

# Introduction

So you've always thought you'd get married. And since you read the papers, watch the news and reality shows, and take calls from your mother, you're pretty worried about the fact that you haven't walked down the aisle yet. The self-help shelves at your local bookstore are crammed with alarmist titles like *Stop Getting Dumped* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes but Gentlemen Marry Brunettes*. Voices on all sides are telling you to hurry the hell up, and while you're at it, don't act too desperate. You've gotten to the point where you think you're not being proactive enough. You may be wondering if it's time to dig deep and buy *Find a Husband After 35 Using What I Learned at Harvard Business School: A Simple 15-Step Action Program* so you can follow the author's plan for finding a mate. (It's a plan that *Publisher's Weekly* called "time consuming, financially taxing and sometimes nearly humiliating,"<sup>1</sup> but don't let that deter you.) A little voice inside you is peeping, "Maybe you've missed your chance."

To put it mildly, you're edgy.

## THE PRESSURE TO MARRY

Sure, you've got your college diploma, maybe a graduate degree or two, and even a satisfying career. But all you've achieved is nothing without a man, according to Wendy L. Walsh, who recounts her sad, manless existence in *The*

*Boyfriend Test: How to Evaluate His Potential Before You Lose Your Heart:*

I was in acute pain, though on the outside you couldn't see that. I was a reporter and host on the national magazine show *Extra*. I was developing my own television production company. I was helping to run a charity. I was chairing a women's investment group, and I was buying and remodeling my first home. . . . [But t]his hectic schedule was just a mask, a way to keep busy, to hold back my tears.<sup>2</sup>

In the old days it seemed so easy. Mom married Dad long before her thirtieth birthday, and all her sisters married young too. Fast-forward a few decades and here you are, wondering, "If I'm so wonderful why am I still single?" And there's your question, right there on the bookstore shelf, now the title of a self-help book by Susan Page (the subtitle is *Ten Strategies That Will Change Your Life Forever*)—one of the plethora aimed at single-and-looking (read "desperate") women.

It seemed easier in the past, in part because matchmaking was once society's business, writes social historian Barbara Dafoe Whitehead in *Why There Are No Good Men Left*. Now individuals are expected to shoulder the burden. Where college was once as much about getting your MRS degree as an education, she says, it's now solely about preparing women for financial independence. But women are up to the task at hand. According to Whitehead, we're rolling up our sleeves and "taking a more focused, organized, professional approach to the search for love. . . ."<sup>3</sup>

Whitehead's grimace-and-bear-it approach to finding your ultimate mate may sound practical, but why does dating have to feel so much like crisis management? My answer: It doesn't have to.

## MOVING FROM BREAKING UP TO HAVING A REALLY GOOD TIME

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The success of my first book, *There Goes The Bride*, made me the breakup expert from New York to London. Now the men I meet have two questions for me: Do I believe in love? And do they run the risk of turning up in one of my books? (Yes and yes. But don't worry—everyone gets pseudonyms in my books.)

I do believe in love, though I can understand how the label of “breakup expert” could conjure up thoughts of a woman laughing devilishly every time she hears about another breakup, whether of good friends or some Hollywood power couple.

I do believe in love, and yet here I am, “alone” and happy. I'm thirty-three, “getting on” to some. I'm running the terrible risk of dying alone, as one conservative marriage expert actually told me. So how can I be so insouciant?

I've got a wager for you. I'm willing to bet that my chances of getting married in the next five years and of having a deep, enduring relationship with that still-unknown man are just as good as if not better than yours, if you're one of the millions of women standing in the self-help aisle freaking out. And I know without a shadow of a doubt that I'm enjoying myself more. You're taking notes in the margins of

*The Best Advice on Finding Mr. Right* and *The Rules*, and I'm living my life. You're glued to scary media reports to validate your feelings about being unmarried. You're looking to "experts" to stop the anxiety by telling you how to get married.

And I'm here to tell you to take a deep breath.

Step away from the self-help stack.

Turn off the TV.

Tell your mom you'll call her back.

The way to stop the anxiety is to refuse to give in to the hype.

There is no rush. You can afford to wait. You should wait. And every relationship you have had so far is the exact opposite of a waste of time. Every relationship you experience is enhancing your life, developing your senses, helping you realize what—just as much as who—you want in your life. Every relationship you sample is important, even those that don't end with the man on bended knee begging you to stay forever.

This book will show you how to accomplish your transformation from anxious to cool, nervous to calm. It will welcome you into a new sorority: a group that enjoys men, relationships, and illuminating adventures. What it won't do is secretly throw in little ways to meet a man. It won't gather a gaggle of friends to coo around your engagement ring, as if getting married were an accomplishment. It won't validate your anxiety about being single. I'm not here to tell you how to get married. Marriage is a wondrous thing, and if it's what you want, I wish you well in getting there. I have every confidence that you will—in your own sweet time and without discounting the amazing adventure that is your life, with or

without a man in it. You're not a failure; you're not behind the curve. You're doing just fine.

### SOMEDAY BUT NOT NOW

Marriage is a wondrous thing  
 For imps and gimps and mutts.  
 I knew a knock-kneed lady once  
 Who married a bowlegged klutz.

My father wrote this little poem on the occasion of his parents' twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. But for all his joking, he'd always tell anyone who'd listen that my mother was the best thing that ever happened to him. Even as a kid I knew that marriage didn't solve your problems—but it was a blessed stage nonetheless (even for the able-bodied).

My college roommate met her husband our senior year at the University of Pennsylvania. They spent every free minute together and after graduation both stayed on in Philadelphia. At age twenty-four they were married, and they are among the happiest-ever-after couples I know. I wore a peach bridesmaid dress to their wedding, with my hair severely sprayed into a rigid helmet around my head. Then, and many difficult times since, I have wondered: "What would my life be like if I had found The One at twenty-one? How much safer would the world seem if I knew who'd be walking beside me?"

In contrast to my roommate and her lifelong partner, my favorite aunt married once, at eighteen, and divorced shortly thereafter. For the rest of her life she dated an endless—at least as it appeared to my admiring eyes—collection of

dashing men, including the masseur who could contort his body like a yogi and the comic book illustrator who inspired that gloriously rich, throaty laugh of hers. That she didn't marry again was considered a tragedy in my parents' home but to me made her bigger than life. She lived alone (alone!) and made her own money. She had lovers (lovers!) and a little Toyota she nicknamed Silver.

I imagine I lie somewhere in the middle of the continuum that runs from my roommate to my aunt. I'm thirty-three and someday I'll marry. Someday.

(My best friend once dragged me and my boyfriend at the time to a psychic who told me I'd marry someone "rich and powerful in New York." I pointed to my boyfriend, a great guy but neither rich nor powerful and said, "That's my boyfriend. He lives here in Washington, D.C." She shrugged, her fringed shawl falling to her elbows. "You'll move to New York?" she asked him. I questioned another of her predictions, and she turned on me. "Your whole life you're going to decide from a psychic?" she demanded, sounding suddenly more like a Jewish grandparent than a swami.)

### **MISTER RIGHT OR MISTERS RIGHT**

In the wake of my broken engagement, I've given a lot of thought to when I might marry, and why, and to whom. Barbara Ehrenreich, tongue firmly in cheek, describes today's ideal husband:

He should be a co-provider and a reliable financial partner; a co-conversationalist and sparkly dinner

companion, fully briefed by CNN. In the event of children, we expect he will further develop into a skilled co-parent with a repertoire of bedtime stories and remedies for runny noses. He should be prepared to jump into sweats and serve as a sturdy fitness partner, plus handling home repair; a husband who can't locate a fuse box is about as useful as one of those little plastic tool kits from Toys "R" Us. And since we are modern women, we have every right to think he will manage, in addition, to be a tireless and imaginative lover, supplying orgasms virtually on demand.<sup>4</sup>

Tall order isn't it? But I want all these things. Of course I know that no one person can be everything, so I'm a believer that the way to get it all is man by man, experience by experience. I believe the way to find out who I ultimately want to settle down with is by doing research in the field, experimenting, and trying out different types, each of whom may have a lot to offer but all of whom are quite different. He may be really smart or well-educated. He may be charming or gorgeous. He may have a wonderful sense of humor or want to accompany me on terrific adventures or appeal to my rebellious, artistic side or "just" be great in bed. Then when I do find a man I want to spend a lifetime with, I'll be able to weigh the importance of the pieces, the importance of sparkly conversation over sturdy athletics. Most important, I won't wonder what I missed, because I'll have had it all.

As I get to know myself better I understand more and more clearly that the journey is just as enriching and worthwhile as any destination. Back in my twenties and new to

Washington, I broke up with the boyfriend who had moved to town for me. A clunking washing machine of swirling, waterlogged emotions (anger, relief, and fear among them), I grabbed the beautiful chess set he had bought me and sent it tumbling to its death down the trash chute. Eight years later, just before I walked out of the home I shared with my fiancé, I dumped my jewelry box onto what had been our bed. I was aiming for both a “fair” and an unencumbered departure, but when I was over the pain of our parting, I began to miss a certain necklace. It was tiny, a thick silver “X,” depicting a kiss. It wasn’t at all the fact that he had bestowed it on me but rather how it felt nestled in the hollow of my neck, a burst of beauty on a fine string, that I missed.

Today I don’t miss either guy, though I treasure the memories, the fun we had and the lessons dating them taught me about life and about myself. I’m far from hating either one, far from repressing those experiences.

But I still don’t know how to play chess, and bare-necked, I miss that necklace. And I’m wondering, why did I toss the jewelry? That action has become kind of symbolic for me. Why disregard what these men, and others, have added to my life?

## WHAT DO WOMEN WANT?

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In *There Goes The Bride* I encouraged women to walk away from the wrong marriage. In fact statistics show that hundreds of thousands of women do break off their engagements every year. And after they’ve begun to understand the reasons they came so close to the wrong choice and have begun

to recover from the inevitable shock and grief, the question for them becomes “What’s next?”

The overwhelming chat room activity on my Web site (theregoesthebride.com) and the sustained attention to my first book from the media have shown that women are ready to think harder than they ever have about marriage. Hundreds of women have written to thank me for taking this message public: You don’t win by landing the guy. You win by experiencing life and by loving yourself.

A middle-aged divorcee in Toronto wrote to me:

I read your article today in the *National Post* about your book on almost marriages. I am so proud of you for doing this and I hope my own daughter will be able to have the strength to cope with all the emotions if ever she finds herself in the same situation.

At the same time, I was fielding letters like this one at my Web site:

Dear Almost Bride:

I find myself daydreaming that my boyfriend will do something wrong to give me a reason to break up with him. I have no reason. He is absolutely wonderful, we have the same interests, our families love each other, we are very compatible. Sometimes I feel there must be something wrong with me to feel doubtful about our relationship because technically it is perfect.

I also find myself thinking more and more about packing up my stuff and moving back with my parents and starting a new life. I think about who I have

to call about address changes and how I'm going to set up my new room. All these signs seem to be pointing me in the direction of breaking up, but I can't seem to accept it because there is no reason. Are my feelings the reason?

I wrote back to her:

Why does there have to be a smoking gun? If you don't want it, you don't want it. Just because you can't write out the reasons in three lines or fewer doesn't make it any less so.

I think it goes back to the definition of "perfect." My perfect isn't going to be your perfect. And why should the fact that many things are great mean that this relationship is the one that knocks you over the head with the sheer fabulousness of it? In less flowery language: yes, just because you don't want to marry him *is* reason enough not to marry him.

Not every relationship is meant for marriage. Not every man is meant to be forever. As Pamela Paul, a journalist who lived through and then documented the painful phenomena of *starter marriages*, notes: "Many ascribe to the act of marriage transformative powers—[thinking] marriage can make a bad relationship good, transform an iffy obligation into solid commitment, turn a drug-abusing boyfriend into a corporate superstar, make a straying mate settle down."<sup>5</sup>

Yet so many of us buy into the hype—we've succeeded when and only when we've settled down. I used to wonder if I was wrong not to believe this and wrong to date without

marriage in mind, but I don't anymore. And that's because I came within two weeks of marrying the wrong guy, and every day since I've thanked God we came to our senses. For a time after, I suffered intense grief and confusion about my life. All around me well-meaning people told me not to worry, that Mr. Right was out there and I'd find him and forget all about the ex-fiancé.

But even then that line of thinking irked me. I spent two years with my ex, and just because we didn't marry, those years weren't worth anything? I would argue that those were two of the most seminal years of my life. In them I learned what I want out of life, what I'm willing to compromise, and how compromising on some things can cause me physical pain.

### DATING IS THE JOURNEY

I could even say that my ex-fiancé, "Mark," was the best thing that ever happened to me—just not in the way I originally thought he would be. Because if we hadn't been together, we wouldn't have broken up. Well-meaning people wouldn't have told me I'd forget all about him and find my true Mr. Right. And I wouldn't have realized that this is all part of the journey to me.

Thank you, Mark, for helping me realize how important it is to have this journey before I settle down.

Not everyone agrees with this approach. Writer Ann Roiphe says she likes Jane Austen's characters because of "the startling neatness and security of their destinies. They fall in love with the man whom history and class and tradition have

chosen them for. . . . *This is the way it's supposed to be*" (Roiphe's emphasis).

"It doesn't seem stifling and moralistic anymore," Roiphe writes, "it seems civilized."<sup>6</sup> I don't buy it. I've never found comfort in being put into a box. When someone tells me I can't do something, I wonder what I'm missing. So I've gone against expectations. Now I'm living the life I always wanted, and my other single friends are too. We work hard at jobs we enjoy, travel, run marathons. But the one piece that hasn't fit is this: we profess to hate dating. We shake our heads at the mention of our ex-boyfriends, as if we can't believe we ever wasted time on the likes of them.

But we've been missing the point.

Dating is not supposed to be torture. It's not supposed to be a series of hoops, each one higher and smaller than the last, some of them ringed in fire, that we jump through to reach the nirvana of marriage. It may seem like the media, our mothers, and society are all in secret cahoots to make us panic if we're not married by a certain age. I'm here to tell you I've had enough. I don't treat being single like an emergency, and I'm no longer going to smile when my single friends contemplate dialing 911.

For kicks my friends and I watch so-called reality TV, which television producers assume means we'd like to skip the small talk and go straight to picking out the china. But life is nothing like the ABC hits *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette* or Fox's *Joe Millionaire*. And contrary to the opinion of TV producers, the reason women tune in is not to live vicariously through the chesty pinheads smiling pretty in the hopes of landing a gumball-sized diamond. It's to mock

them. Studio suits may deem it “reality.” Viewers consider it the ultimate escape from real life.

Take your time, that’s what I say. And I’m not the first. Antoinette Brown Blackwell wrote:

No grown up human being ought to rush blindly into this most intimate, most important, most enduring of human relations. . . . Let the young girl be instructed that, above her personal interests, her home, and social life, she is to have a great life purpose, as broad as the rights and interests of humanity. I say, let every young girl feel this, as much as every young man does. . . . Let her be taught that she ought not be married in her teens. Let her wait, as a young man does, if he’s sensible, until she is twenty-five or thirty. She will then know how to choose properly, and probably she will not be deceived in her estimate of character; she will have had a certain life discipline, which will enable her to control her household matters with wise judgment, so that, while she is looking after her family, she may still keep her great life purpose, for which she was educated.<sup>7</sup>

And Blackwell wrote this in the late 1800s. (Think how old twenty-five or thirty was considered then!)

### LET’S START A NEW MOVEMENT

There’s an empowerment movement afoot that tells women to buy their own damn jewelry. I’m not against it, but I’m not one to turn down a man bearing gifts either. There’s a group of

women out there who say to hell with marriage. I shrug at that; I hope to someday spend the rest of my life with one man, but I'm not sitting home chaste and quiet until he shows up.

Many women have told me that they're tired of searching for a husband. My answer to that is: then don't. Instead I'm starting a movement. It's about living the life you want to live and enjoying the experiences, and the men, that come along. It's about appreciating everything you've learned from former boyfriends and eagerly anticipating the times with the ones to come. It's about not getting married just yet. It's about turning the volume on our anxieties down to low and, for today, enjoying Mr. Right Now.

I hope you'll join with me.

Rachel Safer