love affair with San Francisco had begun.

My Unconventional Upbringing

Polly Whittaker

IT WASN'T just the lure of an exciting new city that enticed me to move to San Francisco. There was a dual action of being drawn into a new life while actively rejecting another. When I left London I called the local thrift store and asked if they had a truck. They took away everything I owned—all my books, plants, and furniture—and left two suitcases standing by the door. I wanted a clean break. To get away from the memories. Maybe I was searching for the family I'd lost. It had all been so perfect when I was young.

I was a true child of the '70s. My parents hosted fondue parties with all their swingin' friends, where they had a rule: if you lost your bread from the end of your little pronged fork while dunking it into the hot pan of sweaty melted cheese, then you had to kiss everyone at the table. At my young age this seemed innocent enough, watching as the grown-ups gave each other drunken, lingering kisses. I had a simple understanding of human relationships when I was five.

I was a weird-looking kid. I had a lazy eye, always pointing in the wrong direction. I got teased a lot. I had an operation to fix it, and had to wear an eye patch over my good eye while

I was reading, to train my bad eye to work properly. It would have been okay, kind of pirate-y, if my mum hadn't glued a piece of flowery fabric to it, to make it pretty. The patch hung from the end of the bookshelf at school for everyone to see. Kids picked it up and tried it on, laughing as they ran around while I begged to have it back.

One day at break time, when I was around seven years old, I looked out of the door to see the playground was empty. There were no fancy games to play in our playground—it was a simple yard surrounded by a high wall, made secure by jagged pieces of glass stuck into the concrete on top. A government-run institution in a dilapidated corner of London.

“Go on, Polly,” muttered my teacher, impatiently. “Go out and play.”

“But where is everyone?” I asked nervously as I peeked out the window.

“They're probably round the corner. Now go on. Scoot!”

The L-shaped playground meant that it was easy for kids to hide. They waited for me round the corner. The entire school, all 60 or so kids, quiet with breath held, giggled as they anticipated my arrival. I looked uneasily around. As I turned the corner the crowd descended on me, out of sight of the teachers, laughing, poking, and punching—gray, fur-trimmed parka hoods pulled up around their faces, sensible Clarks shoes making bruises in my ribs. I screamed, and ran back inside, crying, back to the teachers with the knowledge that it would probably happen again on the way home.

It didn't help that I looked like a boy. I had short hair because of my neurotic compulsion to pull it out, which started when I was a baby. My mother had long hair when she breast-fed, and I twirled

it around my tiny fist as I suckled. When she cut her hair short, she left me without my comforting habit. I remember when they took me to the hair salon. I felt grown up sitting in the big chair in front of the mirror, looking at my squinty face staring back at me. The stylist cut my hair short, to try to even out the bald patches, and gave me a wad of hair tied in a braid for me to keep.

I caught the brunt of some serious bullying before I learned to fight back. Nine years old, in a frustrated frenzy of childhood violence, I lost my sanity and my fear, and attacked my attacker, biting into his neck. My classmates looked on in horror at my bloodstained teeth, and my schoolyard status shifted.

I'm the youngest of four children. There are my two half-brothers (although we all hate that term), more than a decade older, and my sister, who arrived a year and a half before I did. My father did a terrible job of separating from his first wife, and my brothers were pretty traumatized by the divorce, but in the years following, our parents all worked hard to get along. Marjorie, my father's first wife, became like an aunt to me. My brothers moved in with us and gave my mother the affectionate nickname "Wicked." As in "Wicked Stepmother."

As the youngest child I think it's pretty common to believe your brothers and sisters are the most amazing people in the world. That's how it was for me. The pure bliss of being the baby: No responsibility, and love lavished from every direction.

My sister is incredibly talented—she can pick up a musical instrument and play it like a virtuoso after a few weeks—and she's so smart she skipped a grade in school. When I was eleven years old, and about to start a new school, I enlisted my sister to teach me how to be cool. She made homemade textbooks about

how to be a rebel by not pulling up your socks, and choosing the right trousers—in 1985 she supported the wearing of drain-pipe jeans. She created mantras for me to chant while I ran around the garden and did high kicks, and she wrote poetry about being cool with little illustrations in the margins.

“Your sister is a brilliant student, so we have high hopes for you, Polly,” my teacher told me when I started at the school.

“How can two such different daughters come from the same family?” she complained, once I had been at the school for a few months. My grades were always above average, but I tended to daydream. I wasn’t the conscientious worker my sister was, and I only tried in classes I enjoyed. By the time I was a teenager those subjects were reduced to just one—art. I would hide in the art room at school, drawing and painting on my own.

“Why can’t you be more like your sister?” was the inevitable conclusion the school came to.

Our home was modern in every sense of the word—from the bold, geometric wallpaper to the noisy, late-night parties. My parents went to discos, where my mother sported the latest trend of showing her breasts, wearing a pair of skintight blue spandex pants and a sheer fishnet top. They had a penchant for nudity, and enjoyed relaxing around the house without clothes. I made up a poem for those brisk British mornings: “Daddy has a chilly willy, which he waggles willy nilly.”

My father, Rodney Whittaker, was a hot air balloon pilot, and his balloon, *Serendipity*, was the love of his life. He loved to fl on overcast days, exploring above the clouds in the cotton candy landscapes, alone with his gorgeous, round, majestic friend. My mother wasn’t the jealous type, but everyone knew her feelings about *Serendipity*. She hated my father’s dangerous obsession.

Before I was born there had been an accident. The balloon touched down after a short flight, and my father climbed out of the basket onto land, when a gust of warm air suddenly lifted the balloon back into the sky. Mum didn't make it out in time, and as she tried to escape, her leg got caught on a rope. Lifted with the balloon, she rose into the sky, dangling beneath the basket. By the time she struggled her foot free she had risen twenty feet in the air. She fell on her head and fractured her collarbone. She never flew again. And, as you would expect from a protective mother, she wouldn't let her children fly either.

In an attempt to encourage my mother to join him, Dad planned his balloon outings with an all-female crew.

“So, are you sure you don't want to come flying this weekend, Ros? Have you seen who's crewing for me?”

“Yes, I have, darling. You go have fun with the ladies.”

“But we only have one tent.”

“Well, that'll be a squeeze, won't it, Rodney?”

Assisted by this gorgeous bevy of women, he tried in vain to make Mum jealous enough to insist on coming with him. But she didn't fall for his tricks, and turned a blind eye to his philandering, knowing with confidence that he loved her, and that as long as Serendipity didn't take him, he would return home.

My mother, Rosamond Whittaker, worked as a *marriage guidance counselor*—these days she would be called a sex therapist. She was one of the best. Though it was the early days of sex therapy, her work was controversial even by today's standards. Many of the programs she put in place are still operating today, but some of her more risqué methods—like talking dirty to her clients to get them to loosen up—didn't catch on. She was a trailblazer, and she raised me to believe that sex is a natural part of being a grown-up.

I never had the “birds and the bees” talk. I didn’t need to go through that awkward moment when parents consider a child old enough: “Polly, it’s time to let you know that there is no Santa Claus, and penises go in vaginas to make babies.” I didn’t need it, because I knew it already. Not only the basics—I understood about homosexuality, two men or two women loving each other was completely normal and natural. I understood what oral sex was, but the prospect of it horrified me. I knew that sometimes men liked to dress as ladies, that some men even *were* ladies, and vice versa. The information flowed freely. The idea that sex could be dirty or bad never even crossed my mind.

At age five, I took a trip to the National Gallery in London, accompanied by my father’s first wife, Marjorie—a very traditional woman, the total opposite to my mother. In the quiet whispering rooms of this classic museum of art, I faced a huge canvas of a naked woman surrounded by nymphs and satyrs, giving herself over in communion with Bacchus. I looked up and asked in a very loud voice, completely inappropriate for the surrounding volume of the gallery, but totally innocent in its tone: “IS THAT WOMAN A SEXUAL MANIAC?” Marjorie had no reply for me. She looked down, mumbled something about not wanting to miss the Constables, and pulled me quickly through to a room filled with landscapes. I went home that day and drew anatomically correct pubic hair and nipples on all my dolls, aghast at their lack of accuracy.

When I reached puberty I realized my little familial bubble was completely out of sync the rest of the world. That’s when my vocation first appeared to me. Pulling our culture out of the sexual dark ages felt important, and I wanted to be part of it.

Toasters

Polly Pandemonium

SOMETIME in the first few weeks of my arrival in San Francisco, I wandered off the tourist path. With delight I explored this new city, and got lost somewhere in North Beach. Walking down the foreign street, I noticed a *toaster* glued to the wall. I stopped and looked at it for a moment, confused. Then I smiled. I took out my camera and captured it in a photograph. Questions flooded my mind. Who did this? Why? What did it mean? This small but intentional act created a ripple in my reality. An otherwise normal street suddenly became filled with the unknown. People passed by unaware. It was a *glitch in the matrix*. This toaster did not belong there. Toasters live in kitchens, not glued to the wall on bustling city streets.

If this had been in London, where viral advertising campaigns were gaining in popularity, a toaster glued to the wall would be explained in a series of ads on bus stops in the coming weeks. A hip, Scandinavian designer would be releasing a new line of toasters. Wanting to grab the public's imagination and get on the news, they enlisted a marketing company to dream up a racy, modern approach that involved some minor vandalism. When the strategy revealed itself, I would be disappointed.

I told Zari about the toaster, and in her characteristically nonchalant tone she said, “Oh yeah, that’s a *Cacophony* thing.” It turned out that gluing toasters to walls was not an unusual activity in San Francisco, and that the Cacophony Society, who were responsible for the toasters, were also among the founders of Burning Man.

Those toasters and the simplicity of that playful gesture moved me. In London I had spent three years studying for an art degree. I was told that if I didn’t have a gallery show with people buying my paintings, then I was a failure. My teachers scoffed at my interest in fashion. This depressing perspective sapped me of all my will to create art.

In San Francisco, art was something to be lived—not a commodity with value assigned by a dollar. I started to think about what artistic gestures I could integrate into my life. I wanted to make people stop and question their reality. I was inspired.

House of Harlot Fashion Show

Polly Whittaker

IN LONDON I had become jaded. I had been a fetish scene devotee for many years, but its appeal had waned. To walk into a club and find a person suspended above the dance floor by piercing hooks through their back flesh seemed run-of-the-mill. Industrial dance music was the predictable soundscape for tedious shows where strobe lighting and lasers lit bald women wearing latex, dripping wax on each other's heads, or pressing axle grinders onto metal plates on their crotches to release a shower of sparks, arcing into the audience in fountains of light. To me it was dullsville.

I got my first job in the fetish fashion industry when I was seventeen—I worked for a classy little latex boutique in Hammersmith near my school. I loved to dress in sexy cat suits and six-inch spike heels, and to do it all day long. Most of the time the shop was quiet, but about three times a day the bell would ring, and I would put down my magazine and help elderly gentlemen squeeze into latex dresses. I would make them tea and we would try on shoes and talk about sex toys. One time I found a man old enough to be my grandfather attempting to violate a mannequin. I caught him with his hand up her latex skirt, frantically rubbing at her Barbie bump. I was titillated

by his desperate display of perversion. I chastised him for his behavior and kicked him out of the store, laughing.

When I was a teenager the fetish scene felt like home to me. It was my niche, a subversive little corner where I was accepted. London is such a huge town, and meeting people can be difficult. Being part of a subculture meant that I could avoid the anonymity of normal London life.

I loved the sleek, shiny, modern clothes that were the uniform for the fetish scene. When I wore them, I became powerful and embodied. Long before *The Matrix* and its black-clad heroes, back when Lady Gaga was just a little girl, latex was a taboo fabric. Creative and rebellious, kinky fashion oozed with sex appeal.

In 1995 I saw a latex fashion show by a designer called House of Harlot.^{iv} It broke all the rules—showcasing colorful, whimsical, and beautifully fitted clothes, totally different from the boring black that seemed so popular at the time. It inspired me. I yearned to be part of it.

I asked around my friends at the fetish clubs and got myself a job, working for a small latex design house. For the first time in my life I labored intensively at something to succeed. Initially I was the intern, making cups of tea for the seamstresses and sweeping the floor. Every chance I got I would practice, picking out scraps of latex from the trashcan and gluing them together, trying to perfect my technique. By the end of my first year, the designer enlisted my help to make patterns for the new collection. Sadly, the job ended suddenly when my boss's bad business practices caught up with her, but the timing was perfect. A position opened at House of Harlot, and I had the opportunity to apprentice to a master craftsman for two years

before I moved to America and started my own label.

As well as making the clothes, I would often volunteer to model in House of Harlot fashion shows, just to see things from a different angle. The last show I performed in before I moved to San Francisco took place at a huge fetish club in North London called Submission. I wanted to leave on a high—to make people smile.

I wore a latex bee outfit made from stripes of yellow and black, all the way from the top of my head to the tips of my toes, complete with transparent bee wings and antennae. The slick, shiny fabric stretched over every inch of my body. A hood covered my head with three holes, one for each eye and one for my mouth, and they were my only contact with the outside world. A strategically placed window arched across my breasts, squeezed up high and held steady in a magnificent presentation of cleavage. I sweated in the hot club, and the warm layer of moisture between the costume and my skin held me tight in its amniotic bubble. I watched as the backstage area emptied, and performers strutted out onto the stage, lights flashing and strobing.

My partner that night was Katie, a coworker from House of Harlot. Her outfit was a flower, with giant inflatable yellow petals framing her face. Under the petals there were restraints for her arms. Her face looked out from a latex mask with a bouncing flower stamen dancing above her head. She looked utterly ridiculous. I giggled as I twanged her stamen back and forth. With her arms bound, she couldn't stop me.

Our musical cue came over the sound system, and Katie leaped into action. Going out on stage first, she did her best to convey an air of sweet innocence as she shuffled cutely to center stage, and although her acting was impeded by the mask,

she still managed to get the emotion across with her big, dramatic eyes.

Then my cue, the sound of a buzzing bee—I buzzed back and forth across the stage, looking menacing, and zoning in on the innocent flower. She spotted me and looked nervous and vulnerable with her arms bound. I buzzed up behind her and began caressing her, grinding against her leg, touching her petals suggestively. I reached lewdly for her crotch, and then I turned her sideways and bent her over, pulling a bunch of flowers from between her legs like a magician. I sniffed the flowers and threw them into the audience. Shocked, the innocent flower had been defiled, but she excitedly came back for more.

I turned her back around to face the audience and stood behind her, caressing her petals seductively. As the music reached a climax she suddenly exploded in a shower of pink Ping-Pong balls that bounced all over the stage and into the audience. We had filled some hidden pockets in the inflatable petals with balls before the show, and then blown up the flower with air so that the petals were under pressure. When I caressed her, I sneakily unzipped them, sending the bright balls flying into the air.

“Goodbye, London,” I thought to myself as I watched smiles spread across the audience. “Goodbye, you miserable hell hole.”

The Moral Minority

Polly Pandemonium

MY VACATION in San Francisco officially became permanent when I set myself up making latex clothes in a studio in the Dogpatch neighborhood. These days it's becoming gentrified like every corner of San Francisco, but back in 2000 it was a desolate wasteland between Downtown and Hunters Point where the crack slingers would come to do their deals. In the dead of night I would hear cars pull into my parking lot. I'd peek through the curtains to see mysterious, dangerous looking men checking the contents of suitcases, opening them a crack on the roof of the car. This hub for crime was perilous once night fell, but during the daytime the neighborhood was bright and sunny, and the rent was cheap.

I created a glamorous storefront with big windows, pink curtains, and an entire wall of mirrors, where my clients could admire themselves in my latex creations. I slept in the back of my studio on a futon mattress on the floor, in the storage room. You wouldn't have guessed that I lived in the back, bathing with a camp shower over a bucket and eating ramen noodles. I created an air of success. I faked it. I put everything I had into the illusion that I was a successful British fashion designer. I would drink coffee and smoke cigarettes because it made me

feel like a grown-up. I didn't need anyone. At twenty-six years old I thought I knew everything.

Over the years I've had some pretty weird encounters as a result of my career in latex, and I have made some people very happy. I transformed a man into a latex pony for his wedding day, so that he could pull his bride down the aisle in a carriage. I created a toe bondage system that prevented a particularly fidgety client from wriggling his toes, by connecting his feet to his genitals with a spike-lined cock ring. Moving would lacerate him, so he stayed still. A middle-aged doctor came to me wanting to be a rubber doll. Using a complex configuration of undergarments with the appropriate padding, support, and cinching, I feminized his body. Over it, I slipped a flesh-colored latex bodysuit, complete with pink nipples, red toenails, and a sculpted pussy. With his cock strapped back under layers of latex, this pussy had a hole that (to his delight) could actually be penetrated. I have fulfilled people's deepest, most secret fantasies and done so with relish.

I'm not a latex fetishist. I love the way it looks, but I'm not turned on by how it feels. Some people take their love of latex to extremes: it is so compelling they live double lives, indulging in their latex-driven fantasies in secret. Most of these fetishists are men. Women like it too, but men tend to be the ones that get weird about it. They love the way it smells and feels—given half a chance they will rub their face in it, huffing its powdery scent like a drug. I'm not an expert on psychoanalysis, but I'm sure Freud would have something to say on the matter.

I must admit I enjoyed the depravity of it all. I loved watching people come alive when given a chance to explore their

fantasies, and I had a particular fondness for making bizarre inflatables, accentuating shoulders or breasts with cartoonish silhouettes or encasing people, depriving them of their senses.

I named my business The Moral Minority. Not content to simply make clothes, I wanted to promote a lifestyle of fun, playful sexuality. I filled my publicity materials with absurdist manifestos about the sexual revolution. My shows included a speech about reclaiming the word *pervert* as an act of activism, and ended with me being carried off the stage naked and screaming. I mocked everything in sight with irreverent glee. The sexual revolution was, for me at the time, an abstract concept, a gimmick. I didn't know much about the work that had gone on before me, paving the way for increasingly liberal sexual freedom in Western culture. I wasn't aware of the people who had dedicated their lives in far more culturally oppressive times to bring us to this moment.

I understand it's a pretty common folly of youth to think what you are doing is totally new, and the work of your predecessors is irrelevant. I'm ashamed to admit that I arrived in San Francisco without even realizing it had been a central hub for the sexual revolution and the gay rights movement. I lacked the critical intelligence to see myself as a product of history.

In all my naïveté, I just wanted to sell more latex clothes. I released my first collection with a fanfare and a bubblegum-pink, glossy catalog. An illustrated fairytale, with a whimsical storyline chock-full of innuendo, double entendres, and references to revolution. I starred in it as the hero who traveled across the world and overthrew a corporate monarchy to rescue a princess. With it I took a stance on morality, culture,

consumerism, and the military-industrial complex. *But I was joking.* I thought it was funny.

As the years went by, my quirky promotional shtick developed into a real passion. It's a common occurrence in San Francisco to watch people superficially engage, and then develop a consuming vocation. This town has the opposite of the jaded narrative I experienced in London. People aren't afraid to get enthusiastic about their interests here.

I had found myself in the city of erotic possibility, and once I started learning its history, I couldn't help but be inspired. Even a hundred years ago during the Gold Rush, this place had a progressive outlook on sexuality, and the Barbary Coast boomed with its diverse sexual commerce.^v It was the first city in modern America to allow the exhibition and sale of hardcore pornography, it's been a battleground for LGBTQ rights, and it was home to the sexual revolution and the free love movement. The North Beach clubs boasted a vibrant burlesque scene, and the Condor was home to another first—topless dancing. It all happened right here in this little town nestled on a tiny outcrop of land only seven miles across.

The more I learned, the more I wanted to become part of that history.

The Sexual Revolution Keeps Turning

Polly Pandemonium

WHILE WE'RE on the topic of the sexual revolution, perhaps we ought to get some perspective. Let's pull back to look at the bigger cultural picture, and put this story in context.

Did the sexual revolution begin with the counterculture of the '60s where hippies declared the right to free love, the Pill gave women control over their reproductive choices, and pre-marital sex became socially acceptable? Or was it earlier?

After the First World War, intellectuals and scientists in Germany started making daring statements about their discoveries in the realm of sexuality. Physician and sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld founded the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft (Institute for Sexology), where he championed gay rights, and psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich^{vi} penned *Die Sexualität im Kulturkampf* (*The Sexual Revolution*) where he analyzed “the crisis of the bourgeois sexual morality.”

It's difficult to imagine the lives of people like Ida Craddock,^{vii} the sexual activist who died for free love in 1902. The famous puritan Anthony Comstock imprisoned her for writing educational pamphlets giving instruction to couples on their wedding night. Her advice sounds quaint by today's standards:

“When you are performing your movements, do not indulge in the thought of how much you are enjoying them; rather dwell, in thought, upon how much pleasure you are giving your bride.” These ideas, only suggested in the context of marriage, and never with the idea that sex should be enjoyed between *unmarried* people, were so shocking—that *married* women should actually *enjoy* sex, and not simply tolerate it for the purpose of procreation—that they depicted Ida as the devil incarnate. The judge deemed her writing so *obscene, lewd, lascivious, and dirty*, that the jurors weren’t even allowed to read it. They sentenced her to hard labor—so hard, in fact, that she took her own life.

But we can go back even further—during the Age of Reason in the seventeenth century, London was a hub for social, political, and intellectual transformation, and with it came a more permissive attitude toward sexuality. Europe hadn’t seen anything like it since the dawn of Christianity.^{viii}

There’s no doubt that since the ’60s we’ve witnessed a rise in the cultural acceptance of more promiscuous sexual practices. The swinging sex clubs of the ’70s followed the “free love” of the ’60s. Then tragedy struck in the ’80s with the AIDS epidemic, but the sexual revolution didn’t disappear—it transformed into kink and fetish. Perhaps this was a way for us to process the immense grief and fear generated by this tragic illness.

Since the dawn of the internet, millions of couples have used hookup websites to seek out playmates. More recently, there has been a surge of interest in polyamory—the idea that you can have multiple, loving relationships at the same time—with TV shows and newspaper articles^{ix} favorably depicting its utopian potential.

The reality is that the sexual revolution has already made a

few rounds, and it keeps spiraling into new territory with each spin. When it comes around it's inevitably countered with a powerful puritanical backlash—with new laws to control people's behavior, or pressure exerted from religious leaders. Well-meaning, God-fearing crowds have burned books deemed inappropriate, and cheered as adulterers met their fate in flames.

Culture itself is experiencing a moral dilemma, and it's such a complicated issue that figuring it out is taking centuries. Sexuality has been our cultural blind spot, and as we evolve as a species, our relationship to it becomes clearer.

When I was at school I was taught that the mechanics of our evolutionary drive could explain why men are more promiscuous than women. Men's seed is plentiful, and they can easily deny paternity and leave a woman with the responsibility of parenting a child. Women have limited numbers of eggs, must carry the child, *and* must prove their fidelity to ensure paternal support. In other words, men can happily spray their seed like a farmer in a field, knowing that wherever it lands their genetic legacy will live on, but women need to select a man who will take care of her, so she trades her sexual fidelity for financial and material stability, thus explaining men's preoccupation with sex, and women's caution toward it.

As a young teenager obsessed with sex, this struck me as bullshit. A neat explanation designed to justify a fucked-up part of our culture. In biology class that day my young mind silently screamed: "*Men love sex because our culture gives them permission to, and women are cautious because we've been burned at the stake, stoned, shamed, and raped into submission!*"

This rather Victorian image of chaste women protecting their precious eggs is an idea that's been questioned recently. A

new scientific theory suggests that in our prehistory as hunter-gatherers, we shared everything. That includes spoils from the hunt, and berries gathered from the bushes, raising children, and our choice of sexual partners. When hunter-gatherers became farmers, the concept of “ownership” was applied to all the resources we previously shared.

According to this theory, the concept of sexual control only came about 10,000 years ago, when the more complex social structures that evolved from the development of agriculture shifted our relationship to sex. That’s a brief moment, in evolutionary terms. Perhaps this drastic behavioral shift from hunter-gatherer to farmer, and the change in sexual behavior that happened alongside it, explains why our culture is so confused about sex.

It could be that making sex “bad” was a necessary part of the evolution of our species. Before our brains had evolved to comprehend the philosophical, emotional, and spiritual questions that sex can trigger when it’s not constrained by the natural structure of the tribe, it might have been true that we needed simple answers or there would have been chaos.

Although our attitudes in general seem to be progressing away from our prudish, sex-negative past, there’s no doubt we still live in a pretty fucked-up world when it comes to sex. Even the fact that I use the word “fucked” to talk about something bad, well, that’s pretty *fucked*.

One issue that seems to be a particular challenge to our generation is the idea that if a woman is promiscuous she’s a slut, but if a man acts the same way, then he is revered. Many women are still held to blame when they’re raped. They wore the wrong shoes, or walked down the wrong street at the wrong

time. Women are still temptresses, while men try their best to control themselves in the face of such lustful seduction. This conservative attitude toward gender is a sexual double standard that harks from a bygone era of sex negativity.

In my journey as a sexually exploratory woman this is an attitude I have encountered firsthand many times. I remember a one-night stand that turned sour after I consented to anal sex. I got the lube from my side table. He was a little rough, but I liked it. Then afterward he said he was going to the bathroom, but I heard him leaving my apartment. I ran out, confused. “Where are you going?” I asked. He laughed.

“Why would I want to stay, *slut?*” he said as he slammed the door in my face.

His behavior upset me, but he didn’t convince me I’d done something wrong. Is it the way my parents raised me, or is it just evolution? I did not feel ashamed.

Shame exists for a reason. It helps us identify wrong or foolish behavior. When we are raised, our parents are the litmus test we use to ascertain the things we should be ashamed of. Mine raised me without the laundry list most people carry.

We live in a shame-driven culture, and it’s used as a means of social control. People stick within the limits of our preassigned moral structures because they feel bad about it if they don’t. In some situations this is appropriate. You should feel bad if you kick a puppy. But experiencing shame because you ate too much chocolate, have a strong opinion, or fantasize about threesomes? Time to let that go.

Perhaps there are some people who think that shame is a good thing, that it’s society’s way of keeping people in check, or even God’s way of communicating the wrongness of things.

Temptation is the devil causing us to stray from the path of righteousness, and shame is the signpost that leads us back to God.

Humans are adept at creating mythic structures to reinforce cultural standards. The development of religion and belief systems is a universal human trait. I'm not knocking people's beliefs—I support religious freedom—but I am fascinated that the development of these ideas fit so neatly with the cultural history of our morality. Hunter-gatherers worshipped a goddess of abundance as they grazed their way across a plentiful planet, and sexual promiscuity was socially acceptable. Farmers rejected that goddess. Instead, they worshipped a righteous God who “told” them that coveting their neighbor's property (which included their wives) was sinful, and sexual infidelity was punishable by an eternity in hell.

I don't believe in the idea of the “noble savage”—that our prehistory was some kind of perfect utopia—but when you look at these two belief systems it seems pretty clear that one is using shame to impose control over people's behavior. Is it God stepping in to save us from ourselves? Or a complex means of cultural control developed over generations to protect farmers from leaving their land to someone else's son? That's a debate that's tough to reconcile.

POLLY: SEX CULTURE REVOLUTIONARY

DOWNLOAD [THE EBOOK](#) TO READ MORE!