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[Back to previous page](#)

The single life: Some people never find the love of their lives. And live to tell about it.

By [Ellen McCarthy](#), Published: February 10

If Wendy Braitman were writing a screenplay about her life, this scene would play at the top, to set the tone.

It is 1993, and she is the 39-year-old only daughter of her parents' long and loving marriage. Her mother has suffered a stroke, so Braitman has flown from California to New York to be with her. She finds her mom awake, but groggy, and hopped up on meds. After an embrace, her mother asks, "So, how's your boyfriend?"

"Mom, what boyfriend?" Braitman replies. "We broke up six months ago."

Braitman patiently retells the story of their split: He wasn't the right guy, it just didn't work out.

Her mom reacts with disappointment. Then a moment later, she looks up and says, "So, how's your boyfriend?"

Dumbfounded, Braitman repeats the explanation. After another beat, her mom asks the question again. And then again. And again.

"We went around and around in this circle of hell," Braitman recalls from her condo at the foot of the Hollywood Hills. "In the little capacity she had left of her brain, all she wanted to know was: Who am I with?"

Braitman's mom died six weeks later. She had always loved her daughter fiercely and supported her fully, except in this one aspect, her singleness.

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Even today, Braitman sometimes mentally revises past conversations to find the right words to make her mom understand: She didn't stay single on purpose.

Braitman is 58 now, though she has the carriage of a much younger woman. Her body is taut and pliable from rigorous daily ballet classes. She wears boyfriend jeans, rolled to the ankle, and chunky sweaters layered over tight cotton shirts. It's the look of someone with great style, opting for comfort. Her brown, curly hair tapers to the neck, highlighted with flashes of caramel. And her conversations, like her movements, are imbued with the elegance and self-awareness of a woman who has looked deeply inward and come up feeling more or less okay.

But she wanted a partner. She still does.

Braitman grew up in Queens, watching her father dote on her mother. She saw her brother become a wonderful husband. She does not think marriage is broken and does not think life — at least her life — is better lived alone. It just worked out that way.

She went to college, moved across country, built a career in media. She dated, took up hobbies and developed a loving circle of friends. For most of her life, she assumed the right one would eventually show up. Now, she thinks there has been a detour.

After Thanksgiving last year, Braitman read a review of Diane Keaton's new autobiography, "[Then Again](#)." It contained this quote: "I never found a home in the arms of a man."

The sentence laid Braitman flat. That's her truth, too. Of all the men she has known romantically — and there have been plenty — none ever felt like home. It's that plain. Whatever point-counterpoint, yin-yang recognition of a kindred other happens to people, it has not happened to her. At least, not yet.

* * *

We talk a lot about singles, but we don't talk about this: what it's like to live without a partner while longing for one, over years, then decades.

Just [51 percent of the adult population is married](#), down from 72 percent in 1960. So we talk about swinging, "Sex and the City" singles and extended adolescences. We talk about the delay of marriage or the rise of cohabitation and single motherhood. Depending on our perspective, we cheer the broadening definitions of family or bemoan the breakdown of the nuclear unit.

But the cousin or neighbor or co-worker who always seems to be on his or her own? We don't give them much thought.

It's easier not to. Perhaps as much as religion, our society hinges on belief in romantic love. How many songs and novels revolve around the long search and eventual discovery of a beloved? The phrase "happily ever after" implies a singular outcome: two lives made ever better by virtue of their union.

Never mind that close to half of [marriages end in divorce](#), that many of those who stay married do so unhappily, and that, rationally, we all know life can be a struggle regardless of relationship status. Ninety percent of us will marry — often repeatedly — on the belief that marriage can add something fundamentally good to our lives.

Certainly, there's a huge biological imperative to pair up — procreation and protection of the young used to demand it. But reproductive technologies have expanded our baby-making options, and security systems do a good job of deflecting predators. And we still want the ineffable. We want love.

The hope is for a constant companion who will bear intimate witness to our lives. Who will heighten our joy and ease our suffering. Who will be our designated collaborator and caretaker, sparing us the effort of constantly fending for ourselves.

And we're promised as much. There is a lid for every pot, they say. Someone for everyone.

Hollywood promotes this idea and so do our overbearing aunts and women's magazines. And so do I. Each week for this newspaper [I write the story](#) of two people who met, fell in love and married. When I sit down with

couples, they often say things like, “When you know, you know.”

And I believe them. But I also know it doesn’t happen for everyone.

* * *

Ninety miles north of Braitman’s place, Bella DePaulo wakes up each morning to a stunning view of the Pacific Ocean from the house she rents in the steeply inclined town of Summerville, Calif.

“Isn’t this heaven?” she asks, giddy with her good fortune, as she leads me to the deck.

In 10 years, this social psychologist has become the country’s leading expert on singledom. She has written three books and attracted a loyal following for her blog on the Psychology Today Web site.

Her message is that society has it all wrong about singles — casting the whole lot as miserable lonely hearts, too selfish or damaged to marry. Moreover, the stereotype leads to exclusion from dinner parties and the expectation that they’ll work holidays because there’s no family waiting at home.

DePaulo, now 58, began noticing the ostracization as an assistant professor at the University of Virginia. When no one wanted a weeknight assignment, it went to her, and while her colleagues were all chummy during the week, on weekends they left her out of social activities.

“Do they just not like me?” she’d wonder. “Or is it because I’m single and they’re coupled, and couples date other couples essentially.”

DePaulo began to ask other single people about their experiences and quickly found herself wrapped in late-night conversations about the judgments and pressures they face.

She delved into academic literature, expecting to find studies proclaiming married folks to have more happiness, health, wealth and longevity.

And she did. But much of the research was flawed. Her book, [“Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After,”](#) breaks down the findings of a 2004 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that garnered an online headline [“Married Adults Are Healthiest.”](#) In fact, DePaulo writes, the study found that people who were married or had always been single were equally healthy. It was those who were cohabitating, separated, divorced or widowed who were significantly less well.

In response to claims that married people live longer, she points to a study that started in 1921 and tracked 1,528 11-year-olds throughout their lives. Those who either stayed single or stayed married lived the longest. Divorcees and widows had shorter lives. “What mattered was consistency,” she writes. “Not marriage.”

DePaulo’s analysis of a much-lauded happiness study argues that married people get a bump in happiness around their wedding, then return to about the same level of happiness they had before marriage. But the book does not dwell on the fact that single people, who had a slightly lower happiness level from the start, saw their contentment decline over the years. (On scale of one to 10, their average life satisfaction began at 7 and slipped to 6.6 after seven years. The average score of married people hovered around 7.2.)

DePaulo, now a visiting professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara, is a warm, enthusiastic

presence who wears a wide smile and no trace of makeup. Throughout high school and college she felt as if she were waiting for a switch to turn on that would finally make her want to find a partner.

Then, she realized there was no switch. “No,” she remembers thinking. “This is who I am. I’m single. I love it.”

Her phrase for it is “single at heart.” She has simply never had what she calls “the urge to merge.” For someone single at heart, she says, being coupled would feel as unnatural and constrictive as a heterosexual marriage would feel to a gay man.

There’s no way of knowing how many of America’s 96.6 million unmarried adults would consider themselves single at heart. Pew Research found that 55 percent of the singles it surveyed said they were not looking for a partner, though this includes widows and divorcees.

After leaving DePaulo, I tried to think of people I’ve known who fit her category. A few came to mind, but I could name many more who have spent a long time looking for lasting love.

And this, DePaulo acknowledges, is a “much harder spot to be in.”

* * *

Braitman spent years refining her strategies for living single. She always has a plan for major holidays, so she doesn’t end up eating alone. There is a handyman on call and friends lined up as emergency contacts. She knows how to ask for help.

Five years ago, she set out to write a book for other singles and an agent suggested she start a blog to accumulate a following. The book never came to fruition, but her blog, [First Person Singular](#), became the repository for her musings on solo life.

The short entries are often emotionally loaded and accompanied by an evocative painting or photo. Braitman is a spare, beautiful writer whose tone oscillates between hopeful and heartsick. Most often, she is melancholy.

Beneath a picture of a dark-haired woman, she wrote: “It can be marvelous to be free; it can also make you wince with pain when people tell you they envy that freedom.”

In November, she posted: “I know how to navigate through the holiday season, but I don’t love it. I’m not sure by whose side I belong.”

She hoped the blog would allow her to serve as an example, showing others that a single life could be rich and meaningful. Growing up, she watched as family members pitied two great aunts who were single. She ingested and feared the idea of spinsterhood.

But as an adult, she found that the projection bore no resemblance to the reality of her life. It could be lonely, yes, but she was not crabby or closed off. She has been active and perpetually open to the prospect of a life partner. But she has not found one, and so, she writes, “I decided to make the most of it, with as much grace, spirit and levity as possible.”

After graduating from the University of Buffalo, Braitman tried to make it as a dancer. Her boyfriend at the time was a Jewish man studying to be a doctor. Her mother adored him. But in her heart, Braitman knew it wasn’t

quite right, and that if they married, her life would be a shadow of his.

So she moved to San Francisco, where she hosted a television show about the arts and created a business to help independent filmmakers connect with financiers. She became an early adopter of online dating. Her 20s and early 30s were a whirl of social events and romances, some lasting a couple of years. She never considered that her life wouldn't evolve into commitment, domesticity and children.

But a breakup at 36 gave her a twinge of panic. If she wanted to have kids, time was running short. She was never obsessed with the idea of children, though, so even that sense of alarm soon passed.

After she had spent 24 years in San Francisco, the American Film Institute offered her a job in Los Angeles, where she helped launched Silverdocs, the Silver Spring documentary festival. Well-meaning friends assured her that L.A. was a bigger pond, and she was sure to meet someone there.

But Braitman was almost 50 by then and beginning to come to terms with the possibility that marriage might not be in the cards. So, she put her finances in order and figured out who could pick her up from the mechanic. She went to the movies alone and routinely cooked for others.

Things would almost certainly be tougher for a single person with fewer friends or financial resources. But even for Braitman, it can be a struggle. Family reunions are fraught. Baby showers can be intensely awkward. And at weddings, she feels acutely alone. "Sometimes," she says, "the only thing left is to know that it's okay to be uncomfortable."

* * *

James Geoffrey watched his parents divorce when he was 9, but it didn't scare him off marriage. It made him think that most people don't know how to work at it. And he was sure that he would.

A couple of buddies married right after high school. A few more got hitched in college. His younger brother married his first love and quickly had four children. Geoffrey moved from Michigan to Washington and got a job on Capitol Hill.

The ratio of men to women was in his favor there, and Geoffrey dated a lot. But it often seemed that the women he was attracted to weren't interested in him, and those who did express interest weren't his type. He wanted someone smart, but not overbearing. A woman with a sense of humor who could put up with his quirks.

But he found he couldn't put up with theirs. "As I've gotten older, my waist has gotten wider, my hair has gotten thinner and my tolerance has gone down," says Geoffrey, now 48.

In the master bedroom of his Falls Church apartment hangs a world map with 38 push pins, each representing a country Geoffrey has visited. He keeps the place perfectly neat, with a floral couch, a leather recliner and an end table lined up with remote controls.

With the exception of a college girlfriend, no relationship lasted more than a few months. Dates often felt like job interviews, but he continued to accept offers of set-ups, certain his turn would come.

But four years ago, he realized it might not. And, more importantly, he wasn't sure he wanted it to. "I decided, 'No, it's not right for me,'" he says. "There are a lot of nice girls out there, but I'm not the right guy for them."

It became clear to Geoffrey that he liked his life as it was. The only unpleasant part was when he was questing for what it wasn't. He had friends and travels and long summers at the pool. And he had peace.

"Day to day is probably when I most know that I want to be single," says Geoffrey, who works in public affairs. "You deal with so much crap at work. By the time I leave work, I don't want to deal with people any more."

He thinks that it is perhaps easier for him than it would be for a woman. "Confirmed bachelor," after all, has a more positive connotation than "old maid."

But there are moments of sadness. Sometimes, he'll pass a father with children on the street and think, "I would've been a good dad." So, he spends time with his godchildren, has long conversations with friends and savors the familiarity of an Italian restaurant in Alexandria where they have a table waiting for him every Friday night.

* * *

We assume a single life would be incomplete, and quite possibly awful. A 2010 survey of 18- to 25 year-olds found that their biggest fear for the future wasn't illness or poverty. It was "being alone."

And when we meet someone who hasn't married by 40 or 50, we want an explanation. So, we assign one: He's a commitment-phobe. She's too picky. They all have "issues." Because if there was no reason, it could happen to any of us — and that's not a prospect we're eager to confront.

Braitman, the blogger, knows people assume it's somehow her fault, and they're quick to try to fix the problem. "Everyone's weighed in on it," she says. "'You should wear your clothes tight. You should not have short hair. You should dress more like a girl.' I think I've heard everything."

None of it feels like the truth. Of course she is selective — who isn't? And haven't other women with short hair found husbands? "I have the skills that I could be a good partner," she says.

If it's a person's lot in life to live with a chronic disease or raise a child with disabilities, we are sympathetic. But if they don't have a partner, we assume a character flaw.

"There is so much sadness and guilt and shame," she says. "There's a lot of shame. I think if you could just take some of that away it would make the whole thing a lot easier."

Braitman once posted a "Husband Benefits Pie Chart," delineating the ways in which she imagines life would be improved by a spouse. Companionship was the biggest portion, followed by financial stability, children and physical intimacy. One of the smaller slices just said, "Fitting in." Having a husband would mean not having to explain herself, feel like a tag-along or an outcast.

Braitman is stretched out on the floor of the condominium she bought last year. It is the first home she's ever owned. For nine years, she lived with her best friend, a gay man named William. The period "was a good respite," she says. "It was like getting off the wheel and having a built-in life that was just there."

But as William's partner prepared to move in last year, Braitman began to feel extraneous and decided it was time for a place of her own. ("Gay marriage is liberating for everyone except their single friends," she jokes.)

For months, she searched for the right place. “I had a list of the things that I wanted, and none of the places I looked at really lived up to that,” she says. “I started to think, ‘Well, maybe I’m just too picky. Maybe this is just like what everyone says about me and men.’ ”

Then, a two-bedroom near West Hollywood dropped into her price bracket. It had most of what she wanted, so the day after she saw it, she made an offer. Today, it is filled with modern furniture, art books and a closet devoted solely to shoes.

“It was just this metaphor for, ‘All right, it had enough of what I wanted, and I understood its value,’ ” she says. “I’m certain it would be the same if I met the right guy.”

* * *

I first met Aviva Kempner at a wedding I was covering. She introduced herself and said she reads the love stories religiously, analyzing each pair’s saga with friends.

Kempner has played matchmaker for 10 couples. Three more — including her brother and sister-in-law — met at gatherings she hosted. Another pair is living together.

“I’m the biggest romantic in the world,” she says over a lunch of fried tofu and broccoli. She grew up watching romantic movies with her mother every Sunday and woke at 5 a.m. to see last year’s royal wedding. But she never married.

She is a 65-year-old [documentary filmmaker](#) who lives in a Northwest Washington house filled with colorful ceramic tiles and her mother’s abstract paintings. She has thick black hair, full eyebrows and a way of bringing everyone she meets into her circle.

There were long relationships — two years, seven years — but each ended short of the altar. Two of the men went on to marry the next woman they were with, so Kempner jokes that she “whips them into shape.”

She wanted children. And for a while, she thought seriously about having one on her own. Then, she got wrapped up with a documentary and, well, it just didn’t happen. Kempner regrets it, but says her films are her babies. And she is extraordinarily close to her three nieces, who push her constantly to try online dating.

Delaney Kempner, a 21-year-old senior at the University of Michigan, says her aunt has shaped the way she thinks about single life. “It’s not something to be dreaded,” she says. But she still hopes Kempner will find a great guy. “She doesn’t need someone to make her happy, but it would make me so happy to know that that this one last part of her life would be fulfilled.”

Online dating seems like too much gamesmanship, but Kempner is always on the lookout. Her dream now is to meet a nice, single grandfather. That way she could become a grandma, at least.

Sometimes, the people she introduces promise to set her up in return. “But,” she says, “The line I always get is, ‘Oh it has to be someone very special.’ Which of course is what I want to hear but, you know....” It usually doesn’t happen.

At the end of our lunch I ask Kempner if solo life is as bad as society would have us believe.

After a beat, she says, “I think if I found true love now, it would be the icing on the cake — but the cake is still pretty good.”

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When Braitman started the blog, one of her goals was to answer the central question of her life: Why? Why had she stayed single when so many around her married. “Is it luck?” she wondered. “Is it fate? Is it 20 different things I could’ve done differently?”

But as months went by, she says, “I couldn’t come up with an answer. That’s when I just thought, ‘The answer is to stop asking the question — because there is no answer.’”

Again and again, she catalogued all the men she has known, trying to figure out if she missed something in one of them. “But I can’t look at my past and think, ‘He’s the one who got away,’” she says.

And she feels equally confident in her decision not to pretend some wrong guy was the right one. “Settling just never seemed like the right move,” Braitman says. “Because that, I think, tears at your soul.”

What Braitman still has is hope. It can be tricky, some days, to balance hope with acceptance, but at her core, she believes the right guy might still come along.

Though she loathes “high-volume dating,” she knows she needs to get back on a dating Web site. “It’s hard in modern life to connect with people. I just don’t know another way around it,” she says. “I want to have romance. I want to have sex.”

And if she has those things, but never meets a long-term companion, she will be okay. Twice a day, Braitman reminds herself to be grateful for all that she has: good health, great friends, a lovely new home and a poodle mix named Rose who is always happy to cuddle.

She has a nourishing spiritual life and has become politically active, lobbying on behalf of L.A.’s immigrant communities. She has ballet and the blog and letters from people who have found solace in her words.

After several hours in Braitman’s comfortable home, with Rose curled up on the couch, it’s striking to think about how much of the distress surrounding her singleness stems not from her actual existence, but the reactions of others, whether real or perceived.

“I’ve survived and had a really full, rich, interesting life,” she says. “Part of writing about it is spreading the good news: Move on, there’s nothing to pity here.”

There’s no way of knowing how a movie about Braitman’s life would end. But perhaps that’s not the point. Maybe the point is that it would be surprising, compelling and deep. And that its theme would be universal.

“It’s about having something we want and not getting it,” she says. “And then how do you live your life and have it be good?

“That’s life. That’s what living is. For everyone.”

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