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All the Single Ladies

RECENT YEARS HAVE SEEN AN EXPLOSION OF MALE JOBLESSNESS AND A STEEP DECLINE IN MEN'S LIFE PROSPECTS THAT HAVE DISRUPTED THE "ROMANTIC MARKET" IN WAYS THAT NARROW A MARRIAGE-MINDED WOMAN'S OPTIONS: INCREASINGLY, HER CHOICE IS BETWEEN DEADBEATS (WHOSE NUMBERS ARE RISING) AND PLAYBOYS (WHOSE POWER IS GROWING). BUT THIS STRANGE STATE OF AFFAIRS ALSO PRESENTS AN OPPORTUNITY: AS THE ECONOMY EVOLVES, IT'S TIME TO EMBRACE NEW IDEAS ABOUT ROMANCE AND FAMILY—AND TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE END OF "TRADITIONAL" MARRIAGE AS SOCIETY'S HIGHEST IDEAL.

By *Kate Bolick*



IN 2001, WHEN I was 28, I broke up with my boyfriend. Allan and I had been together for three years, and there was no good reason to end things. He was (and remains) an exceptional person, intelligent, good-looking, loyal, kind. My friends, many of whom were married or in marriage-track relationships, were bewildered. I was bewildered. To account for my behavior, all I had were two intangible yet undeniable convictions: something was missing; I wasn't ready to settle down.

The period that followed was awful. I barely ate for sobbing all the time. (A friend who suffered my company a lot that summer sent me a birthday text this past July: "A decade ago you and I were reuniting, and you were crying a lot.") I missed Allan desperately—his calm, sure voice; the sweetly fastidious way he folded his shirts. On good days, I felt secure that I'd done the right thing. Learning to

be alone would make me a better person, and eventually a better partner. On bad days, I feared I would be alone forever. Had I made the biggest mistake of my life?

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"This is clearly a mess and not one that is going to clear up with magic speed on the wedding night." By Nora Johnson

Ten years later, I occasionally ask myself the same question. Today I am 39, with too many ex-boyfriends to count and, I am told, two grim-seeming options to face down: either stay single or settle for a “good enough” mate. At this point, certainly, falling in love and getting married may be less a matter of choice than a stroke of wild great luck. A decade ago, luck didn’t even cross my mind. I’d been in love before, and I’d be in love again. This wasn’t hubris so much as naïveté; I’d had serious, long-term boyfriends since my freshman year of high school, and simply couldn’t envision my life any differently.

Well, there was a lot I didn’t know 10 years ago. The decision to end a stable relationship for abstract rather than concrete reasons (“something was missing”), I see now, is in keeping with a post-Boomer ideology that values emotional fulfillment above all else. And the elevation of independence over coupling (“I wasn’t ready to settle down”) is a second-wave feminist idea I’d acquired from my mother, who had embraced it, in part, I suspect, to correct for her own choices.

I was her first and only recruit, marching off to third grade in tiny green or blue T-shirts declaring: A WOMAN WITHOUT A MAN IS LIKE A FISH WITHOUT A BICYCLE, or: A WOMAN’S PLACE IS IN THE HOUSE—AND THE SENATE, and bellowing along to Gloria Steinem & Co.’s feminist-minded children’s album, *Free to Be ... You and Me* (released the same year Title IX was passed, also the year of my birth). Marlo Thomas and Alan Alda’s retelling of “Atalanta,” the ancient Greek myth about a fleet-footed princess who longs to travel the world before finding her prince, became the theme song of my life. Once, in high school, driving home from a family vacation, my mother turned to my boyfriend and me cuddling in the backseat and said, “Isn’t it time you two started seeing other people?” She adored Brian—he was invited on family vacations! But my future was to be one of limitless possibilities, where

getting married was something I'd do when I was ready, to a man who was in every way my equal, and she didn't want me to get tied down just yet.

This unfettered future was the promise of my time and place. I spent many a golden afternoon at my small New England liberal-arts college debating with friends the merits of leg-shaving and whether or not we'd take our husband's surname. (Even then, our concerns struck me as retro; hadn't the women's libbers tackled all this stuff already?) We took for granted that we'd spend our 20s finding ourselves, whatever that meant, and save marriage for after we'd finished graduate school and launched our careers, which of course would happen at the magical age of 30.

That we would marry, and that there would always be men we wanted to marry, we took on faith. How could we not? One of the many ways in which our lives differed from our mothers' was in the variety of our interactions with the opposite sex. Men were our classmates and colleagues, our bosses and professors, as well as, in time, our students and employees and subordinates—an entire universe of prospective friends, boyfriends, friends with benefits, and even ex-boyfriends-turned-friends. In this brave new world, boundaries were fluid, and roles constantly changing. Allan and I had met when we worked together at a magazine in Boston (full disclosure: this one), where I was an assistant and he an editor; two years later, he quit his job to follow me to New York so that I could go to graduate school and he could focus on his writing. After the worst of our breakup, we eventually found our way to a friendship so deep and sustaining that several years ago, when he got engaged, his fiancée suggested that I help him buy his wedding suit. As he and I toured through Manhattan's men's-wear ateliers, we enjoyed explaining to the confused tailors and salesclerks that no, no, *we* weren't getting married. Isn't life funny that way?

I retell that moment as an aside, as if it's a tangent to the larger story, but in a way, it is the story. In 1969, when my 25-year-old mother, a college-educated high-school teacher, married a handsome lawyer-to-be, most women her age were doing more or less the same thing. By the time she was in her mid-30s, she was raising two small children and struggling to find a satisfying career. She'd never had sex with anyone but my father. Could she have even envisioned herself on a shopping excursion with an ex-lover, never mind one who was getting married while she remained alone? And the ex-lover's fiancée being so generous and open-minded as to suggest the shopping trip to begin with?

What my mother could envision was a future in which I made my own choices. I don't think either of us could have predicted what happens when you multiply that sense of agency by an entire generation.

But what transpired next lay well beyond the powers of everybody's imagination: as women have climbed ever higher, men have been falling behind. We've arrived at the top of the staircase, finally ready to start our lives, only to discover a cavernous room at the tail end of a party, most of the men gone already, some having never shown up—and those who remain are leering by the cheese table, or are, you know, the ones you don't want to go out with.

IN THE 1990S, Stephanie Coontz, a social historian at Evergreen State College in Washington, noticed an uptick in questions from reporters and audiences asking if the institution of marriage was falling apart. She didn't think it was, and was struck by how everyone believed in some mythical Golden Age of Marriage and saw mounting divorce rates as evidence of the dissolution of this halcyon past. She decided to write a book discrediting the notion and proving that the ways in which we think about and

construct the legal union between a man and a woman have always been in flux.

What Coontz found was even more interesting than she'd originally expected. In her fascinating *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage*, she surveys 5,000 years of human habits, from our days as hunters and gatherers up until the present, showing our social arrangements to be more complex and varied than could ever seem possible. She'd long known that the Leave It to Beaver–style family model popular in the 1950s and '60s had been a flash in the pan, and like a lot of historians, she couldn't understand how people had become so attached to an idea that had developed so late and been so short-lived.

For thousands of years, marriage had been a primarily economic and political contract between two people, negotiated and policed by their families, church, and community. It took more than one person to make a farm or business thrive, and so a potential mate's skills, resources, thrift, and industriousness were valued as highly as personality and attractiveness. This held true for all classes. In the American colonies, wealthy merchants entrusted business matters to their landlocked wives while off at sea, just as sailors, vulnerable to the unpredictability of seasonal employment, relied on their wives' steady income as domestics in elite households. Two-income families were the norm.

Not until the 18th century did labor begin to be divided along a sharp line: wage-earning for the men and unpaid maintenance of household and children for the women. Coontz notes that as recently as the late 17th century, women's contributions to the family economy were openly recognized, and advice books urged husbands and wives to share domestic tasks. But as labor became separated, so did our spheres of experience—the marketplace versus the home—one founded on reason and action, the other on compassion and comfort. Not until the post-war gains of the 1950s, however, were a majority of American families able to actually afford living off a single breadwinner.

All of this was intriguing, for sure—but even more surprising to Coontz was the realization that those alarmed reporters and audiences might be onto something. Coontz still didn't think that marriage was falling apart, but she came to see that it was undergoing a transformation far more radical than anyone could have predicted, and that our current attitudes and arrangements are without precedent. “Today we are experiencing a historical revolution every bit as wrenching, far-reaching, and irreversible as the Industrial Revolution,” she wrote.

Last summer I called Coontz to talk to her about this revolution. “We are without a doubt in the midst of an extraordinary sea change,” she told me. “The transformation is momentous—immensely liberating and immensely scary. When it comes to what people actually want and expect from marriage and relationships, and how they organize their sexual and romantic lives, all the old ways have broken down.”

For starters, we keep putting marriage off. In 1960, the median age of first marriage in the U.S. was 23 for men and 20 for women; today it is 28 and 26. Today, a smaller proportion of American women in their early 30s are married than at any other point since the 1950s, if not earlier. We're also marrying less—with a significant degree of change taking place in just the past decade and a half. In 1997, 29 percent of my Gen X cohort was married; among today's Millennials that figure has dropped to 22 percent. (Compare that with 1960, when more than half of those ages 18 to 29 had already tied the knot.) These numbers reflect major attitudinal shifts. According to the Pew Research Center, a full 44

percent of Millennials and 43 percent of Gen Xers think that marriage is becoming obsolete.

Even more momentously, we no longer need husbands to have children, nor do we have to have children if we don't want to. For those who want their own biological child, and haven't found the right man, now is a good time to be alive. Biological parenthood in a nuclear family need not be the be-all and end-all of womanhood—and in fact it increasingly is not. Today 40 percent of children are born to single mothers. This isn't to say all of these women preferred that route, but the fact that so many upper-middle-class women are choosing to travel it—and that gays and lesbians (married or single) and older women are also having children, via adoption or in vitro fertilization—has helped shrink the stigma against single motherhood. Even as single motherhood is no longer a disgrace, motherhood itself is no longer compulsory. Since 1976, the percentage of women in their early 40s who have not given birth has nearly doubled. A childless single woman of a certain age is no longer automatically perceived as a barren spinster.

Of course, between the diminishing external pressure to have children and the common misperception that our biology is ours to control, some of us don't deal with the matter in a timely fashion. Like me, for instance. Do I want children? My answer is: I don't know. But somewhere along the way, I decided to not let my biology dictate my romantic life. If I find someone I really like being with, and if he and I decide we want a child together, and it's too late for me to conceive naturally, I'll consider whatever technological aid is currently available, or adopt (and if he's not open to adoption, he's not the kind of man I want to be with).

Do I realize that this further narrows my pool of prospects? Yes. Just as I am fully aware that with each passing year, I become less attractive to the men in my peer group, who have plenty of younger, more fertile women to pick from. But what can I possibly do about that? Sure, my stance here could be read as a feint, or even self-deception. By blithely deeming biology a nonissue, I'm conveniently removing myself from arguably the most significant decision a woman has to make. But that's only if you regard motherhood as the defining feature of womanhood—and I happen not to.

Foremost among the reasons for all these changes in family structure are the gains of the women's movement. Over the past half century, women have steadily gained on—and are in some ways surpassing—men in education and employment. From 1970 (seven years after the Equal Pay Act was passed) to 2007, women's earnings grew by 44 percent, compared with 6 percent for men. In 2008, women still earned just 77 cents to the male dollar—but that figure doesn't account for the difference in hours worked, or the fact that women tend to choose lower-paying fields like nursing or education. A 2010 study of single, childless urban workers between the ages of 22 and 30 found that the women actually earned 8 percent more than the men. Women are also more likely than men to go to college: in 2010, 55 percent of all college graduates ages 25 to 29 were female.

BY THEMSELVES, THE cultural and technological advances that have made my stance on childbearing plausible would be enough to reshape our understanding of the modern family—but, unfortunately, they happen to be dovetailing with another set of developments that can be summed up as: the deterioration of the male condition. As Hanna Rosin laid out in these pages last year ([“The End of Men,”](#) July/August 2010), men have been rapidly declining—in income, in educational attainment, and in future employment prospects—relative to women. As of last year, women held 51.4 percent of all

managerial and professional positions, up from 26 percent in 1980. Today women outnumber men not only in college but in graduate school; they earned 60 percent of all bachelor's and master's degrees awarded in 2010, and men are now more likely than women to hold only a high-school diploma.

No one has been hurt more by the arrival of the post-industrial economy than the stubbornly large pool of men without higher education. An analysis by Michael Greenstone, an economist at MIT, reveals that, after accounting for inflation, male median wages have fallen by 32 percent since their peak in 1973, once you account for the men who have stopped working altogether. The Great Recession accelerated this imbalance. Nearly three-quarters of the 7.5 million jobs lost in the depths of the recession were lost by men, making 2010 the first time in American history that women made up the majority of the workforce. Men have since then regained a small portion of the positions they'd lost—but they remain in a deep hole, and most of the jobs that are least likely ever to come back are in traditionally male-dominated sectors, like manufacturing and construction.

The implications are extraordinary. If, in all sectors of society, women are on the ascent, and if gender parity is actually within reach, this means that a marriage regime based on men's overwhelming economic dominance may be passing into extinction. As long as women were denied the financial and educational opportunities of men, it behooved them to “marry up”—how else would they improve their lot? (As Maureen Dowd memorably put it in her 2005 book, *Are Men Necessary?*, “Females are still programmed to look for older men with resources, while males are still programmed to look for younger women with adoring gazes.”) Now that we can pursue our own status and security, and are therefore liberated from needing men the way we once did, we are free to like them more, or at least more idiosyncratically, which is how love ought to be, isn't it?

My friend B., who is tall and gorgeous, jokes that she could have married an NBA player, but decided to go with the guy she can talk to all night—a graphic artist who comes up to her shoulder. C., the editorial force behind some of today's most celebrated novels, is a modern-day Venus de Milo—with a boyfriend 14 years her junior. Then there are those women who choose to forgo men altogether. Sonia Sotomayor isn't merely a powerful woman in a black robe—she's also a stellar example of what it can mean to exercise authority over every single aspect of your personal life. When Gloria Steinem said, in the 1970s, “We're becoming the men we wanted to marry,” I doubt even she realized the prescience of her words.

But while the rise of women has been good for everyone, the decline of males has obviously been bad news for men—and bad news for marriage. For all the changes the institution has undergone, American women as a whole have never been confronted with such a radically shrinking pool of what are traditionally considered to be “marriageable” men—those who are better educated and earn more than they do. So women are now contending with what we might call the new scarcity. Even as women have seen their range of options broaden in recent years—for instance, expanding the kind of men it's culturally acceptable to be with, and making it okay not to marry at all—the new scarcity disrupts what economists call the “marriage market” in a way that in fact narrows the available choices, making a good man harder to find than ever. At the rate things are going, the next generation's pool of good men will be significantly smaller. What does this portend for the future of the American family?

EVERY SO OFTEN, society experiences a “crisis in gender” (as some academics have called it) that

radically transforms the social landscape.

Take the years after the Civil War, when America reeled from the loss of close to 620,000 men, the majority of them from the South. An article published last year in *The Journal of Southern History* reported that in 1860, there were 104 marriageable white men for every 100 white women; in 1870, that number dropped to 87.5. A generation of Southern women found themselves facing a “marriage squeeze.” They could no longer assume that they would become wives and mothers—a terrifying prospect in an era when women relied on marriage for social acceptability and financial resources.

Instead, they were forced to ask themselves: Will I marry a man who has poor prospects (“marrying down,” in sociological parlance)? Will I marry a man much older, or much younger? Will I remain alone, a spinster? Diaries and letters from the period reveal a populace fraught with insecurity. As casualties mounted, expectations dropped, and women resigned themselves to lives without husbands, or simply lowered their standards. (In 1862, a Confederate nurse named Ada Bacot described in her diary the lamentable fashion “of a woman marrying a man younger than herself.”) Their fears were not unfounded—the mean age at first marriage did rise—but in time, approximately 92 percent of these Southern-born white women found someone to partner with. The anxious climate, however, as well as the extremely high levels of widowhood—nearly one-third of Southern white women over the age of 40 were widows in 1880—persisted.

Or take 1940s Russia, which lost some 20 million men and 7 million women to World War II. In order to replenish the population, the state instituted an aggressive pro-natalist policy to support single mothers. Mie Nakachi, a historian at Hokkaido University, in Japan, has outlined its components: mothers were given generous subsidies and often put up in special sanatoria during pregnancy and childbirth; the state day-care system expanded to cover most children from infancy; and penalties were brandished for anyone who perpetuated the stigma against conceiving out of wedlock. In 1944, a new Family Law was passed, which essentially freed men from responsibility for illegitimate children; in effect, the state took on the role of “husband.” As a result of this policy—and of the general dearth of males—men moved at will from house to house, where they were expected to do nothing and were treated like kings; a generation of children were raised without reliable fathers, and women became the “responsible” gender. This family pattern was felt for decades after the war.

Indeed, Siberia today is suffering such an acute “man shortage” (due in part to massive rates of alcoholism) that both men and women have lobbied the Russian parliament to legalize polygamy. In 2009, *The Guardian* cited Russian politicians’ claims that polygamy would provide husbands for “10 million lonely women.” In endorsing polygamy, these women, particularly those in remote rural areas without running water, may be less concerned with loneliness than with something more pragmatic: help with the chores. Caroline Humphrey, a Cambridge University anthropologist who has studied the region, said women supporters believed the legalization of polygamy would be a “godsend,” giving them “rights to a man’s financial and physical support, legitimacy for their children, and rights to state benefits.”

Our own “crisis in gender” isn’t a literal imbalance—America as a whole currently enjoys a healthy population ratio of 50.8 percent females and 49.2 percent males. But our shrinking pool of traditionally “marriageable” men is dramatically changing our social landscape, and producing

startling dynamics in the marriage market, in ways that aren't immediately apparent.

IN THEIR 1983 book, *Too Many Women? The Sex Ratio Question*, two psychologists developed what has become known as the Guttentag-Secord theory, which holds that members of the gender in shorter supply are less dependent on their partners, because they have a greater number of alternative relationships available to them; that is, they have greater “dyadic power” than members of the sex in oversupply. How this plays out, however, varies drastically between genders.

In societies where men heavily outnumber women—in what's known as a “high-sex-ratio society”—women are valued and treated with deference and respect and use their high dyadic power to create loving, committed bonds with their partners and raise families. Rates of illegitimacy and divorce are low. Women's traditional roles as mothers and homemakers are held in high esteem. In such situations, however, men also use the power of their greater numbers to limit women's economic and political strength, and female literacy and labor-force participation drop.

One might hope that in low-sex-ratio societies—where women outnumber men—women would have the social and sexual advantage. (After all, didn't the mythical all-female nation of Amazons capture men and keep them as their sex slaves?) But that's not what happens: instead, when confronted with a surplus of women, men become promiscuous and unwilling to commit to a monogamous relationship. (Which, I suppose, might explain the Amazons' need to keep men in slave quarters.) In societies with too many women, the theory holds, fewer people marry, and those who do marry do so later in life. Because men take advantage of the variety of potential partners available to them, women's traditional roles are not valued, and because these women can't rely on their partners to stick around, more turn to extrafamilial ambitions like education and career.

In 1988, the sociologists Scott J. South and Katherine Trent set out to test the Guttentag-Secord theory by analyzing data from 117 countries. Most aspects of the theory tested out. In each country, more men meant more married women, less divorce, and fewer women in the workforce. South and Trent also found that the Guttentag-Secord dynamics were more pronounced in developed rather than developing countries. In other words—capitalist men are pigs.

I kid! And yet, as a woman who spent her early 30s actively putting off marriage, I have had ample time to investigate, if you will, the prevailing attitudes of the high-status American urban male. (Granted, given my taste for brainy, creatively ambitious men—or “scrawny nerds,” as a high-school friend describes them—my sample is skewed.) My spotty anecdotal findings have revealed that, yes, in many cases, the more successful a man is (or thinks he is), the less interested he is in commitment.

Take the high-powered magazine editor who declared on our first date that he was going to spend his 30s playing the field. Or the prominent academic who announced on our fifth date that he couldn't maintain a committed emotional relationship but was very interested in a physical one. Or the novelist who, after a month of hanging out, said he had to get back out there and tomcat around, but asked if we could keep having sex anyhow, or at least just one last time. Or the writer (yes, another one) who announced after six months together that he had to end things because he “couldn't continue fending off all the sexual offers.” And those are just the honest ones.

To be sure, these men were the outliers—the majority of my personal experience has been with

commitment-minded men with whom things just didn't work out, for one reason or another. Indeed, another of my anecdotal-research discoveries is of what an ex calls "marriage o'clock"—when a man hits 35 and suddenly, desperately, wants a wife. I'll never forget the post-first-date e-mail message reading: "I wanted to marry you last night, just listening to you." Nor the 40-ish journalist who, on our second date, driving down a long country road, gripped the steering wheel and asked, "Are you The One? Are you The One?" (Can you imagine a woman getting away with this kind of behavior?) Like zealous lepidopterists, they swoop down with their butterfly nets, fingers aimed for the thorax, certain that just because they are ready for marriage and children, I must be, too.

But the non-committers are out there in growing force. If dating and mating is in fact a marketplace—and of course it is—today we're contending with a new "dating gap," where marriage-minded women are increasingly confronted with either deadbeats or players. For evidence, we don't need to look to the past, or abroad—we have two examples right in front of us: the African American community, and the college campus.

IN AUGUST I traveled to Wilkesburg, Pennsylvania, a small, predominantly African American borough on the eastern edge of Pittsburgh. A half-century ago, it was known as "The Holy City" for its preponderance of churches. Today, the cobblestoned streets are lined with defeated clapboard houses that look as if the spirit's been sucked right out of them.

I was there to spend the afternoon with Denean, a 34-year-old nurse who was living in one such house with three of her four children (the eldest is 19 and lived across town) and, these days, a teenage niece. Denean is pretty and slender, with a wry, deadpan humor. For 10 years she worked for a health-care company, but she was laid off in January. She is twice divorced; no two of her children share a father. In February, when she learned (on Facebook) that her second child, 15-year-old Ronicka, was pregnant, Denean slumped down on her enormous slate-gray sofa and didn't get up for 10 hours.

"I had done everything I could to make sure she didn't end up like me, and now this," she told me.

It was a clear, warm day, and we were clustered on the front porch—Denean, Ronicka, and I, along with Denean's niece, Keira, 18, and Denean's friend Chantal, 28, a single mother whose daughter goes to day care with Denean's youngest. The affection between these four high-spirited women was light and infectious, and they spoke knowingly about the stigmas they're up against. "That's right," Denean laughed, "we're your standard bunch of single black moms!"

Given the crisis in gender it has suffered through for the past half century, the African American population might as well be a separate nation. An astonishing 70 percent of black women are unmarried, and they are more than twice as likely as white women to remain that way. Those black women who do marry are more likely than any other group of women to "marry down." This is often chalked up to high incarceration rates—in 2009, of the nearly 1.5 million men in prison, 39 percent were black—but it's more than that. Across all income levels, black men have dropped far behind black women professionally and educationally; women with college degrees outnumber men 2-to-1. In August, the unemployment rate among black men age 20 or older exceeded 17 percent.

In his book, *Is Marriage for White People?*, Ralph Richard Banks, a law professor at Stanford, argues that the black experience of the past half century is a harbinger for society at large. "When you're

writing about black people, white people may assume it's unconnected to them," he told me when I got him on the phone. It might seem easy to dismiss Banks's theory that what holds for blacks may hold for nonblacks, if only because no other group has endured such a long history of racism, and racism begets singular ills. But the reality is that what's happened to the black family is already beginning to happen to the white family. In 1950, 64 percent of African American women were married—roughly the same percentage as white women. By 1965, African American marriage rates had declined precipitously, and Daniel Patrick Moynihan was famously declaring black families a “tangle of pathology.” Black marriage rates have fallen drastically in the years since—but then, so have white marriage rates. In 1965, when Moynihan wrote with such concern about the African American family, fewer than 25 percent of black children were born out of wedlock; in 2011, considerably more than 25 percent of white children are.

This erosion of traditional marriage and family structure has played out most dramatically among low-income groups, both black and white. According to the sociologist William Julius Wilson, inner-city black men struggled badly in the 1970s, as manufacturing plants shut down or moved to distant suburbs. These men naturally resented their downward mobility, and had trouble making the switch to service jobs requiring a very different style of self-presentation. The joblessness and economic insecurity that resulted created a host of problems, and made many men altogether unmarriageable. Today, as manufacturing jobs disappear nationwide (American manufacturing shed about a third of its jobs during the first decade of this century), the same phenomenon may be under way, but on a much larger scale.

Just as the decline of marriage in the black underclass augured the decline of marriage in the white underclass, the decline of marriage in the black middle class has prefigured the decline of marriage in the white middle class. In the 1990s, the author Terry McMillan climbed the best-seller list (and box-office charts) with novels like *Waiting to Exhale* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, which provided incisive glimpses of life and frustrated romance among middle-class black women, where the prospect of marrying a black man often seemed more or less hopeless. (As she writes in *Waiting to Exhale*: “[Successful black men have] taken these stupid statistics about us to heart and are having the time of their lives. They do not hold themselves accountable to anybody for anything, and they're getting away with murder ... They lie to us without a conscience, they fuck as many of us at a time as they want to.”) Today, with the precipitous economic and social decline of men of all races, it's easy to see why women of any race would feel frustrated by their romantic prospects. (Is it any wonder marriage rates have fallen?) Increasingly, this extends to the upper-middle class, too: early last year, a study by the Pew Research Center reported that professionally successful, college-educated women were confronted with a shrinking pool of like-minded marriage prospects.

“If you're a successful black man in New York City, one of the most appealing and sought-after men around, your options are plentiful,” Banks told me. “Why marry if you don't have to?” (Or, as he quotes one black man in his book, “If you have four quality women you're dating and they're in a rotation, who's going to rush into a marriage?”) Banks's book caused a small stir by suggesting that black women should expand their choices by marrying outside their race—a choice that the women of Terry McMillan's novels would have found at best unfortunate and at worst an abhorrent betrayal. As it happens, the father of Chantal's child is white, and Denean has dated across the color line. But in any event, the decline in the economic prospects of white men means that marrying outside their race can

expand African American women's choices only so far. Increasingly, the new dating gap—where women are forced to choose between deadbeats and players—trumps all else, in all socioeconomic brackets.

THE EARLY 1990S witnessed the dawn of “hookup culture” at universities, as colleges stopped acting in loco parentis, and undergraduates, heady with freedom, started throwing themselves into a frenzy of one-night stands. Depending on whom you ask, this has either liberated young women from being ashamed of their sexual urges, or forced them into a promiscuity they didn't ask for. Young men, apparently, couldn't be happier.

According to Robert H. Frank, an economist at Cornell who has written on supply and demand in the marriage market, this shouldn't be surprising. When the available women significantly outnumber men, which is the case on many campuses today, “courtship behavior changes in the direction of what men want,” he told me recently. If women greatly outnumber men, he says, social norms against casual sex will weaken. He qualifies this by explaining that no matter how unbalanced the overall sex ratio may become (in either direction), “there will always be specific men and women who are in high demand as romantic partners—think Penélope Cruz and George Clooney.” But even Cruz and Clooney, Frank says, will be affected by changing mores. The likelihood increases “that even a highly sought-after woman will engage in casual sex, even though she would have sufficient market power to defy prevailing norms.” If a woman with the “market power” of a Penélope Cruz is affected by this, what are the rest of us to do?

Whether the sexual double standard is cultural or biological, it's finding traction in the increasingly lopsided sexual marketplace that is the American college campus, where women outnumber men, 57 percent to 43 percent. In 2010, *The New York Times* ran a much-discussed article chronicling this phenomenon. “If a guy is not getting what he wants, he can quickly and abruptly go to the next one, because there are so many of us,” a University of Georgia co-ed told *The Times*, reporting that at college parties and bars, she will often see two guys being fawned over by six provocatively dressed women. The alternative is just to give up on dating and romance because “there are no guys,” as a University of North Carolina student put it.

Last year, a former management consultant named Susan Walsh tried to dig a little deeper. She applied what economists call the Pareto principle—the idea that for many events, roughly 20 percent of the causes create 80 percent of the effects—to the college dating market, and concluded that only 20 percent of the men (those considered to have the highest status) are having 80 percent of the sex, with only 20 percent of the women (those with the greatest sexual willingness); the remaining 80 percent, male and female, sit out the hookup dance altogether. (Surprisingly, a 2007 study commissioned by the Justice Department suggested that male virgins outnumber female virgins on campus.) As Walsh puts it, most of the leftover men are “have nots” in terms of access to sex, and most of the women—both those who are hooking up and those who are not—are “have nots” in terms of access to male attention that leads to commitment. (Of course, plenty of women are perfectly happy with casual, no-strings sex, but they are generally considered to be in the minority.) Yet the myth of everyone having sex all the time is so pervasive that it's assumed to be true, which distorts how young men and women relate. “I think the 80/20 principle is the key to understanding the situation we find ourselves in—one in which casual sex is the cultural norm, despite the fact that most people would actually prefer something quite

different,” Walsh told me.

I became aware of Walsh this past summer when I happened upon her blog, *HookingUpSmart.com*, and lost an evening to one of those late-night Internet binges, each link leading to the next, drawn into a boy-girl conversation to end all boy-girl conversations. A frumpy beige Web-site palette and pragmatic voice belie a refreshingly frank, at times even raunchy, dialogue; postings in the comments section can swell into the high hundreds—interestingly, the majority of them from men. I felt as if I’d stumbled into the online equivalent of a (progressive) school nurse’s office.

A Wharton M.B.A. and stay-at-home mother of two, Walsh began her career as a relationship adviser turned blogger six years ago, when her daughter, then a student at an all-girls high school, started dating. She began seeking counsel from Walsh, and liked what she heard, as did her friends when she told them; in time, the girls were regularly gathering around Walsh’s kitchen table to pick her brain. Soon enough, a childhood friend’s daughter, a sophomore at Boston University, started coming over with her friends. Walsh started thinking of these ’70s-style rap sessions as her own informal “focus groups,” the members of one still in high school, those of the other in college, but all of them having similar experiences. In 2008, after the younger group had left home, Walsh started the blog so they could all continue the conversation.

In July, I traveled to Walsh’s home, a handsome 19th-century Victorian hidden behind tall hedges in a quiet corner of Brookline, Massachusetts, to sit in on one of these informal roundtables. I came of age with hookup culture, but not of it, having continued through college my high-school habit of serial long-term relationships, and I wanted to hear from the front lines. What would these sexual buccaneers be like? Bold and provocative? Worn-out and embittered?

When Walsh opened the door, I could immediately see why young women find her so easy to talk to; her brunette bob frames bright green eyes and a warm, easy smile. Once everyone had arrived—five recent college graduates, all of them white and upper middle class, some employed and some still looking for work, all unmarried—we sat down to a dinner of chicken and salad in Walsh’s high-ceilinged, wood-paneled dining room to weigh in on one of the evening’s topics: man whores.

“How do you all feel about guys who get with a ton of girls?” Walsh asked. “Do you think they have ‘trash dick’?” She’d run across this term on the Internet.

One of Walsh’s pet observations pertains to what she calls the “soft harem,” where high-status men (i.e., the football captain) maintain an “official” girlfriend as well as a rotating roster of neo-concubines, who service him in the barroom bathroom or wherever the beer is flowing. “There used to be more assortative mating,” she explained, “where a five would date a five. But now every woman who is a six and above wants the hottest guy on campus, and she can have him—for one night.”

As I’d expected, these denizens of hookup culture were far more sexually experienced than I’d been at their age. Some had had many partners, and they all joked easily about sexual positions and penis size (“I was like, ‘That’s a pinkie, not a penis!’”) with the offhand knowledge only familiarity can breed. Most of them said that though they’d had a lot of sex, none of it was particularly sensual or exciting. It appears that the erotic promises of the 1960s sexual revolution have run aground on the shoals of changing sex ratios, where young women and men come together in fumbling, drunken couplings

fueled less by lust than by a vague sense of social conformity. (I can't help wondering: Did this de-eroticization of sex encourage the rise of pornography? Or is it that pornography endows the inexperienced with a toolbox of socially sanctioned postures and tricks, ensuring that one can engage in what amounts to a public exchange according to a pre-approved script?) For centuries, women's sexuality was repressed by a patriarchal marriage system; now what could be an era of heady carnal delights is stifled by a new form of male entitlement, this one fueled by demographics.

Most striking to me was the innocence of these young women. Of these attractive and vivacious females, only two had ever had a "real" boyfriend—as in, a mutually exclusive and satisfying relationship rather than a series of hookups—and for all their technical know-how, they didn't seem to be any wiser than I'd been at their age. This surprised me; I'd assumed that growing up in a jungle would give them a more matter-of-fact or at least less conventional worldview. Instead, when I asked if they wanted to get married when they grew up, and if so, at what age, to a one they answered "yes" and "27 or 28."

"That's only five or six years from now," I pointed out. "Doesn't that seem—not far off?"

They nodded.

"Take a look at me," I said. "I've never been married, and I have no idea if I ever will be. There's a good chance that this will be your reality, too. Does that freak you out?"

Again they nodded.

"I don't think I can bear doing this for that long!" whispered one, with undisguised alarm.

I REMEMBER EXPERIENCING THAT same panicked exhaustion around the time I turned 36, at which point I'd been in the dating game for longer than that alarmed 22-year-old had, and I wanted out. (Is there an expiration date on the fun, running-around period of being single captured so well by movies and television?) I'd spent the past year with a handsome, commitment-minded man, and these better qualities, along with our having several interests in common, allowed me to overlook our many thundering incompatibilities. In short, I was creeping up on marriage o'clock, and I figured, Enough already—I had to make something work. When it became clear that sheer will wasn't going to save us, I went to bed one night and had a rare dream about my (late) mother.

"Mom," I said. "Things aren't working out. I'm breaking up with him tomorrow."

"Oh, honey," she said. "I am so sorry. We were rooting for this one, weren't we? When something doesn't work, though, what can you do?"

This, I found irritating. "Mom. I am getting old."

"Pwhah!" she scoffed. "You're fine. You've got six more years."

Six more years. I woke up. In six more years, I'd be 42. All this time, I'd been regarding my single life as a temporary interlude, one I had to make the most of—or swiftly terminate, depending on my mood. Without intending to, by actively rejecting our pop-culture depictions of the single woman—you know the ones—I'd been terrorizing myself with their specters. But now that 35 had come and gone, and with yet another relationship up in flames, all bets were off. It might never happen. Or maybe not until 42.

Or 70, for that matter. Was that so bad? If I stopped seeing my present life as provisional, perhaps I'd be a little ... happier. Perhaps I could actually get down to the business of what it means to be a real single woman.

It's something a lot of people might want to consider, given that now, by choice or by circumstance, more and more of us (women and men), across the economic spectrum, are spending more years of our adult lives unmarried than ever before. The numbers are striking: The Census Bureau has reported that in 2010, the proportion of married households in America dropped to a record low of 48 percent. Fifty percent of the adult population is single (compared with 33 percent in 1950)—and that portion is very likely to keep growing, given the variety of factors that contribute to it. The median age for getting married has been rising, and for those who are affluent and educated, that number climbs even higher. (Indeed, Stephanie Coontz told me that an educated white woman of 40 is more than twice as likely to marry in the next decade as a less educated woman of the same age.) Last year, nearly twice as many single women bought homes as did single men. And yet, what are our ideas about single people? Perverted misanthropes, crazy cat ladies, dating-obsessed shoe shoppers, etc.—all of them some form of terribly lonely. (In her 2008 memoir, *Epilogue*, a 70-something Anne Roiphe muses: “There are millions of women who live alone in America. Some of them are widows. Some of them are divorced and between connections, some of them are odd, loners who prefer to keep their habits undisturbed.” That's a pretty good representation of her generation's notions of unmarried women.)

Famous Bolick family story: When I was a little girl, my mother and I went for a walk and ran into her friend Regina. They talked for a few minutes, caught up. I gleaned from their conversation that Regina wasn't married, and as soon as we made our goodbyes, I bombarded my mother with questions. “No husband? How could that be? She's a grown-up! Grown-ups have husbands!” My mother explained that not all grown-ups get married. “Then who opens the pickle jar?” (I was 5.)

Thus began my lifelong fascination with the idea of the single woman. There was my second-grade teacher, Mrs. Connors, who was, I believe, a former nun, or seemed like one. There was the director of my middle-school gifted-and-talented program, who struck me as wonderfully remote and original. (Was she a lesbian?) There was a college poetry professor, a brilliant single woman in her 40s who had never been married, rather glamorously, I thought. Once, I told her I wanted to be just like her. “Good God,” she said. “I've made a mess of my life. Don't look to me.” Why did they all seem so mysterious, even marginalized?

Back when I believed my mother had a happy marriage—and she did for quite a long time, really—she surprised me by confiding that one of the most blissful moments of her life had been when she was 21, driving down the highway in her VW Beetle, with nowhere to go except wherever she wanted to be. “I had my own car, my own job, all the clothes I wanted,” she remembered wistfully. Why couldn't she have had more of that?

When I embarked on my own sojourn as a single woman in New York City—talk about a timeworn cliché!—it wasn't dating I was after. I was seeking something more vague and, in my mind, more noble, having to do with finding my own way, and independence. And I found all that. Early on, I sometimes ached, watching so many friends pair off—and without a doubt there has been loneliness. At times I've envied my married friends for being able to rely on a spouse to help make difficult decisions, or even

just to carry the bills for a couple of months. And yet I'm perhaps inordinately proud that I've never depended on anyone to pay my way (today that strikes me as a quaint achievement, but there you have it). Once, when my father consoled me, with the best of intentions, for being so unlucky in love, I bristled. I'd gotten to know so many interesting men, and experienced so much. Wasn't that a form of luck?

All of which is to say that the single woman is very rarely seen for who she is—whatever that might be—by others, or even by the single woman herself, so thoroughly do most of us internalize the stigmas that surround our status.

Bella DePaulo, a Harvard-trained social psychologist who is now a visiting professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara, is America's foremost thinker and writer on the single experience. In 2005, she coined the word singlism, in an article she published in *Psychological Inquiry*. Intending a parallel with terms like racism and sexism, DePaulo says singlism is "the stigmatizing of adults who are single [and] includes negative stereotyping of singles and discrimination against singles." In her 2006 book, *Singled Out*, she argues that the complexities of modern life, and the fragility of the institution of marriage, have inspired an unprecedented glorification of coupling. (Laura Kipnis, the author of *Against Love*, has called this "the tyranny of two.") This marriage myth—"matrimania," DePaulo calls it—proclaims that the only route to happiness is finding and keeping one all-purpose, all-important partner who can meet our every emotional and social need. Those who don't have this are pitied. Those who don't want it are seen as threatening. Singlism, therefore, "serves to maintain cultural beliefs about marriage by derogating those whose lives challenge those beliefs."

In July, I visited DePaulo in the improbably named Summerland, California, which, as one might hope, is a charming outpost overlooking a glorious stretch of the Pacific Ocean. DePaulo, a warm, curious woman in her late 50s, describes herself as "single at heart"—meaning that she's always been single and always will be, and that's just the way she wants it. Over lunch at a seafood restaurant, she discussed how the cultural fixation on the couple blinds us to the full web of relationships that sustain us on a daily basis. We are far more than whom we are (or aren't) married to: we are also friends, grandparents, colleagues, cousins, and so on. To ignore the depth and complexities of these networks is to limit the full range of our emotional experiences.

Personally, I've been wondering if we might be witnessing the rise of the aunt, based on the simple fact that my brother's two small daughters have brought me emotional rewards I never could have anticipated. I have always been very close with my family, but welcoming my nieces into the world has reminded me anew of what a gift it is to care deeply, even helplessly, about another. There are many ways to know love in this world.

This is not to question romantic love itself. Rather, we could stand to examine the ways in which we think about love; and the changing face of marriage is giving us a chance to do this. "Love comes from the motor of the mind, the wanting part that craves that piece of chocolate, or a work promotion," Helen Fisher, a biological anthropologist and perhaps this country's leading scholar of love, told me. That we want is enduring; what we want changes as culture does.

OUR CULTURAL FIXATION on the couple is actually a relatively recent development. Though "pair-bonding" has been around for 3.5 million years, according to Helen Fisher, the hunters and gatherers

evolved in egalitarian groups, with men and women sharing the labor equally. Both left the camp in the morning; both returned at day's end with their bounty. Children were raised collaboratively. As a result, women and men were sexually and socially more or less equals; divorce (or its institution-of-marriage-preceding equivalent) was common. Indeed, Fisher sees the contemporary trend for marriage between equals as us “moving forward into deep history”—back to the social and sexual relationships of millions of years ago.

It wasn't until we moved to farms, and became an agrarian economy centered on property, that the married couple became the central unit of production. As Stephanie Coontz explains, by the Middle Ages, the combination of the couple's economic interdependence and the Catholic Church's success in limiting divorce had created the tradition of getting married to one person and staying that way until death do us part. It was in our personal and collective best interest that the marriage remain intact if we wanted to keep the farm afloat.

That said, being too emotionally attached to one's spouse was discouraged; neighbors, family, and friends were valued just as highly in terms of practical and emotional support. Even servants and apprentices shared the family table, and sometimes slept in the same room with the couple who headed the household, Coontz notes. Until the mid-19th century, the word love was used to describe neighborly and familial feelings more often than to describe those felt toward a mate, and same-sex friendships were conducted with what we moderns would consider a romantic intensity. When honeymoons first started, in the 19th century, the newlyweds brought friends and family along for the fun.

But as the 19th century progressed, and especially with the sexualization of marriage in the early 20th century, these older social ties were drastically devalued in order to strengthen the bond between the husband and wife—with contradictory results. As Coontz told me, “When a couple's relationship is strong, a marriage can be more fulfilling than ever. But by overloading marriage with more demands than any one individual can possibly meet, we unduly strain it, and have fewer emotional systems to fall back on if the marriage falters.”

Some even believe that the pair bond, far from strengthening communities (which is both the prevailing view of social science and a central tenet of social conservatism), weakens them, the idea being that a married couple becomes too consumed with its own tiny nation of two to pay much heed to anyone else. In 2006, the sociologists Naomi Gerstel and Natalia Sarkisian published a paper concluding that unlike singles, married couples spend less time keeping in touch with and visiting their friends and extended family, and are less likely to provide them with emotional and practical support. They call these “greedy marriages.” I can see how couples today might be driven to form such isolated nations—it's not easy in this age of dual-career families and hyper-parenting to keep the wheels turning, never mind having to maintain outside relationships as well. And yet we continue to rank this arrangement above all else!

Now that women are financially independent, and marriage is an option rather than a necessity, we are free to pursue what the British sociologist Anthony Giddens termed the “pure relationship,” in which intimacy is sought in and of itself and not solely for reproduction. (If I may quote the eminently quotable Gloria Steinem again: “I can't mate in captivity.”) Certainly, in a world where women can

create their own social standing, concepts like “marrying up” and “marrying down” evaporate—to the point where the importance of conventional criteria such as age and height, Coontz says, has fallen to an all-time low (no pun intended) in the United States.

Everywhere I turn, I see couples upending existing norms and power structures, whether it’s women choosing to be with much younger men, or men choosing to be with women more financially successful than they are (or both at once). My friend M., a successful filmmaker, fell in love with her dog walker, a man 12 years her junior; they stayed together for three years, and are best friends today. As with many such relationships, I didn’t even know about their age difference until I became a member of their not-so-secret society. At a rooftop party last September, a man 11 years my junior asked me out for dinner; I didn’t take him seriously for one second—and then the next thing I knew, we were driving to his parents’ house for Christmas. (When I mentioned what I considered to be this scandalous age difference to the actress Julianne Moore after a newspaper interview that had turned chatty and intimate, she e-mailed me to say, “In terms of scandalously young—I have been with my 9-years-younger husband for 15 years now—so there you go!”) The same goes for couples where the woman is taller. Dalton Conley, the dean for the social sciences at New York University, recently analyzed data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics and found a 40 percent increase, between 1986 and 2003, in men who are shorter than their wives. (Most research confirms casual observation: when it comes to judging a prospective mate on the basis of looks, women are the more lenient gender.)

Perhaps true to conservative fears, the rise of gay marriage has helped heterosexuals think more creatively about their own conventions. News stories about polyamory, “ethical nonmonogamy,” and the like pop up with increasing frequency. Gay men have traditionally had a more permissive attitude toward infidelity; how will this influence the straight world? Coontz points out that two of the hallmarks of contemporary marriage are demands for monogamy on an equal basis, and candor. “Throughout history, there was a fairly high tolerance of [men’s] extramarital flings, with women expected to look the other way,” she said. “Now we have to ask: Can we be more monogamous? Or understand that flings happen?” (She’s also noticed that an unexpected consequence of people’s marrying later is that they skip right over the cheating years.) If we’re ready to rethink, as individuals, the ways in which we structure our arrangements, are we ready to do this as a society?

In her new book, *Unhitched*, Judith Stacey, a sociologist at NYU, surveys a variety of unconventional arrangements, from gay parenthood to polygamy to—in a mesmerizing case study—the Mosuo people of southwest China, who eschew marriage and visit their lovers only under cover of night. “The sooner and better our society comes to terms with the inescapable variety of intimacy and kinship in the modern world, the fewer unhappy families it will generate,” she writes.

The matrilineal Mosuo are worth pausing on, as a reminder of how complex family systems can be, and how rigid ours are—and also as an example of women’s innate libidinousness, which is routinely squelched by patriarchal systems, as Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá point out in their own analysis of the Mosuo in their 2010 book, *Sex at Dawn*. For centuries, the Mosuo have lived in households that revolve around the women: the mothers preside over their children and grandchildren, and brothers take paternal responsibility for their sisters’ offspring.

Sexual relations are kept separate from family. At night, a Mosuo woman invites her lover to visit her

babahuago (flower room); the assignation is called sese (walking). If she'd prefer he not sleep over, he'll retire to an outer building (never home to his sisters). She can take another lover that night, or a different one the next, or sleep every single night with the same man for the rest of her life—there are no expectations or rules. As Cai Hua, a Chinese anthropologist, explains, these relationships, which are known as *açia*, are founded on each individual's autonomy, and last only as long as each person is in the other's company. Every goodbye is taken to be the end of the *açia* relationship, even if it resumes the following night. "There is no concept of *açia* that applies to the future," Hua says.

America has a rich history of its own sexually alternative utopias, from the 19th-century Oneida Community (which encouraged postmenopausal women to introduce teenage males to sex) to the celibate Shakers, but real change can seldom take hold when economic forces remain static. The extraordinary economic flux we're in is what makes this current moment so distinctive.

IN THE MONTHS leading to my breakup with Allan, my problem, as I saw it, lay in wanting two incompatible states of being—autonomy and intimacy—and this struck me as selfish and juvenile; part of growing up, I knew, was making trade-offs. I was too ashamed to confide in anyone, and as far as I could tell, mine was an alien predicament anyhow; apparently women everywhere wanted exactly what I possessed: a good man; a marriage-in-the-making; a "we."

So I started searching out stories about those who had gone off-script with unconventional arrangements. I had to page back through an entire century, down past the riot grrrls, then the women's libbers, then the flappers, before I found people who talked about love in a way I could relate to: the free-thinking adventurers of early-1900s Greenwich Village. Susan Glaspell, Neith Boyce, Edna St. Vincent Millay—they investigated the limits and possibilities of intimacy with a naive audacity, and a touching decorum, that I found familiar and comforting. I am not a bold person. To read their essays and poems was to perform a shy ideological striptease to the sweetly insistent warble of a gramophone.

"We are not designed, as a species, to raise children in nuclear families," Christopher Ryan, one of the *Sex at Dawn* co-authors, told me over the telephone late last summer. Women who try to be "supermoms," whether single or married, holding down a career and running a household simultaneously, are "swimming upstream." Could we have a modernization of the Mosuo, Ryan mused, with several women and their children living together—perhaps in one of the nation's many foreclosed and abandoned McMansions—bonding, sharing expenses, having a higher quality of life? "In every society where women have power—whether humans or primates—the key is female bonding," he added.

Certainly letting men off the hook isn't progress. But as we talked, I couldn't help thinking about the women in Wilkesburg—an inadvertent all-female coalition—and how in spite of it all, they derived so much happiness from each other's company. That underprivileged communities are often forced into matrilineal arrangements in the absence of reliable males has been well documented (by the University of Virginia sociologist W. Bradford Wilcox, among others), and I am not in any way romanticizing these circumstances. Nor am I arguing that we should discourage marriage—it's a tried-and-true model for raising successful children in a modern economy. (Evidence suggests that American children who grow up amidst the disorder that is common to single-parent homes tend to struggle.) But we would do well to study, and to endorse, alternative family arrangements that might provide strength and stability

to children as they grow up. I am curious to know what could happen if these de facto female support systems of the sort I saw in Wilkesburg were recognized as an adaptive response, even an evolutionary stage, that women could be proud to build and maintain.

I definitely noticed an increase in my own contentment when I began to develop and pay more attention to friendships with women who, like me, have never been married. Their worldviews feel relaxingly familiar, and give me the space to sort through my own ambivalence. That's an abstract benefit. More concretely, there's what my brother terms our "immigrant bucket brigade"—my peer group's habit of jumping to the ready to help each other with matters practical and emotional. This isn't to say that my married friends aren't as supportive—some of my best friends are married!—it's just that, with families of their own, they can't be as available.

Indeed, my single friends housed me as I flew around the world to research this article; by the end, I had my own little (unwritten) monograph on the very rich lives of the modern-day single woman. Deb gave me the use of her handsome mid-century apartment in Chelsea when she vacated town for a meditation retreat; Courtney bequeathed her charming Brooklyn aerie while she traveled alone through Italy; Catherine put me up at her rambling Cape Cod summer house; when my weekend at Maria's place on Shelter Island unexpectedly ballooned into two weeks, she set me up in my own little writing room; when a different Courtney needed to be nursed through an operation, I stayed for four days to write paragraphs between changing bandages.

The sense of community we create for one another puts me in mind of the 19th-century availability of single-sex hotels and boarding houses, which were a necessity when women were discouraged from living alone, and then became an albatross when they finally weren't. So last year, inspired by visions of New York's "women only" Barbizon Hotel in its heyday, I persuaded my childhood friend Willamain to take over the newly available apartment in my building in Brooklyn Heights. We've known each other since we were 5, and I thought it would be a great comfort to us both to spend our single lives just a little less atomized. It's worked. These days, I think of us as a mini-neo-single-sex residential hotel of two. We collect one another's mail when necessary, share kitchenware, tend to one another when sick, fall into long conversations when we least expect it—all the benefits of dorm living, without the gross bathrooms.

Could we create something bigger, and more intentional? In August, I flew to Amsterdam to visit an iconic medieval bastion of single-sex living. The Begijnhof was founded in the mid-12th century as a religious all-female collective devoted to taking care of the sick. The women were not nuns, but nor were they married, and they were free to cancel their vows and leave at any time. Over the ensuing centuries, very little has changed. Today the religious trappings are gone (though there is an active chapel on site), and to be accepted, an applicant must be female and between the ages of 30 and 65, and commit to living alone. The institution is beloved by the Dutch, and gaining entry isn't easy. The waiting list is as long as the turnover is low.

I'd heard about the Begijnhof through a friend, who once knew an American woman who lived there, named Ellen. I contacted an old boyfriend who now lives in Amsterdam to see if he knew anything about it (thank you, Facebook), and he put me in touch with an American friend who has lived there for 12 years: the very same Ellen.

The Begijnhof is big—106 apartments in all—but even so, I nearly pedaled right past it on my rented bicycle, hidden as it is in plain sight: a walled enclosure in the middle of the city, set a meter lower than its surroundings. Throngs of tourists sped past toward the adjacent shopping district. In the wall is a heavy, rounded wood door. I pulled it open and walked through.

Inside was an enchanted garden: a modest courtyard surrounded by classic Dutch houses of all different widths and heights. Roses and hydrangea lined walkways and peeked through gates. The sounds of the city were indiscernible. As I climbed the narrow, twisting stairs to Ellen’s sun-filled garret, she leaned over the railing in welcome—white hair cut in a bob, smiling red-painted lips. A writer and producer of avant-garde radio programs, Ellen, 60, has a chic, minimal style that carries over into her little two-floor apartment, which can’t be more than 300 square feet. Neat and efficient in the way of a ship, the place has large windows overlooking the courtyard and rooftops below. To be there is like being held in a nest.

We drank tea and talked, and Ellen rolled her own cigarettes and smoked thoughtfully. She talked about how the Dutch don’t regard being single as peculiar in any way—people are as they are. She feels blessed to live at the Begijnhof and doesn’t ever want to leave. Save for one or two friends on the premises, socially she holds herself aloof; she has no interest in being ensnared by the gossip on which a few of the residents thrive—but she loves knowing that they’re there. Ellen has a partner, but since he’s not allowed to spend the night, they split time between her place and his nearby home. “If you want to live here, you have to adjust, and you have to be creative,” Ellen said. (When I asked her if starting a relationship was a difficult decision after so many years of pleasurable solitude, she looked at me meaningfully and said, “It wasn’t a choice—it was a certainty.”)

When an American woman gives you a tour of her house, she leads you through all the rooms. Instead, this expat showed me her favorite window views: from her desk, from her (single) bed, from her reading chair. As I perched for a moment in each spot, trying her life on for size, I thought about the years I’d spent struggling against the four walls of my apartment, and I wondered what my mother’s life would have been like had she lived and divorced my father. A room of one’s own, for each of us. A place where single women can live and thrive as themselves.

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