

single  
at heart

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The Power, Freedom and  
Joy of Single Life

Dr Bella DePaulo



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*To every person who is single at heart, this book is for you.*

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# Introduction

Lovers of single life, set yourselves free! Unshackle yourselves from those old, regressive stories that claim that single life is sad and lonely. Rise above those repressive notions that everyone wants a romantic partner and if you think you don't, you'll get over it, and if you don't get over it, you need help. Gleefully reject the idea that putting a romantic partner at the center of your life is something you have to do, something that everyone wants, or that it is the normal, natural, and superior way to live.

I have a new story to tell you. It is based on experiences of people all around the world who are telling their stories, often for the first time. It is also grounded in social science studies of hundreds, thousands, and sometimes even hundreds of thousands of people.

My story is about people who are powerfully drawn to single life. I call them “single at heart,” and I'm one of them. For us, single life is our best life. It is our most authentic, meaningful, and fulfilling life. It is a psychologically rich life. No other way of life will ever feel as profoundly satisfying. To us, living single is every bit as normal, natural, comfortable, and desirable as a committed romantic partnership is to people who are drawn to coupled life.

We are the curators of our lives. Being single doesn't limit our lives—it throws them wide open. We have our freedom, and we use it to make the most of our resources and opportunities, however vast or meager they may be. We get to decide the shape and contours of our lives, from our daily routines to life-altering transformations. We get to pursue our interests and passions, without trying to refashion or resize them in ways that suit a romantic partner. We get to welcome into our lives anyone we want—friends, relatives, mentors, colleagues, lovers, neighbors, spiritual figures, pets, or anyone else—as many or as few as we like, with no pressure to elevate a romantic partner above all others. We can devote ourselves to our inner circle, our larger communities, our countries, and our causes, if that's what we want to do. We

create homes that are our sanctuaries. We have our sweet, sweet solitude. If we don't want kids, no partner is going to pout. If we do have kids, we get to raise them as we see fit. We enjoy intimacy on our own terms.

The risk to people who are single at heart is not what we will miss if we do not put a romantic partner at the center of our lives, but what we will miss if we do. I will never say that it is OK to be single, that it is better to be single than to be in a bad romantic relationship, or that it is better to be single than to wish you were. Those sentiments are far too grudging. For people like us, it is better to be single. Period. It is better to be single when we are young. It is better to be single when we are old. And it is better to be single during all the years in between.

People who are single at heart include women and men and people who identify as neither. We include parents and people who are not parents. We include the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the formally educated and the self-educated, people of all gender identities and orientations, races and ethnicities. Among our numbers are many kinds of believers as well as nonbelievers. Many of us hail from WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) societies, but substantial numbers do not.

The single at heart range from people who have never married, never lived with a romantic partner, and never had a serious romantic relationship to people who, in the past, have had all of those experiences, sometimes over and over again. We include people who are not at all interested in sex or romantic relationships and people who are quite fond of both. Some of us enjoy dating now and then. What we all share is that we do not put a romantic partner at the center of our lives, and we do not ever want to organize our lives around a romantic partner.

Perhaps even more importantly, we share the joy we experience by living single. Being single is something we savor. It doesn't matter if we have had no past romantic experiences or plenty of them. It doesn't matter if any such experiences were glorious, horrifying, boring, or a mixed bag. It doesn't matter if we had a miserable childhood or an exemplary one. We are not defined by any of those things. We are not single just because we are running

away from something or because we have “issues” (everyone has issues). We are single because we love what single life offers and will continue to offer for as long as we commit to it and invest in it. For us, that’s forever. We don’t ever want to unsingle ourselves.

We realize we are bucking the relentlessly touted and celebrated cultural script that insists that what adults want, more than anything else, is a committed romantic partnership. We know what people think: that it’s fine to be single for a while, but to stay single forever is just sad, and that to *want* to stay single isn’t natural or normal.

Over the course of my lifetime, I’ve seen other bedrock beliefs pulverized. Is it abnormal to be attracted to people of your own gender? We know better now. Is a woman’s place in the home? Oh, please. Is it only natural for women to want kids? That doesn’t seem obvious anymore.

Each time our understanding of human nature becomes more expansive, we all become freer to live our best and most authentic lives. In the enlightened world that I envision, every child will understand, as a matter of course, that living single is a life path that can be just as joyful and fulfilling as any other—and for some people, the best path of all. Every adult will forsake forever the temptation to pity or patronize people who are single, and will instead appreciate the profound rewards of single life. Adults who are naturally drawn to single life will not be asked to defend that choice ever again. Millions of happy single people will realize that they are happy and thriving not in spite of being single, but because of it.

Because we who are single at heart are embracing our single lives rather than trying to escape them, we develop strengths, skills, resources, and attitudes that are less often honed by those who lead a conventionally coupled life. The time, money, and emotional resources that some other people devote to their pursuit of a romantic partner and then bestow upon that partner if they find such a person, we invest in the experiences that make our lives meaningful and that can never be taken away from us by a divorce or any other casualty of coupling. We value our friends, rather than looking past them for the romantic partner who may be on the horizon or waiting



for us at home. Because we don't split the tasks of everyday life with a romantic partner, we learn how to cover everything ourselves, either by mastering each task, finding ways around it, or figuring out how to find people who will help or who we can hire. Because we plan to stay single, we create homes that will continue to accommodate, comfort, and inspire us as we age.

Our years of investing in our single lives and embracing all that single life has to offer payoff along the way, but the investment comes to its ultimate, stereotype-shattering pinnacle later in life. We've been warned that we are going to end up decrepit, despondent, despairing, and oh so alone when we are old, but that's not what happens. Studies show that it is the people who have stayed single who are most likely to be thriving in later life. Unlike the newly single, such as the divorced and widowed people who organized their lives around a spouse, the lifelong single people aren't trying to figure out for the first time how to do the things their spouse used to do for them. Lifelong single people never demote the people who matter to them once a spouse waltzes into their lives. They aren't trying to create a social circle or an emotional support system anew; they have been doing that all along. A study of older people in the United States showed that the men and women who stayed single were most optimistic about the future, were most likely to have an active social life, and most likely to have the help they needed and the intimacy they wanted. Black Americans, who are the targets of so much moralizing and shaming for their relatively low rates of marrying, were especially likely to be living a fulfilling life in their old age if they had never married.<sup>1</sup>

An Australian study of more than ten thousand women in their seventies found that the lifelong single women were not just doing better than the previously married women, they were also doing better than the currently married women.<sup>2</sup> Compared to the currently or previously married women, with or without children, the lifelong single women who had no children were the most optimistic, least stressed, most altruistic, and had the fewest diagnoses of major illnesses.

Those studies included all people who stayed single and did not distinguish between the reluctantly single and the single at heart. Once researchers start zeroing in on the single people who want to be single, the findings will be even more impressive. We already have hints of that. A ten-year study of more than seventeen thousand people without romantic partners found that, over time, the people who were not looking to unsingle themselves were becoming increasingly happy with their lives, while those who were pining for a partner were becoming increasingly dissatisfied.<sup>3</sup> Other research shows that single people who are not looking for a partner value their friends more, and as they continue to invest in their friends, they become even more delighted with their single lives.<sup>4</sup> Single people who yearn to be coupled often do not enjoy that heartening dynamic. The single people who want to stay single are also more sexually satisfied.<sup>5</sup>

I've been studying single people since December 17, 1992. That's the day I created a secret folder labeled only with the number 1 and slipped into it a clipping from an advice column in the local newspaper. I had underlined one sentence, "Remember that one is a whole number."

I was thirty-nine and single. I didn't think I was less than a whole person, but I did think it was curious that so many of the depictions of single people I would place in the folder, from Cathy cartoons to book reviews in the *New Yorker*, were based on the premise that to be single was to be sad and that no one would choose to be or stay single.

My obsession did not stay secret for long. Within a few years, I had mostly forsaken my previous area of expertise (in the psychology of lying and detecting lies), and completely immersed myself in my new study of single people and single life. Deception was an interest of mine. Singlehood became my passion. I conducted studies, taught courses, published research papers, wrote dozens of articles for newspapers and magazines, published hundreds of blog posts, gave a TEDx talk, started the Community of Single People Facebook group, and wrote books, beginning with *Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*.

I'm a social psychologist, a researcher and not a therapist, but over the years hundreds of people have sent me emails or handwritten notes telling me about their single lives. Two themes have stood out. The first one is dismaying. Over and over again, people have told me that until they encountered my work, they never realized that it was OK to like being single and to want to stay single. The second is more exuberant. Those people have described themselves as powerfully drawn to single life. They have effused about how meaningful and fulfilling it was to live single, and how nothing else compared. That's how I felt too. And that's when I realized that the popular narratives of single life just weren't capturing what it could mean to live single and to love that life truly and deeply. They did not speak to people like us, who were single at heart.

I was also intrigued by the single people who were pining for a romantic partner and the many pundits, essayists, and experts who extolled coupled life. Some seemed clear-minded, but many others seemed to be envisioning what I would come to think of as the Magical Mythical Romantic Partner. That's the person who is always kind, always attentive, always around when you need them, and always happy to do their share of the work. That's the partner who always wants the same kind and amount of sex that you do, at the same time that you do, and who never strays. As a parent, this partner is always present with your children and devoted to them, and the family you have together is free of conflict or cruelty. In later life, the Magical Mythical Romantic Partner is always there when you've fallen and can't get up. This person is there when you need a ride to a medical procedure or need someone to stay with you at the hospital, and is by your side no matter how long your illness lasts. This partner is never sick, and is never sick of you.

I don't doubt that some romantic partners, married or otherwise, truly are wonderful. But I also know they are human. As obvious as that sounds, I think it is a point that eludes the single at heart skeptics, who don't believe that anyone could want a life that is not built around a romantic partner. The partner they have in mind is fictional. For the single at heart, though, even a perfect partner would not lure us away from our single lives. We are

drawn to single life by what it has to offer; we are not fleeing from coupledness because romantic partners are imperfect.

On Valentine's Day 2012, I posted a brief quiz online titled "Are you single at heart?" (It is at the end of Chapter 1 if you want to take a look.) By 2019, when I was ready to analyze the data for this book, nearly nine thousand people had taken the quiz. By 2022, that number had more than doubled to nineteen thousand, and it just keeps growing. The participants hailed from more than one hundred countries and every continent except Antarctica. Residents of the United States, Canada, England, and Australia flocked to the quiz. People from places such as Albania and Algeria, Egypt and El Salvador, Iran and India, Japan and Jordan, New Zealand and Norway, Russia and Rwanda, Ukraine and Uruguay—all found their way to the quiz and answered the questions.

The results of the quiz helped me understand, in broad strokes, how people who are single at heart differ from people who are not. But I also wanted to understand the single at heart more deeply. I wanted to hear the stories of their lives. I posted on my website, blogs, and social media a request for people who identified as single at heart to tell me, in great detail and in writing, all about their lives, and to allow me to quote them in this book. The forty-one people who agreed by the time I was ready to start writing this book include women and men, people of different sexual and gender identities and orientations, parents and people with no children, and people of different races and ethnicities. They range in age from twenty-somethings to seventy-somethings. Most are from the US, but others are from Austria, Australia, Canada, England, India, Mexico, and Portugal. (I'll mostly use first names only, either their actual names or the ones they requested. A few people have published books or articles about single life, and when I refer to those publications, I will use their last names too. The ages I report, as well as the places where they live and the other details of their lives, are from the year they described their experiences, 2019 or 2020. I describe their location however they wished—a specific city, a region, or country.)

My understanding of what it means to be single at heart has also been informed by the hundreds of people who shared stories of their lives with me more informally or told me about their role models, including people who are and are not single at heart, and by the results of many systematic studies of single people. When I noticed people expressing a single at heart sentiment in an essay, book, podcast, talk, or anywhere else, I added them to my files. They include everyone from the famous to the unknown, and you will meet some of them in this book too.

In early 2020 I thought I was ready to start writing this book. I gathered my copious materials and opened a new document on my computer. The date was March 10, 2020. The next day, Governor Gavin Newsom of California, where I am an academic affiliate at the University of California, Santa Barbara, announced that public health officials had determined that gatherings should be postponed or canceled across the state until at least the end of March. COVID-19 had come to California.

For the first time in all my years of studying single life, I had a crisis of confidence. The single at heart love solitude, but how would we deal with weeks of it? If there's anything we cherish more than solitude, it's our freedom. With a pandemic lockdown, spending time alone would not be something we freely chose, but something that was imposed. What if the lockdown went on for months? What if it lasted a year?

I stopped writing and watched as the pandemic threw everything it had at single people, particularly those who live alone: isolation, social distancing, masks, financial woes, terrifying health risks, canceled plans, work disruptions, and the inability to see friends and family. Would it send singles lunging into the arms of a romantic partner—any romantic partner—just for relief?

The ominous headlines began to pile up: "A pandemic is hard enough. For some, being single has made it harder," wrote the *New York Times*.<sup>6</sup> On Twitter, a sixteen-part thread was posted that began with, "I don't know who wants to hear this, but being single during this pandemic has been

downright dreadful.”<sup>7</sup> It went viral, and it was tweeted at me a few times. I got the message, and yes, I was worried.

Before the pandemic, the forty-one single at heart people who shared their life stories had been providing me with some of my most valuable anecdotal data for more than a year. Now I was afraid to check on them. Finally in December 2020, I began reaching out to them again, starting with the first seventeen people on my list. If all my high-minded optimism about people who love their single lives was going to get snuffed out by COVID, well, I needed to know.

I posed a slew of new questions to the people I contacted. The most important was: After nearly a year of pandemic life, do you still feel that single life is your best life? I held my breath and waited for them to answer. I did not have to wait long.

One by one they replied. Most responded almost immediately. Some had suffered setbacks, often financial ones. Many desperately missed seeing their friends in person and some craved human touch. Most were eager to get back to the “before times.” But *not a single person* wanted to trade their single life for a life of conventional romantic coupledness.<sup>8</sup> In fact, some felt even *more* secure about being single than they had before the pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

They were thriving because they had already cultivated the kinds of interests and practices that turned out to be hugely helpful in surviving pandemic life. They enjoyed pursuits like reading, writing, meditating, and exercising, all of which could be savored solo. Many have long attended lovingly to their homes, and during the pandemic they continued to experience their homes as sanctuaries not prisons. The single at heart are used to taking the initiative to maintain their relationships with friends and relatives, and they are also accustomed to staying in touch virtually. Even when they were not seeing anyone in person, they were not socially isolated.

Many of the people who jumped on that Twitter thread about the dreadfulness of being single during the pandemic had one thing in common: they wanted to be coupled. For them, 2020 was a lost year in their quest to find a life partner. No one who is single at heart experienced the pandemic that way.

I was relieved to hear how the single at heart had fared during COVID isolations. I was also emboldened. Was it possible that some single people had gone into the pandemic wanting to find a romantic partner, but then changed their mind as the lockdown continued? I posed the question to the Community of Single People Facebook group. One person, then another, then several more described the lockdown as transformational.<sup>10</sup> During the pandemic, they told me, they faced their fears. They faced themselves. They found comfort in solitude, emotional closeness in relationships that were not romantic, wisdom in their self-reflection, and joy in both the new opportunities they pursued and the strength they'd never realized they had. Most significantly, they learned that single life was not just something they could handle, but something they relished.

The pandemic was a time of reckoning for couples as well as singles. Some couples have grown closer. Others have fallen apart. In "Covid Ended Our Marriage," the BBC reported, "All around the world—from South America to West Africa—previously happy couples are splitting up, and many are divorcing."<sup>11</sup>

The already fraught issue of the division of household chores became even more tense as those chores multiplied during lockdown. Many couples and families longed for what people who are single at heart access easily: freedom to do what they wanted to do when they wanted to do it, and time and space to themselves. The *Globe and Mail* reported on people sitting alone in their parked cars just to have a moment on their own.<sup>12</sup> In a work of photojournalism, the *Washington Post* published photos of "pandemic sheds" some families had built "to create room for silence, storage, and solace."<sup>13</sup>

*New York Times* reporters talked to people across the country about their pandemic experiences and in April 2021, they described their findings: "Over and over, people were reevaluating their most important relationships, where they want to live, and how they want to be in the world."<sup>14</sup>

My book project was back on. The single at heart had reaffirmed their commitment to single life by a once in a century natural experiment.

## This Is Our Time

For more than half a century we have been in the midst of a worldwide transformation in how we live. Women have been having fewer babies.<sup>15</sup> More people are living alone.<sup>16</sup> Where nuclear families once were the norm, they are now less common. In at least twenty-five nations, if you knock on any door at random, you are more likely to be greeted by a person living alone than a couple and their children.<sup>17</sup> In those countries, there are more one-person households than nuclear family households. In some of them, such as Finland, Germany, Japan, and Estonia, there are about twice as many.

Central to the demographic revolution is a retreat from marriage. A United Nations report tracking changes between 1990 and 2010 showed that in every region of the world, a smaller percentage of adults were marrying, and of those who did marry, they were doing so at increasingly older ages.<sup>18</sup> Also, all around the world, a greater percentage of people were divorced in 2010 than several decades before.

The decline of marriage has continued beyond the years tracked by the UN report. For example, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development found that between 1970 and 2020, rates of marriage had declined for thirty-four of the thirty-seven nations for which data were available.<sup>19</sup> They included, for example, Costa Rica, Greece, Japan, Korea, Norway, Slovenia, and Switzerland. In every nation, women and men who married for the first time were on average older in 2020 than they were in 1990.

In the US, it is not just the rates of marriage, but also the rates of remarriage that are decreasing, a trend only partly explained by the decision of some couples to cohabit instead.<sup>20</sup> Although rates of divorce have slowed overall, they remain high, and they are continuing to increase among the over-fifty set.<sup>21</sup> All told, Americans spend more years of their adult lives not married than married.<sup>22</sup>



In theory, the decline of marriage could mean that the people who do marry are happier than they were when marriage felt more mandatory. But that's not what's happening. Every year since 1972 (when researchers started keeping track), couples in the US have been reporting lower and lower levels of happiness in their marriages.<sup>23</sup> That trend has not put a dent in the relentless promotion of marriage. In fact, the unabashed defense of marriage may have reached a remarkable nadir in 2022, when the Well+Being editor of the *Washington Post* proclaimed that “hating your romantic partner is ‘normal.’” She offered tips on what to do about it, and the first was, “It’s OK to hate your partner.”<sup>24</sup>

The flip side of the decline of marriage is the rise of single people. In many nations, it has never been as possible to lead a full and fulfilling life as a single person as it is now, especially for women. Even though women often get paid less than men for the same work, many earn enough to support themselves as well as children, if they want kids. They don’t need a spouse for that. Single motherhood still does not have the same social acceptance as married motherhood, but the number of single mothers—and fathers—keeps growing, and contrary to all the scare stories, most of their children are doing just fine.<sup>25</sup> Or more than fine. As I will show a little later, single-parent families have some rarely acknowledged advantages over married-parent families.

Want to stay single and still have sex? In many nations it has been a good long time since sex outside of marriage or committed romantic coupling has been stigmatized. If anything, we’ve teetered in the other direction, in which not having sex or not wanting sex is what needs to be justified or explained. Want sex but not children? Use birth control. Want children without having sex, a committed sexual partner, or a spouse? Advances in reproductive medicine have made that more possible too.

Want companionship you can count on? Want intimacy? No one needs marriage or a committed romantic partner for either of those things. Have you gotten married but now want out? Around the world, divorce is more likely to be legally available and less likely to be denounced than it was a half-century ago.

Not into cooking? You don't need a wife or husband or any kind of romantic partner for that. You can pick up takeout on the way home from work or just stop at a restaurant and have a nice meal with friends or with your own sweet self. Don't want to deal with those bothersome repairs? Check the Better Business Bureau listings for a handyperson in your area. Need medications when you are sick? In many places, they can be delivered. Are you older and worried that you might fall and not be able to get up? You don't need a spouse in the house for that either—you can get a medical alert device. It's more likely to be there when you need it.

I'm not saying that contemporary societies cater to single people. They most certainly do not. Most policies and practices are designed with couples and families in mind, and that needs to change. In the meantime, though, the possibilities for living single that are already in place should mean that more and more people are living outside of committed coupledness.

And in fact, they are. The UN report showed that in Australia and New Zealand, by 2010, one out of every seven women (14 percent) had been single (never married) all her life as she approached the age of fifty.<sup>26</sup> The rates were nearly as high for Latin America and the Caribbean (13 percent) and still in the double digits (11 percent) for Europe and North America. In the US, a 2014 Pew Research Center report predicted that by the time the young adults in the US reach the age of fifty, about one in four of them will have been single their whole life.<sup>27</sup>

In the US in 2021, nearly half (48 percent) of all adults eighteen and older were not married.<sup>28</sup> If single is defined much more stringently—not married, not living with a romantic partner, and not in a committed romantic relationship—then 31 percent qualify.<sup>29</sup> That segment of the population, the solo singles, has been growing too. From the way solo singles are relentlessly targeted with self-help books and other sources of advice on how to snag a spouse, and pelted with unsolicited offers from relatives and friends to “fix them up” with some other solo single person (as if they were broken), even after previous offers had been declined, you might think they are all desperately seeking coupledness. But in a survey of a national sample of US

adults in 2019, the Pew Research Center found that half of the solo single people were not interested in a romantic relationship, or even a date.<sup>30</sup> The older singles were especially unlikely to want to unsingle themselves, but even in the youngest groups (eighteen to twenty-nine and thirty to forty-nine), close to 40 percent said they were uninterested in dating or romantic relationships.

In 2022 the Pew Research Center repeated the survey.<sup>31</sup> This time, they found that an even greater proportion of solo singles, 56 percent, were not interested in a romantic relationship or a date. If all those single people were saying they were uninterested in becoming coupled for negative reasons, such as thinking that no one would be interested in them, or even neutral ones, such as being too busy, then the rise of these solo single people might not provide any evidence for the rise of the single at heart. But when the single people were offered a list of possible reasons for staying single, they most often endorsed the most positive one: 72 percent said they weren't looking to unsingle themselves because they just liked being single.

No matter how many people in the US or any other nation in the world say that they like being single and they have no interest in unsingling themselves, the number who would flourish by staying single is likely much higher. The deck is stacked against people saying they want to be single and stay that way, or even realizing how fulfilling single life could be for them. We've seen this kind of dynamic before, when many people—including many women—came to believe that a woman's place is in the home and that no woman would really and truly want to be anywhere else.

## Why We Don't Yet Know How Many People Would Flourish by Living Single

Imagine asking the women of Vassar College if they have any interest in careers or any other independent achievements or pursuits, or if they are only interested in marriage and children. The question would strike many of them as odd, even offensive. But in the 1950s, it wasn't unusual or insulting at all. A ten-year study of Vassar students (back then, they were all woman) concluded that they

had little interest in achievement beyond being a wife and mother. In his 1962 book, *The American College*, psychologist Nevitt Sanford wrote, “Vassar girls, by and large, do not expect to achieve fame, make an enduring contribution . . . or otherwise create ripples in the placid order of things.”<sup>32</sup>

A few decades later, women were still being asked whether they agreed with statements such as, “It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family,” and, “A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works.” In 1977, a representative sample of Americans (not just women, and not just the elite, mostly white, women of Vassar) was asked those questions and two-thirds of them agreed!<sup>33</sup> By 2018, though, Americans completely reversed themselves: three-quarters rejected any notion that a woman’s place was solely in the home or that women were hurting their children if they worked for pay outside of the home.<sup>34</sup>

All those years when Vassar women were saying they just wanted to be wives and mothers, and Americans were saying that a woman’s place was in the home, many thought they were describing something essential and fundamental about what it meant to be a woman. Women, they thought, were naturally nurturant and suited to domestic life. Men were believed to be different by nature, more suited to life outside the home in realms such as work and politics. (The people who did not have the luxury of choosing not to work because they needed to work to survive, including many people racialized as black, already knew better.<sup>35</sup>)

That essentialist view of women and men was belied by the social changes that swept through the nation and much of the world toward the end of the twentieth century. The idea that it is natural and normal for women and men to inhabit separate spheres now seems embarrassingly naive. Instead, it seems self-evident that it is natural and normal for many women to want to have work and interests outside of the home, and that men aren’t fundamentally incapable of domesticity or uninterested in it.

However, one part of the old-fashioned formula has stuck. It is still considered natural and normal and superior for adults to be coupled.

Women are no longer expected to define themselves *solely* in terms of their romantic partnership status, but that status is still obligatory. Coupling is compulsory, for women and men and people who do not identify as either if you don't want to seem abnormal, unnatural, or inferior. Coupling is compulsory if you want to be accepted as fully adult, and if you want to be part of the Couples Club, where you will be respected, admired, celebrated, and privileged simply because you have a romantic partner. In places such as the US, marriage is compulsory if you want access to a whole panoply of benefits and protections; if you aren't legally married, you don't get them.<sup>36</sup>

When Betty Friedan published her landmark book, *The Feminine Mystique*, in 1963, she explained how limiting it was to have “only one model, one image, one vision, of a full and free human being: man.”<sup>37</sup> Now, more than a half-century later, we are still deeply and unfairly constraining humanity to only one model, one image, one vision of a full adult: a coupled person.

I'm acutely aware of the reign of compulsory coupling in the US; I've lived here all my life, many of the participants in my studies of single life have been from the US, and many of the examples I will describe in this book are from the US. But the centrality of coupling to adult life is not just an American phenomenon. Scholars based in other nations or who have studied other countries have found the same thing. For example, Professor Sasha Roseneil of University College London and four other scholars conducted a wide-ranging investigation of how things were changing for groups such as women, sexual and gender minorities, and single people in four very different European nations: the UK, Norway, Portugal, and Bulgaria.<sup>38</sup> They examined laws and policies, social movements, cultural traditions, and the everyday life experiences of adults who were not leading conventionally coupled lives. They found that things were getting better for women and sexual and gender minorities. Discrimination against those groups was less often ensconced in the law. Everyday sexism and heterosexism had become less rampant. Single people, though, could claim far less progress. In all four nations, coupling is still experienced as compulsory. The couple norm—the belief that being coupled is “the

normal, natural, and superior way of being an adult”—remains dominant.<sup>39</sup> In fact, some of the social changes that benefited other groups only served to strengthen the couple norm. The legalization of same-sex marriage, for example, gave sexual minorities access to legal benefits and protections they didn’t have before. But that victory, and the doggedness with which advocates fought for it, further enshrined the significance of coupling. Staying single, for people of all sexual and gender orientations and identities, meant that you just weren’t as worthy as coupled people.

Committed romantic coupling is no longer just something people are expected to do. It has been elevated to an achievement, a status symbol, and a ticket to privilege. It is propped up by laws and policies and social practices that give couples special treatment. It is burnished by media representations of coupled life as the good and desirable life, and of snagging a romantic partner as the one accomplishment that outshines all others. Committed romantic coupling is kept atop its pedestal by everyday interactions with friends, relatives, neighbors, and coworkers who cajole single people to couple, fawn all over those who do, and pity those who don’t. Under these conditions, asking people if they want to be single and stay single is like asking Vassar women in the 1950s whether they wanted a career. Sure, a few will say yes and go on to succeed spectacularly, but for too many others, it will seem unimaginable.

Going along with the privileging of couples and the marginalizing of single people is today’s “placid order of things.” Many of those who bask in the glow of their own coupled status, and many single people who aspire to that esteemed status, would like the rest of us to kindly refrain from creating ripples.

I’m not aiming for ripples. I want to create a tsunami.

## Rejecting Marriage Is Not the Point; Curating a Life of Our Own Is

The couple norm positions romantic coupling, particularly in the form of marriage, as the standard against which everything else is measured and

found wanting. Coupling is what is expected of adults. It is what they are all assumed to want.

Let's transcend that way of thinking. Marriage does not have to be at the center of anyone's life. It doesn't even have to be considered. We no longer need to ask ourselves whether we want to marry or have children. Instead we can start with an open, expansive slate of what our lives might be. Then, within the limits of our resources and opportunities and privileges, we get to fill it in with whatever counts as most meaningful and fulfilling to us. If we want relationships in our lives, we can honor the biggest, broadest sense of the word "relationships," and seek connections—casual, intimate, or anything in between—with friends, relatives, neighbors, coworkers, mentors, or anyone else we value. We can have children in our lives—and not just as parents—or we can choose not to. We can fill our lives with deep reservoirs of solitude if that's what we find fulfilling. We can pursue careers or passions or callings, or just dabble in whatever interests us at the moment. We can transform the place where we live into a home. We can settle into our cities and towns, or we can try out different places at different times.

When we think about life as an open slate, people are not single at heart because they have rejected marriage. Instead, they have chosen single life. Joan, a seventy-three-year-old retired professor from Newark, Delaware, who is one of the many single at heart people who shared their life stories with me for this book, explained it this way:

For me, being single isn't a matter of not wanting to be married, any more than I became a professor because I didn't want to be a surgeon, or a pilot. I did not in fact want to be either of those things, any more than I wanted a whole lot of other possible careers. I wanted to be a professor because I wanted to be a professor. And I'm happy being single because that's who I am.

## From the Most Privileged to the Most Disadvantaged, We Are United in Our Commitment to Be True to Ourselves

In 1994 Jane Mattes published *Single Mothers by Choice: A Guidebook for Single Women Who Are Considering or Have Chosen Motherhood*. The designation caught on, and more and more women began identifying as single mothers by choice. Many of those women were white, straight, and financially secure. They have been criticized, fairly or not, as using the label to separate themselves from queer, poor, or younger women of color, who, by implication, are stuck with single motherhood rather than choosing it.

My goal is just the opposite. I want “single at heart” to be an inclusive category, and not just a privileged class of single people. And in fact, many people who are members of devalued or disadvantaged groups identify as single at heart. For example, people who are single at heart are more likely than those who are not single at heart to be members of sexual or gender minorities. The single at heart are more likely to be agnostic or atheists. They are no more likely to be white, wealthy, or employed, analyses of the quiz data showed.

When I compare the single at heart to people who are not single at heart, I am not comparing people who want to be single with people who are stuck with it. I’m comparing people with different values and aspirations. The single at heart want to be single. People who are not single at heart want to be coupled or they already are coupled. No one needs to make the case for people who are not single at heart. They want what they are supposed to want. Their desires and aspirations are considered normal, natural, and superior. I am claiming equal legitimacy for all those who feel, in a deep sense, that single is who they really are, that single life is *their* best life—not just for a while, but for good. Maybe they deserve even greater recognition because they are persisting in embracing their best life even though they are too often stereotyped, stigmatized, marginalized, and disadvantaged for doing so.



## This Book Is for You

People don't usually write to advice columnists when everything in their life is exactly the way they want it to be, but "Happy Singleness" did just that when she sought counsel from the *Washington Post's* Carolyn Hax. "I have meaningful work, a home I love, good relationships with my three grown children, and excellent friends," she shared.<sup>40</sup> The problem?

My children are suggesting I should be dating. And suddenly I'm noticing so much societal pressure to pair off. Even articles/books/blogs about happy single life/traveling/social life all seem to say: do these things and then *you'll be ready when Mr. Right comes along*. But I am happy now. Dates are fine, but usually I come home thinking I would have been happier reading a book. Still I wonder: will I stay this happy? Would it be better to have a partner in my golden years? Should I put some effort into finding one?<sup>41</sup>

If it is not clear just how stunning that question is, do something I will advise you to do throughout this book—*flip the script* and imagine a married person asking something comparable: "I have been married for eight years. My life is really good. My marriage is really good. I have a home I love and good relationships with my kids. But I wonder: will I stay this happy? Would it be better to split up now so that I have enough time to invest in a life of my own? That way, I could nurture relationships with all the adults who matter to me rather than focusing primarily on just one person. I could develop the skills and strategies I will need to live my life fully and joyfully, no matter who is or is not around. Should I put more effort into living on my own?"

That sort of inquiry seems inconceivable. But it shouldn't be. I don't mean that I want to encourage divorce among those who are happily married; I don't. But I do want to revolutionize the way we think about being single.

“Happy Singleness” was right about the books, articles, and blogs that seem to be offering an upbeat view of single life, only to end up rather grudging about the matter. We should stay single, they tell us, while we ready ourselves for the time when our real lives begin (or begin again), when “the right person” comes along.

All those writers, steeped in the prevailing narratives of what it means to be single, are talking past the millions of people who want something different, something that describes and validates their experiences and makes them feel seen. This book is dedicated to all the people craving a more enlightened understanding of single life.

*Single at Heart* is for the millions of people like “Happy Singleness” who do not need instructions on how to be happily single because they already have been for years. People who are happier reading a book than going out on a date. People who have great friends, meaningful work, a home they love, and no interest in coupling. People who are even more certain than “Happy Singleness” that single life is their best life. This book is the validation and celebration they have deserved all along, but probably never got.

*Single at Heart* is for the young adults who feel pressure to date, who may even have dating apps on their phones, but who, deep down, don’t want to. They tell themselves they are going to get to it, they tell others they are interested in finding someone, but really, they like their lives just the way they are. It is also for the young adults who really are using the apps to find dates, but who still feel a stronger pull toward single life.

*Single at Heart* is for the not-quite-as-young adults who are closing in on that time when finding a partner and starting a family is the next step, the step their parents are probably pressuring them to take, and that some of their friends have already taken. They aren’t interested but wonder whether they can trust themselves to continue to feel that way. They might feel alone in their reluctance, but they shouldn’t. In 2018, when Match asked single women, ages thirty to forty-five, to name the number one priority in their lives, getting married did not even make it into the top three.<sup>42</sup> Living

on their own (44 percent), establishing a career (34 percent), and achieving financial security (27 percent) all mattered more.

*Single at Heart* is for the people who are attracted to single life, but who have kids or want kids, and wonder if living single could still be fulfilling with children in the picture. The scare stories they have heard about the supposed risks to children of being raised by an unmarried parent may weigh on them as well. Later, I will have a different story to tell.

*Single at Heart* is for the young, the old, and everyone in between who has tried marriage or romantic partnering only to be disappointed every time. They were promised happiness, meaning, and fulfillment that would surpass anything they had experienced or would experience in single life, but never found it. Maybe the problem is that they never gave single life a chance. If they did, maybe some would find true love—the love of single life. The kind of love that lasts.

*Single at Heart* is for people who tried conventional coupled life and loved it. Maybe they had a spouse and kids who they loved. Maybe they even loved their in-laws. But now the spouse is gone, the kids are grown, and they want a whole different life. A single life.

*Single at Heart* is for the people who are in romantic partnerships and want to stay in them, but who want to break free of the conventions of romantic life. Perhaps they want to value their relationships with their friends and relatives as much or even more than their romantic partnerships. Maybe they want much more independence and solitude than coupled people are expected to want. I think they will discover a real kinship with the single at heart. Some may even end up identifying that way themselves.

*Single at Heart* is for the people who never will fully identify as single at heart, but aspire to learn from the attitudes, values, and practices of people who love single life more than they ever will. Even people who don't want to stay single want their single years to be as meaningful and fulfilling as they can possibly be.

*Single at Heart* is for our allies, including people who are coupled and want to stay that way. They believe that people who want to be

single should get to do so joyfully and unapologetically, with the same benefits, protections, and privileges as anyone who pursues coupledness gets. This book will offer guidance on how they can best support the single at heart.

*Single at Heart* is for the one-time romantic partners of the single at heart who could never figure out what went wrong. Maybe they loved their person and that person really did love them. They tried to be kind, gracious, and understanding, but the relationship still didn't last. Maybe their single at heart person said, "It's not you, it's me." They should know that an explanation like that is not a polite dodge, it's the truth. People who are single at heart are never going to feel like they are living their best life if they try to put a romantic partner at the center of it, and that really isn't their partner's fault.

*Single at Heart* is also for the parents of grown children who are single at heart. This one is personal.

As I write this, I am sixty-nine years old, living in Summerland, California, and I've been single my whole life. I live alone and don't have kids or pets. I had a few romantic relationships with men when I was very young. I would have been truer to myself if I'd had none at all. I wake up every day feeling immensely grateful that I get to live this single life that I cherish.

For the first forty-five years of my life, my mother never said a word about my single status. In the seven years she lived after my father died, we occasionally traveled together, just the two of us, and we spent some holidays together. We talked about a lot of things, but she never pressured me to marry, not even subtly. I was proud of that. I thought it meant that she could see that staying single wasn't an issue for me. I never complained about it, collected bridal magazines, or mused dreamily about some future prince. I had an engaging career. In Charlottesville, where I taught at the University of Virginia for several decades, I owned a home that I loved. I've always had close friends, and she met many of them.

In the last conversation I had alone with her, as she lay dying, she brought up my single life for the first time. "I worry about you," she said.

I don't remember what I said in response, but I do remember that I was stunned and saddened. I wish she had understood that for me, and the millions like me, staying single was how I stayed happy and fulfilled. I wish I knew then what I know now and could have helped her to understand. I wish I had already written this book.

# 1

## Are You Single at Heart?

“**H**ow do you know if you were meant to be single?” It’s a question I’ve been asked many times. Sometimes it comes from a place of anguish, from people who are powerfully drawn to single life, but worry that their preference means something is wrong with them. Other times the people posing the question sound relieved, as if they’ve realized for the first time that maybe there’s nothing wrong with them at all. I want them to feel something even better than relief, because single life, for people who flourish when single, is a *joyful, psychologically rich, and authentic* life. I want them to feel proud.

I don’t use the phrase “meant to be single,” because it suggests a whiff of judgment, as if the people in question are stuck being single because they just don’t have what it takes to be coupled. People I call “single at heart” are, like those “meant to be single,” destined to be single, but for all the best reasons.

Mary, a thirty-three-year-old from Buffalo, New York, said, “I identify as single at heart because I live my best life when I’m single. By best life I mean that I am thriving, able to be the happiest, most genuine version of myself.” For those like Mary, single feels like who we are at our very core.

Some people are single by default or by defeat. That’s not us. The single at heart are not single only because we “have issues” or because we are “too picky.” We are not single just because we were unlucky in love or traumatized by previous romantic relationships. Single is not a phase for us. We will not outgrow it. Single life is not our Plan B. It is our first and best choice.

Single can be defined either legally or socially. You are officially, legally single if you are not married. You can be in a long-term, committed romantic

relationship with someone you've been living with for decades, but if you never made it official, you are still legally single. You would not be socially single though. Socially single people do not have a serious romantic partner. They are the solo singles, single both legally and socially.

The "at heart" part of single at heart suggests a passion for single life, and an authenticity. It is also a door that opens a bit, to let in a few people who don't fit anyone's definition of single, but who, at heart, feel that single is who they really are. They are the people who are married or in a serious romantic relationship who yearn to be single, but do not want to hurt their partner by leaving. They also include people who have romantic partners they don't want to leave, but who insist that, at heart, they are single. As you will see, their relationships are not very conventional ones. They try to incorporate into their lives what the uncoupled single at heart find so dear, such as generous servings of solitude and boatloads of freedom.

## Do You Qualify as Single at Heart?

The best way to know whether you are single at heart is to read the stories I'm sharing in this book of the people who already know that they qualify, and my discussions of the meaning of their experiences. The more you identify with those stories, the more likely you are to be single at heart. The more you *wish* you could be like them, the more likely it is that if you really gave single life a chance, you might like it more than you ever dreamed you could. Some people are like a woman I heard from during the pandemic, who desperately sought romantic coupling her whole life until she finally spent time on her own during the pandemic and discovered that she loved it.

Another way to get a sense of whether you are single at heart is to take the quiz at the end of this chapter. The quiz begins with fourteen questions. Then, participants are told, "If you are single at heart, single life suits you. You are not single because you have 'issues' or just haven't found a partner yet. Instead, living single is a way for you to lead your most meaningful and authentic life. Even people who are not single may be single at heart. Do you

think you are single at heart?” In response, participants could choose from four answers: Yes; In more than a few ways, yes, but not all; Maybe in a few ways, but mostly not; and No.

People who are most clearly single at heart answer “Yes” to the question of whether they think they are single at heart. They typically give the single at heart answer to all fourteen questions, or close to it. The people who are most clearly not single at heart answer “No” to that question. They answer very few questions the way someone who is single at heart would, typically between zero and four questions.

I consider myself deeply and unambivalently single at heart, but I would not have scored a perfect fourteen on the quiz. My downfall is the question, “Do you have a sense of personal mastery—a can-do attitude and a sense that you can do just about anything you set your mind to?” Eighty-six percent of people who are clearly single at heart answer yes to that question. With their can-do attitude, and without the temptation to rely on a romantic partner to do what they don’t know how to do or don’t like to do, they master a whole array of skills. That serves them well throughout their lives. I’m in the 14 percent of the single at heart who do not have a sense of personal mastery. I don’t think I can do just about anything I set my mind to; what’s more, if it is something that doesn’t interest me, I don’t even want to try to learn it. In high school, for example, I very nearly failed a mechanical aptitude test. If I were married, I’d be shamelessly dependent on my spouse to do whatever I didn’t like doing and I would have even fewer skills than I have now.

Of all the people who had taken the single at heart quiz by the time I analyzed the data for this book—nearly nine thousand people from more than one hundred nations—29 percent scored as clearly single at heart. Because the people who took the quiz were those who learned about it and were interested in it, and not a representative sample of the adults in the US or any other nation, the findings do not necessarily mean that 29 percent of all adults are single at heart.

In other research, representative national samples of German adults, eighteen and older, have been asked to indicate the extent of their agreement



with the statement, “I would like to have a partner,” on a five-point scale. Hebrew University sociologist Elyakim Kislev looked at the responses of the solo single people: they were not married, not cohabiting with a romantic partner, and did not have a romantic partner who lived elsewhere.<sup>43</sup> Some had never married, and others were divorced. More than fifty-six hundred participants fit those criteria. Overall, 21 percent of them said that they did not want a partner, choosing either the most definitive no (“not at all”) or the next most definitive option. The people who were divorced were even more likely to say that they did not want a partner than the people who had never been married, 27 percent compared to 19 percent.

Not everyone who does not want a partner is single at heart. Some, for example, may be fed up with coupled life rather than enthralled by single life. Nonetheless, the results of the German survey and my own single at heart survey both suggest the same thing: substantial numbers of people just don’t want to be coupled. Even as the over-the-top celebration of marriage, weddings, and coupling that I call “matrimania” continues to run wild, and even as many countries around the world continue to respect, value, and advantage people who are coupled over those who are single in their laws, policies, and practices, and in everyday social interactions, at least one in five single people in Germany, and probably in many other nations as well, are just saying “no thanks.”

## Our Joyful Lives

I always lived my most fulfilling, creative, happy, exciting life as a single.

—Eva (forty-four, London, England)

In describing single life in such exuberant terms, Eva speaks for many of us. In fact, if you want to answer just one question from the single at heart quiz, instead of all fourteen, to know if you are likely to be single at heart, it would be this one: “When you think about all the potential joys of single life, what

do you conclude?” Of those who are clearly single at heart, 96 percent answer, “Sounds great!” Of those who are clearly not single at heart, only 7 percent think that single life sounds great.

We who are single at heart revel in our single life and all it has to offer. It’s a delicious experience we get to savor every day. Sally, a forty-five-year-old from Austria, said, “Singledom is very much a state I enjoy and relish. I love to live alone, spend time alone, travel alone, and do things alone. I do not feel I am missing something or someone but feel happy and complete as an individual.”

People who are powerfully drawn to single life, but who are currently in a romantic relationship, often find themselves yearning for their single lives. Sally shared, “I have enjoyed relationships when I have been in them but ultimately I felt a need to be on my own again and I never wanted to live with anyone.” A man told me he was in a relationship with “a very nice guy,” but added, “I have basically daydreamt about my solo life every day.” A woman married to a man said, “More and more often, I fantasize about being alone again. Being free.”

When social psychologist Wendy Morris and I studied stereotypes of single people, we found what we expected: people think single people are not as happy as married people.<sup>44</sup> They also think that single people become even more unhappy as they grow older. The single at heart defy those stereotypes. Over the course of their adult life, the more single people embrace their single lives, the more satisfied they feel. That’s not just what I learned from the people who shared their life stories with me; it is also the conclusion of a study of more than seventeen thousand Germans, eighteen and older, who reported the degree to which they were pining for a partner, and their satisfaction with their lives, over and over again, for up to ten years.<sup>45</sup> Single people who are not trying to un-single themselves are leading the life they want, and it just keeps getting better.

None of this means that we are happy all the time. No one is. But we are happy that we get to be single. We are grateful for our single lives

in the best of times, and we are grateful even in the worst of times. When life taunts us with some of the most threatening experiences imaginable, we remain undeterred. The pandemic did not send us fleeing into the arms of a romantic partner. I live in Southern California, a land of wildfires. When a particularly ferocious fire came barreling toward my home and my phone blared with the warning that I had to evacuate immediately, I did not wish I had a romantic partner at my side. Kristin, age fifty-five, of Bellingham, Washington, who I'll talk more about later, faced the ultimate challenge. A car swerved into her as she was bicycling, leaving her mangled and barely breathing. She knew in those moments after she was hit that they could be her last, but she did not wish that she had stayed married. We really aren't just fooling ourselves about loving our single lives.

Because we who are single at heart love our single lives and don't want to ever unsingle ourselves, we are spared from some of the most painful emotions experienced by single people who really don't want to be single. One such emotion is the "ambiguous loss" of yearning to find a lifelong romantic partner, but not knowing whether that will ever happen. Karen Gail Lewis, author of *With or Without a Man*, defined that as "a loss for which there is no resolution," making it difficult to move on.<sup>46</sup> "Dear Therapist," an advice column, described it as "ambiguous grief—the intangible loss, the not knowing, the toggling between hope one minute and sadness the next."<sup>47</sup> It is hard for people struggling with that ambiguity to invest in their single lives and feel joyful about being single the way the single at heart do.

The single at heart are not spared from getting pitied. To be any kind of single person is to be at risk of being pitied. Sure, there are acknowledgments of strong, confident, happy single people in the media these days—I've done my share to encourage that—and yet the pity parties continue, mostly unabated.

To pity someone who is single at heart is to get our emotional profile all wrong. We know the feeling rules that tell us how we are supposed to experience things. But that's not how it works for us. One rule about feelings is that adults—women, especially—should feel badly when a younger sibling

marries before they do. I was happy for my younger brother when he got married. I love him and his wife. Marriage is what he wanted. It is not what I wanted, and it is not what I ever wanted. Why would I feel bad about not having something I don't want? Lily, a thirty-six-year-old from West Virginia, put it this way: "When my brother got married, I was happy for him but I was detached from the whole ceremony. I didn't think, *Wow, I can't wait until I find someone and get married.*"

You can be single at heart and still be happy for people who are married. Single at heart is about being happily single. It is not about being anti-coupling or anti-marriage, though those attitudes are not disqualifying. I'm against using legal marriage as a criterion for access to special benefits and protections, as happens in the US, but for me, that's something different from being against romantic coupling.

My older brother is married. He and his wife live nearly two thousand miles away, but we visit each other and stay in touch. I'm the last person in the world who would know what goes on inside anyone's marriage, but they seem to have a very nice relationship, easy and loving. They've traveled the world together. They've gone to some fabulous restaurants. Stuck at home during the pandemic, they Zoomed into wine and cheese tastings hosted by the iconic New Orleans restaurant, Commander's Palace.

I'm happy for them too. I love them. And I'm not envious. I don't want to be part of a couple, not even an awesome one. If I were traveling the world with someone, I'd want my own room. I'd want to go off on my own some of the time. Maybe a lot of the time. I have had plenty of marvelous meals with friends and relatives, and I enjoyed every moment. When those dinner companions included couples, I have always been so very happy that I wasn't them. At the end of the evening, they went home together; I got to go home and be alone.

Another emotion rule that is routinely violated by people who are single at heart is how we feel if we get into a romantic relationship and it ends. We know that the break up of a serious relationship is supposed to be devastating. Maybe we even have friends or relatives who couldn't get

out of bed for days after one. We who are single at heart sometimes also experience sadness and pain if a meaningful romantic relationship ends. But we experience something else too, sometimes much more strongly: relief. It feels good to return to the life that feels natural and comfortable for us, our single life. In the single at heart quiz, 84 percent of the single at heart reported feeling relief if they were in a romantic relationship that ended, compared to just 12 percent of people who are not single at heart.

We who are single at heart also break the rules about the things that are supposed to scare us. We are unafraid of loneliness because we are not very susceptible to it. We are unafraid of spending time alone, living alone, coming home to an empty home, going to bed alone, or waking up alone. We are unafraid of dining alone, traveling alone, or spending holidays and vacations alone. Most of us are unafraid of growing old alone, and yes, we are even unafraid of dying alone. Most importantly, most fundamentally, we are unafraid of being single. We *love* being single.

That's one of our superpowers. Because we are unafraid of being single, we get to invest joyfully and unreservedly in our single lives. We are spared from ruminating about what we might be missing, plotting ways to find The One, sinking time and money into the search, and presenting ourselves in ways we think will be most appealing to a potential partner.

A whole program of psychological research has explored the implications of being afraid of being single. Psychologist Stephanie Spielmann and her colleagues when she was at the University of Toronto created a scale to measure that fear, with items such as "I feel anxious when I think about being single forever" and "If I end up alone in life, I will probably feel that there is something wrong with me."<sup>48</sup> I'm more interested in the people who are *unafraid* of being single, the ones who disagree with those kinds of statements. They don't feel anxious or deficient when they think about staying single. Their psychological profiles are impressive. The fearlessly single are shown to be less likely to feel lonely and less likely to be depressed. They are also less neurotic and more open to new experiences.

Not everyone who is unafraid of being single is single at heart. Some people are unafraid of being single but are still interested in romantic coupling. Those people have standards.<sup>49</sup> They are not running away from single life toward anyone who will have them. Shown online profiles of potential dating partners, they are discriminating. They are mostly interested in people who seem caring and responsive. In contrast, people who are afraid of being single show almost as much interest in self-centered people. In speed dating events, people who are unafraid of being single give out their contact data to fewer people. When they do become romantically involved, they are less likely to feel needy and dependent. For example, they typically disagree with the statement, “If I couldn’t be in this relationship, I would lose an important part of myself.” They are also more likely to break off an unsatisfying romantic relationship than people who are afraid of being single.

People who are unafraid of being single also navigate the end of romantic relationships more skillfully, the research shows.<sup>50</sup> In the immediate aftermath, they are less likely to try to get back in touch with their ex, and they experience less yearning for their ex. Long after the breakup, people who are afraid of being single are still pining for their partner; those who are unafraid usually are not.

Just because the single at heart are unafraid of being single, that doesn’t mean we have no fears at all. I live in fear that my computer will crash. I worry that the cost of living in my spectacularly beautiful Southern California town will eventually exceed my means. I’m scared that my health will someday fail so catastrophically that I will no longer be able live alone and care for myself. That last one is not a fear of being single, it is a fear of not being able to live my life as I wish to live it, independently in a place of my own.

In the chapter “Domestic Gulags” in her book *Against Love*, Laura Kipnis offers a sampling of the answers she got to the question, “What can’t you do because you’re in a couple?”: “You can’t leave the house without saying where

you are going . . . you can't go to parties alone . . . you can't be a slob . . . you can't leave the dishes for later . . . you can't leave the bathroom door open . . . you can't watch soap operas without getting made fun of . . . you can't eat what you want."<sup>51</sup> It goes on like that for eight pages.

When a trio of social scientists studied a similar dynamic more systematically, they also found that being with a romantic partner can be draining.<sup>52</sup> In the study, more than three hundred coupled people, ranging in age from nineteen to ninety-two, described who they were with and how they were feeling on at least two occasions. Being with their partner did not protect them from feeling frustrated, worried, sad, or angry. In fact, except for the people who stood out from the rest in consistently describing their relationship in the most positive ways, the participants experienced more of those negative feelings when they were with their partner than when their partner was not around.

When I hear from people who want to stay single, sometimes they tell me stories about the things they were not allowed to do when they were in a romantic relationship, or how they felt more self-conscious or more wary or more inadequate or more miserable when their partner was around than when they were alone or with friends. They chafe at what romantic partnering meant to them, and they don't want to go back to that ever again.

Some women tell me they got tired of doing more than their fair share of the dishes and the laundry and the caretaking and organizing outings and remembering everyone's birthday. Some men tell me they felt suffocated.

I also hear from people who have trust issues, or who have parents who criticized them relentlessly when they were children and then never stopped. Some confide their history of emotional problems. Some report that they have never seen a committed relationship they would want for themselves; their parents were not good role models, and neither was anyone else.

I listen to them with great interest; but if their only reasons for wanting to stay single are negative ones, they are not single at heart. We who are single

at heart love being single, and not because we are running away from coupled life or nursing old wounds; we are leaping into the arms of our single life because of the opportunities it offers for us to flourish.

What about the people who thrive when they are single but who also have had troubling experiences? Holly, who is thirty-four and from the Washington, DC, area believes she is single at heart. “I’m good on my own,” she told me. “I’m very independent, love to do my own thing, do quick solo weekend trips, go to dinner on my own, and have an active social life.”

She’s worried, though, that she may identify as single at heart for the wrong reasons, and that’s why she wrote to me. She struggled with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) in her childhood and through her twenties. She had some decent experiences when dating, but also some traumatizing ones.

Holly is happily single, but other people keep telling her that what she’s experiencing isn’t really happiness, and that she’s in denial. They tell her she just hasn’t met the right person yet. They pathologize her, proclaiming that she is afraid of intimacy. And sometimes she doubts herself. She wonders whether her struggles with OCD make her “closed off to romantic relationships.” She’s concerned that maybe she just hasn’t tried hard enough at dating.

I told Holly that I don’t think it matters at all if her experiences with dating were disastrous or delightful. It doesn’t matter if she had OCD or has been a paragon of mental health. We who are single at heart are not defined or motivated by what we have left behind. If Holly wanted to be single only as an escape from her painful dating experiences, or solely as a way of dodging anything else she did not like, then she would not be single at heart. But Holly, who is very independent, who happily travels on her own and goes out to dinner on her own and also has an active social life, is really good at single life. She should be congratulating herself, and her friends should look up to her.

If you are single, you may recognize what has happened to Holly—she has gotten the singles treatment. Her own feelings of happiness have not been taken



at face value; they have been doubted and examined and turned against her.

I encouraged Holly to do something I advise throughout this book: flip the script. Imagine asking married people if they really are happily married or if they are just fooling themselves. Imagine speculating that the real reason they are married is that they never learned to stand on their own two feet. Maybe some pathology is in play—they are just too needy and dependent to be single.

Holly worried that she didn't try hard enough at dating. But why aren't coupled people concerned that they may not have tried hard enough to live single?

I don't think anyone, coupled or single, should be treated in disrespectful ways. Coupled people typically are not. It is the single people, especially those who love their single lives, who are put on the defensive. They shouldn't be.

## Our Psychologically Rich Lives

I was raised by society to dream of my wedding,  
but I wish I had been dreaming of my life.<sup>53</sup>

—Tracee Ellis Ross

"You complete me," Tom Cruise said to Renée Zellweger in a scene from *Jerry Maguire* that remains iconic more than a quarter-century later. You can mock the sentiment, but many people believe it with all their heart. Without a romantic partner—just the right romantic partner—they feel incomplete and shrunken, like something is missing.

Not the single at heart. For us it is single life that is expansive, that affords us a whole wide world of possibilities. If we settled for a life of conventional marriage or long-term romantic coupling, our lives would feel smaller. That, to us, would be a lesser life. That's not how everyone experiences coupled life, of course, but it is how we do.