

Love: It May Surprise You

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Love: It May Surprise You

By Lisa Roney

UCF Forum columnist

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“Reader, I married him”—the classic line from *Jane Eyre*—may have been the main referent for unusual marriages for more than 100 years. Well, reader, I married him, too, but not until I was 49. What constitutes an unusual marriage constantly shifts.

In a way, I represent a trend. The U.S. Census Bureau has shown that the average age of marriage has been rising for decades. The census doesn’t identify the causes, but the average age has risen more for women than for men, so one speculation is that more women are going to college and putting their careers first. More generally, younger generations are more likely to be children of divorce and therefore approach marriage with more caution.

Nonetheless, the average age of first marriage for women is just 25.1 years and for men just 26.8 years. I say “just” because they seem awfully young to me, but, of course, throughout my 30s and 40s I frequently faced the question of why I wasn’t married. In fact, I withstood frequent drillings on the part of befuddled family, friends and even strangers. The inconceivability of my aloneness perhaps should have been a comfort—at least I had no obvious reasons that no one would ask, right?

I had given up on having children many years before. At the age of 11, my diagnosis of Type 1 diabetes came with dour-faced warnings in doctors’ offices and books that my parents should warn any suitor that I might not be able to carry off a healthy pregnancy. Even though the stats in this regard improved dramatically by the time I reached child-bearing age, I hadn’t been one to waste my time on fruitless pursuits, even as a child. With my steely eyed personality, I started early to plan other ways to make my life meaningful.

Of course, I wasn’t always alone. I dated, I shacked up, I broke up, then I started all over again. I never consciously marked marriage off my list of possibilities for my life, but like so many other single women, I lost my optimism. Almost everywhere I turned, another article would shriek the fact that past a certain age a woman’s chance of roping

a man into a commitment dwindled. By the time I turned 40, then 45, I figured it would never happen and did my best to make peace with that fact.

I even tried an online dating site—the one with the complex couples-matching procedures purported to find someone just for you. In a five-state area, it found me exactly zero good matches, which I found hilarious even then. When you're a weird girl, when you have a chronic illness, when you have a Ph.D., when you won't give up your cats if a guy doesn't like them—well, fuggedaboutit. I admit, I did have five cats.

It was around this time that I met Bruce at UCF faculty orientation. He was as new to Florida as I was and perhaps even a little bewildered since he came from Canada. We discovered that we shared academic interests, became friendly colleagues, then good friends. He first asked me out in the stairwell of Colbourn Hall, where we both had offices.

I said no—not because I didn't already adore him, but because I was still in the process of extricating myself from a dating relationship that had not gone well. Bruce and I stayed friends, but it was another year or so before we had our first official date. It resembled so many other good first dates—mine, his, yours, dates at 15, dates at 20, dates at 35, at 65 or 70, dates of the widowed, divorced, and single—that awareness of one's pulse, the intensified sense of smell that allows another person's presence to be intoxicating, the blips of shyness, the connection that we so often compare to electric current.

I remember the moment, a few months later, that I thought I might marry Bruce.

On a sweltering summer evening, we had a dinner reservation at a trendy downtown Orlando restaurant where the parking was terrible. Just as we pulled into a spot, a woman started knocking desperately on Bruce's car window. Immediately, he rolled it down. Huffing and puffing, the sweaty woman choked out that she was having an asthma attack and needed to get home to her oxygen. But she had missed the bus, and it would be another hour until the next one came. "No one will take me," she gasped out.

Without any hesitation, Bruce told her to get into the back seat, and off we went, following her spare directions into the heart of the poorest neighborhood in town. Within 10 minutes, we had her to her door. Ten easy minutes that no one else had been willing to take.

Something I think of as mature love rose immediately through me that evening. I knew that Bruce was someone I could trust to do well by me and by the world we share. It's not the love of 20-year-olds, or even of 25-year-olds, and I know that, strong as it felt, it might not have worked out for us. Although the statistics show a rising average age of marriage, they also show that more and more people never marry at all, by either choice or default. And Bruce had never lived with even one cat, after all.

I could just as easily have stayed single my entire life, and I never want to give false hopes to those who remain single and wish they weren't. Let me say, though, that romantic love can happen at any age.

And I never want to make any single person feel as though the loves of their lives—their children from former relationships, their nieces and nephews, their family and friends, their pets—aren't just as important as my love for my husband. They are. Maybe because I stayed single for so long, I know this as deeply as they do and value my friends, birth family, and pets intensely.

In February, this month of red hearts and sentimental expectations, let's just say that any true love—and I mean the real thing—is good. Whatever its age, whatever its form, love is love.

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