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Sex and the city

In the days after 9/11, terror and grief pervaded the streets of New York. But then something unexpected took place: a massive surge in one-night stands and casual flings. So what is it about disaster that sends people running for the covers?

Rachel DeWoskin

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Five days after 9/11, New York's One Leg Up club held an erotic party that its owner describes as the "most intense" event in its history. In a Midtown hotel, shell-shocked couples struggled their way through a newly complicated security check, rode the elevators up to a suite with marble floors and locked windows, and took off their coats.

Underneath, the guests were wrapped in American-flag sarongs, halters and togas: the theme of the night was red, white and blue.

After a round of cocktails and talk that was self-consciously not about the attacks or the smoke still visible outside, the flags came off as well. Then people found comfort in each other's arms. "Everyone really needed an outlet," its owner, Palagia, says. "They were like, 'Let me love you. I don't know you, but let me love you.' People were really getting along."

Palagia, a blowsy Greek-American known as the "Rolls-Royce" of New York's erotic party scene, sat down with me recently at her Chelsea apartment. The building is flanked by blocks of off-licences, an adult shop called Passion, and a clinic with "pregnancy help" advertised on its awning. Palagia wore slacks and a sweater, her long, straight hair down around her shoulders. After serving iced water and taking a Polaroid of me for a collection she keeps on the table, she sat on a love seat and lit a cigarette.

"I tried to cancel that party," she said of the September 16 event. "I just thought it was inappropriate to have a party anyway, after such a huge tragedy hit. But when I tried to cancel it, everyone was like, 'Don't you dare!' And I have to say that it was one of the most sexual, most comfortable parties ever. I remember the hotel suite was wonderful, but we couldn't open the windows. You could smell death in the air, and yet people were having sex in the shower, the bathtub, on the bed, everywhere. Sexual electricity just bounced off the walls."

Palagia is hardly the first person to suggest love and sex are ways to escape mayhem, make order out of chaos, or survive. In western literature, lovers have always leapt into each other's arms as bombs and buildings fall. Take Shakespeare's Desdemona, seduced by stories Othello tells her "of most disastrous chances, Of moving accidents by flood and field, Of hair-breadth scapes i' th' imminent deadly breach". Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara kiss against a backdrop of Yankee arson and invasion, and Hemingway's Catherine and Mr Henry flee the front for bed, in a valiant if failed effort to create life out of war and loss.

In the immediate wake of 9/11, New Yorkers showed up at firehouses, offering everything from meals and massages to themselves. Volunteers fell in love and into each other's arms behind the barricades, and couples ended, reignited and, in some cases, started passionate affairs.

A 34-year-old fireman, who asked to be called Sam, had an affair with two women in the winter after 9/11. He was recently married when he was assigned to a detail digging for remains at Ground Zero. He worked 24-hour shifts, three hours on and off. During his breaks, he slept in trailers and church pews. The content and schedule of those days put a strain on his marriage, and when he met two women at the Racoon Lodge in downtown New York, they became his Desdemonas, eager to hear the same stories his wife could no longer listen to. And so he spent the remaining nights of his month-long detail in a ménage à trois that made the misery bearable. "They sent a beer down to me and we started talking," Sam says. "They got a few laughs out of me, and it felt good to laugh, just to laugh, you know? It was Sunday night and Sex and the City was on, so we talked about it, and they invited me over to watch it. I was like, 'What do I have to lose?' "

In much of the world outside the United States, people have always lived with the threat, even expectation, of violence. Pre-9/11 America was a relatively luxurious place, safe and insulated enough to feel invulnerable from outside attack. But 9/11 revealed that America, too, was exposed. That revelation, coupled with grief and chaos, caused for many the sensation that Sam describes, of having suffered a loss so great that there is little left to lose. That feeling leads people into bars and beds.

According to Dr David Vlahov, director for the Center for Urban Epidemiologic Studies at the New York Academy of Medicine, a 2002 study on the effects of 9/11 showed an increase in alcohol and drug use among New Yorkers. "We followed people in the month after 9/11, and again six and nine months later, and saw an increase in the frequency of cigarette, alcohol and marijuana consumption," Vlahov says, particularly by "people who developed anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder. The consideration there is the possibility of self medication".

Heidi Wilson, a psychotherapist and addiction counsellor, observes that national tragedies like 9/11 bring about booze and addiction booms because "When people don't like the way that they feel, they look for something outside of themselves that will change the way they feel – and that could be drugs or sex or alcohol. You feel like you're taking control that way, but actually you lose control, so people get more lost than ever."

Sam followed the women from the bar to a 40th-floor apartment overlooking Ground Zero. He was surprised at the elegance of the place, the women's desire for him, and the whole situation, which he described as "totally surreal".

“They were lawyers, in suits. And it was a beautiful apartment, overlooking the site. I was still in my coveralls, dirty from the digging. So I took a shower, and they poured me some Scotch, and we sat together on the couch and watched Sex and the City. That show has a sexual twist to it, and one thing led to another, you know?”

The stars of Sex and the City were flashy career women, icons of the 1990s. Firemen and rescue workers became the aspirational heroes of 2001, so the affair was a kind of fusion of pre- and post-9/11 archetypes. There is, of course, the lure of rescue workers who have saved lives, narrowly escaping with their own. And if men in uniform were considered desirable already, then 9/11 made them into movie-star symbols of safety and protection; dates with firemen went for thousands of dollars at charity auctions.

And Sam’s is not the only story to conflate real life with the dreamlike world of pop culture. Perhaps because most Americans are arguably the safest people in the world, 9/11 was far enough removed from daily experience life here that it made reality feel like a Jerry Bruckheimer movie. People found themselves at a loss for reference points, even for how to behave.

Dr Michael Bader, a practising psychologist and psychoanalyst and the author of Arousal: The Secret Logic of Sexual Fantasies, describes a phenomenon he calls “terror sex”. “The lowering of external prohibitions promotes the lowering of internal ones, internal injunctions against being too vulnerable or too altruistic,” says Bader. “When the external trappings of regulation, order, and control are lowered, one’s forbidden longings and impulses can more safely flourish. This explains the surprising finding that people seem more sexual after a disaster.”

Sam says he did not consider himself immune to the rules of society or his marriage. Nor did he feel heroic; he was just a guy suddenly in need of rescue. So he reached out to strangers.

“It was an escape, separate, very sexual and raw,” he says of the affair, sounding apologetic. “I was doing everything for everyone else, and it was nice to have someone do something for me. The women asked a lot of questions – about who I was and how I was dealing. It gave me somebody who wanted to listen. You go home every day and people just don’t want to hear any more – and, I mean, who can blame them?”

Who can blame anyone for what we created, transformed or ended in the moments after 9/11? It’s been a popular question for the past half-decade, and there’s no consensus on an answer. Certainly the US government is not blameless; its subsequent actions have earned America international wrath and scorn. But what about private citizens, moving through their lives in a daze of suddenly revealed danger? Some argue that tragedy is a catalyst that lifts our inhibitions, allowing us to justify changes we wanted to make anyway. Others believe we make changes because we are changed by events themselves.

“People’s sense of vulnerability and mortality hit them in their faces after 9/11,” says Sylvie Blaustein, a midwife at Midwifery of Manhattan, who saw a post-9/11 increase in women deciding to stay home with their babies. “I felt a real change, in terms of women choosing to make sacrifices in their professional lives in order to be able to spend more time with their children – saying, ‘Maybe I want to take more time off, maybe I don’t want to work full time, maybe I don’t

need that promotion after all.' It was a moment of real evaluation of what's important. And family came up over and over."

According to Michael McSweeney, the first deputy city clerk, New York's City Hall went without a telephone service or computer system for more than a month after 9/11, so marriage licences were unavailable. But once operations were up and running, applications flooded in. The year following 9/11 saw an increase, culminating in a December (traditionally City Hall's biggest month for weddings) busier than any for two years before or after.

"Marriages spiked because it was such an uncertain time that people decided to get serious," explains McSweeney. "After 9/11, people who had never gotten around to it finally got married."

Rebecca Weinberg, a 34-year-old professional who has lived in New York's East Village for more than a decade, describes the month after 9/11 as a "huge turning point" during which she swung violently from wanting one kind of comfort to wanting another. Initially she embarked on a short-lived romance with a mover who came to help pack her belongings so she could leave a downtown apartment close to Ground Zero – where she could no longer tolerate living. Then, almost immediately, casual relationships became unacceptable. "I suddenly wasn't willing to settle any more, to waste time, wait around, fake how I was feeling – I felt like playing it cool wasn't the strong position; it was actually weak and pathetic. And it sounds funny, but I was empowered," she says. Three months after 9/11, Weinberg met the man she would later marry.

There was a moment in autumn 2001 when various social, class and daily boundaries seemed obscured; random people felt connected, and risked making choices and taking actions they might otherwise not have. Some thought of themselves in new ways: vulnerable, nationalistic, heroic or lost. The connections people formed were sometimes safe and sometimes precarious: either kind can apparently offer comfort.

Edith Freni, a playwright who is currently earning her Master of Fine Arts at New York University, describes post-9/11 life as a haze of alcohol, panic attacks and "fast and furious romance". She was 22 years old at the time.

"I had been on maybe two or three dates with a guy," she says, "and then on 9/11, I was completely cut off from the rest of the city – I had no phone service, no radio, no TV. So I went to his place in Brooklyn Heights and we just started walking. The idea was to clear our heads, but we ended up walking all the way to the Upper West Side, where my parents live. So he wound up meeting my family that day, which was very bizarre and not something that would have happened otherwise." But although the affair began with a 9/11-fuelled intensity, it ended several months later when Freni realised it was more about the moment than the two of them. "I just remember that day, when I talked to him, we had a really intense 'I miss you and I have to be with you' conversation. But it didn't have anything to do with him or me, really. It was about needing to feel like you have people around who are safe and comforting."

David Lobenstine and Miranda Beverly-Whittemore are 30-year-old college sweethearts who have been together for 12 years. They say that their otherwise smooth romance underwent such upheaval during 9/11 that they consider it divisible into two relationships: before and after.

“We had mammalian responses to 9/11,” says Beverly-Whittemore. “He wanted to hibernate and I wanted to mate, to get rowdy. He hid and I went out. And sought comfort in someone else’s arms.” It was the only such hurdle they had faced in almost a decade. So they went to couple’s therapy, something they might not have considered without the impetus of 9/11, and both are grateful for having had the chance to confront problems early in their life together. They got married in 2004.

“The awfulness of the whole world made us realise all of the problems embedded in our own relationship,” Lobenstine says. “9/11 was such a crisis that it forced us to face our crises. And to work them out.”

Talking about love and sex in a time of crisis, or as they relate to a crisis, feels inappropriate, selfish, even unpatriotic. Americans are funny about sex and tragedy, especially in conversation. Alternately obsessed and reserved, we have reputations for being both the most flagrantly oversexed and puritanical people in the world. Partially, this is because of the obvious chasm between what people say and what they do, which is not particular to Americans. But it’s also because America has contradictory attitudes. We feast on and export a stunning combination of visions: from Baywatch bombshells running scantily clad on beaches to religious zealots preaching everything from abstinence to the moral benefits of war. Even New Yorkers, with a reputation for being the country’s wildest (and most politically progressive) people, know that there’s a limited vocabulary considered acceptable for talking about America and sex. Combine sex and politics in a sentence that isn’t about congressmen soliciting teenagers, for example, and you’re in trouble. Mention sex and 9/11, and you’re censorable.

Last month I posted a listing on the American website Craigslist, asking people about their romantic and sexual experiences following 9/11. I said I was a journalist looking for anecdotes about how people had changed their lives and found comfort. Within six minutes of my message being posted, the hate mail began flooding my thankfully anonymous e-mail account. One representative example read: “Your [sic] a sicko, one shouldn’t have anything to do with the other. have some respect, and this coming from a perv. who loves sex.”

Less than 10 minutes after I had posted my listing, Craigslist sent me an e-mail, politely informing me that my ad had been flagged and removed by the community “due to inappropriate content”. Yet my message was flanked by requests and offers for services so pornographic and specific that I can’t include them here. Maybe there’s something arbitrary about our definitions of what’s inappropriate. Or maybe forbidding ourselves to mention certain connections helps liberate us to explore them.

Mainstream media touched on the topic of tragedy-inspired romance with cheerful articles on a “9/11 baby boom”, one that writers and their subjects alike hoped would help compensate for our loss as a nation. 9/11 sex was called “post-traumatic sex syndrome” and “post-traumatic love syndrome”, and in the year following the incident, dozens of stories appeared predicting a future crop of babies who would soothe our nation’s grief.

Yet population experts and demographers agree that there was no such boom. While tragedies such as earthquakes, blitzes, blackouts and terrorist attacks may indeed affect life-changing decisions, people respond in ways various enough that they tend to cancel each other out and

leave few patterns worth demographers' analysis. For every couple inspired by a disaster to go ahead and have a baby, there is a couple made cautious. Each casual encounter may be balanced by an equal and opposite reaction. And since population trends tend to be long-term, it's difficult to find meaningful patterns even five years after a traumatic event.

According to Catherine Cohan, a sociologist at Pennsylvania State University and the author of a 2002 study of the effects of Hurricane Hugo on marriage, birth and divorce, "It is a basic human instinct to care for and seek comfort from loved ones when a serious tragedy occurs." She believes that the link between natural disasters and birth booms depends to a large extent upon geographical proximity to the event: the closer that a community is to a disaster, the more likely that it is to conceive.

A psychological explanation for the lack of such a spike in New York after 9/11 "might be related to feelings of fear, vulnerability, and demoralisation after 9/11 (a man-made disaster) not necessarily present after a natural disaster", Cohan says. "Perhaps people are more reluctant to start or expand a family when the world seems like such a dangerous place."

While it's difficult to imagine that hurricanes and tsunamis don't also make the world seem risky and undependable, the displacement that follows a natural disaster does have its own side effects. As Cohan explains, "More people were displaced after Hurricane Hugo compared to New York City. Literally half of South Carolina was declared a federal disaster site. Perhaps in the throes of temporary or permanent relocation, people simply forgot to use contraception."

According to a recent New York Times article, an influx of immigrant workers to New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina has caused a baby boom there that is threatening the city's devastated health-care infrastructure. Thousands who arrived to help rebuild the city are now having babies there; most are poor, without medical insurance, legal protection or adequate resources for prenatal care. Low-cost maternity wards and charitable hospitals remain closed after the storm, so women have no choice but to deliver their babies in emergency rooms.

As the psychotherapist Heidi Wilson points out, even when tragic events do lead to baby booms, those don't always constitute happy endings. "Is it life-reaffirming," she asks, "if people get pregnant after tragedies – or is it the opposite? It can mean hopelessness, too. If you get pregnant out of the sense that you can't tolerate your feelings, or if you get pregnant by accident because you're self-medicating or displaced or forget contraception, then those are acts of desperation."

But when we feel vulnerable – either as individuals or as a country – we struggle back towards a sense that things are controllable, normally by changing whatever we are in a position to change. Often that means making intimate connections – whether romantic, sexual, familial or creative.

Our cultural and artistic landscapes are now full of the twin topics of 9/11 and romance. Dozens of songs, theatre pieces, movies and art exhibits came out of the rubble, from the first urban installations of love letters and missing-person posters to Art Spiegelman's masterpiece, In the Shadow of No Towers, or the polished lyrics of Bruce Springsteen's Empty Sky:

“I woke up this morning/I could barely breathe/Just an empty impression/In the bed where you used to be/I want a kiss from your lips/I want an eye for an eye/I woke up this morning to the empty sky.”

In the past five years, celebrities have come together to perform benefits, New York’s theatres have staged marathons of 9/11 works, Hollywood has contributed movies from Munich to United 93 and Snakes on a Plane. The television series Rescue Me is devoted to exploring the professional and personal lives of firemen who survived the fall of the towers, even pairing one fictional fireman with his fallen cousin’s 9/11 widow. To ignore the event or its significance is to be passé, oblivious or inappropriately callous. And since very few works of art entirely avoid sexual content, some combination of the topics begs creation.

John Cameron Mitchell offers a particularly literal example with his recent movie Shortbus. Set in a hazy, post-9/11 New York, the film is an explicit celebration of (figurative) rebirth through sex and human connection, book-ended by 9/11 and the New York City blackout of 2003. Blackout sex is notorious among New Yorkers, the myth being that without television, lights or the internet, the process of elimination of our usual pastimes left people shrugging nonchalantly into bed. 9/11 sex is a bit trickier.

“Disaster concentrates the mind in a lot of ways,” Mitchell says. “9/11 sent some people off to war, some quit their jobs to do something that had real meaning for them, others broke up with their partners, and still others were bound together. It was a little bit of that luxury wartime feeling: I don’t have that much time left in this world; why am I wasting it?”

Mitchell was in Edinburgh during 9/11, and he says he had never felt more alone or more connected to the US. After confirming the safety of his boyfriend in New York, and other loved ones, he went to a cafe where he found another American.

“People would just start talking to each other at that special time,” he says. “We were both sitting in the cafe, kind of alone, and there was sort of a sexual thing going on, but it wasn’t about getting laid: it was almost like, sexual with another American. I felt more American than I ever have. It was a strange, kind of erotic conversation we had, one that wasn’t going to lead to sex in that case, but that was very much about feeling alone in the world. You had to do everything you could not to feel alone.”

There is intimacy in a shared plight or cause, one ingredient for a brand of bonding sometimes born of activism, a love alive at volunteer and disaster sites everywhere. And 9/11 pushed people into closer proximity, giving strangers something profound in common. Even the least conventionally stable of the relationships forged then felt, in a wildly unstable moment, comforting.

As Sam, the fireman, puts it, “I heard a lot of stories of people having anonymous sex down at Ground Zero. But my affair gave me something more spiritual, a little deeper. It gave me someone who wanted to listen. I mean, I had lost my grip on reality. I had to seize the moment.”