



Christine Estima

44, Toronto

I've never wanted to walk down the aisle. I'd rather chase my dreams of writing and travelling the world.



I was 13 when my parents decided to get divorced. My father cheated on my mother and went to live with the other woman. Seeing that happen had a huge impact on me.

In high school, I turned down every guy who wanted to date me, even if I liked them. I figured if what my dad did to my mom is what men do to women, then I wasn't interested. Girls I knew would talk about their dream wedding and what they would wear, but I never thought about that. Instead, I dreamed about the places I wanted to go, the experiences I wanted to have and my future career. I believe marriage is antithetical to feminism. Historically—and in my own life—I've seen women, including my mom, forced to make sacrifices for their marriages and children. I refuse to allow that to happen to me.

That said, I still love to love. I started dating in university, but I was mostly disappointed because

Christine Estima
at one of her
favourite Toronto
coffee shops,
Dineen Outpost.

Flying Solo

Studies show that women live happier and healthier lives when they're single. That may be why they're increasingly choosing singlehood. In fact, a recent Pew Research survey of nearly 5,000 people found a whopping 71 percent of single women—unmarried, widowed and divorced—above the age of 40 are not looking to couple up, compared to 42 percent of men. **Sanam Islam** spoke to three Canadian women about why they've decided to stay footloose and fancy-free.

my experiences didn't live up to my romcom ideals. I was looking for something more meaningful, but most guys in their 20s just want to have fun.

As I got older, one of the recurring issues I faced was men who felt threatened by a strong, independent woman. I've had boyfriends tell me what I can or cannot say and what I'm allowed to write about, even how I should laugh. One boyfriend, the only one I ever lived with, controlled what I wore—only black clothing and jeans because he thought colour was garish.

Not being married gives me the freedom to leave without legal or financial implications. I see so many girlfriends my age who are going through a divorce and it destroys them.

It's so freeing to be single. I've backpacked around the world by myself, published a novel (it follows an Arab immigrant family over several generations), been cast on British TV shows, lived in nine countries and met some incredible people.

During the past 17 years, I've been in five serious romantic relationships. In my most recent relationship, which lasted for five years, I came close to getting married. I told my partner I had a lot of reservations about it, but we were ready to plan our future together and figure out what that looked like for us. His family, who are Catholic, didn't like me because they knew I had no interest in having kids. I attended all of their baby showers, weddings and kids' birthday parties, but none of them showed up for my book



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launch—the biggest career event of my life—except for his mother. I spent a lot of time crying over that.

About three-and-a-half years into our relationship, though, my partner began experiencing serious mental health challenges. I was his caregiver for the rest of our time together. He wasn't responding to treatment, and ultimately we couldn't make the relationship work.

I've been on a few first dates in the year since our breakup, but my main goal is to continue this wacky, wild journey of being an author (I'm currently working on my second book). It's such a huge deal when someone says, "Your book really meant something to me." What greater compliment is there? I also never want to lose my wanderlust. I just got back from Portugal, and a dream of mine is to backpack through Vietnam.

I don't know if I'll ever meet somebody again who would change my mind about marriage, but I welcome the challenge. I'm always open to new ideas and ways of living, but at this age, I don't want to give up everything I've worked for.



PHOTO, CARMEN CHEUNG.



Sheila Thomas
60, Sooke, B.C.

After my divorce, I wasn't interested in remarrying. Instead, I bought a bus to share my love of art with others.



I WAS OPEN to getting married when I was younger, but I never met the right person. By the time I was in my late 30s, I was busy with my job on Vancouver Island as a group homes manager for people with developmental disabilities. Then I reconnected online with an old friend, whom I'll call Stan. We dated for six months before I married him at the age of 40.

There were signs early in our marriage that Stan had a gambling problem: He went over budget at the casino, insisted on always checking the mail and discouraged me from buying too many groceries. In 2013, I discovered that he had gambled away tens of thousands of dollars online. I gave him an ultimatum: get the gambling under control, or I would leave. We sought counselling, and he agreed to self-exclusion from B.C.'s casinos and to install software on his laptop that blocks gambling sites.

I wanted to believe everything was fixed, so in my naivety, I let him continue to manage our finances. I took on an additional job part-time and started a home-based business to help pay off the debt. I also handled the shopping, cooking and cleaning. Marriage made me put my feet into my mother's submissive slippers.

One day, about 10 years ago—and a decade into my marriage with Stan—I went to the mailbox and found a Visa statement. When I opened the envelope, I saw an amount owing that was even larger than the previous gambling debt Stan had accumulated, which was still outstanding. We would have to sell our house to pay off the debts. I knew our relationship was finished. At 50, I was starting again from zero.

I had a hard time after the marriage ended. I had lost my childhood friend, and I still loved him. But I also felt free to spend my money the way I wanted to, and I was glad I wouldn't have to take care of someone else, since my job already involved caregiving. Instead, I could focus on me. The divorce allowed me to ask: What do I want for *my* life?

I started painting. I wasn't particularly good, but it gave me a lot of emotional relief, so I kept at it. Four years later, I quit my day job to pursue creating and teaching art as a career.

In 2019, I refurbished a 1960s school bus to live in. I wanted to interview local artists and write about them on my blog, as well as teach painting classes. But before I could travel anywhere, the pandemic hit. My friend invited me to park my bus and teach art at her farm in Shirley, B.C., and I started offering free lessons to essential workers, which morphed into an art therapy class.

I lived on the bus for a couple of years, but now I have a condo in nearby Sooke, B.C. The bus is still parked on my friend's farm, where I host what I call "art hootenannies." They involve painting, eating lunch and homemade ice cream sandwiches, and having a hoot together! I am proud to say that I've inspired a lot of artists since I started *Sheels on Wheels*.

I'm now 60 and a happy single gal. The loves of my life are standard poodles—first Stroodle, who passed away in 2022 at the age of 13, and now Blueberry. Dog love is so fulfilling. Blueberry doesn't pay the bills, but she also doesn't gamble. It's a win-win.

My dreams for the future include painting a perfect landscape or portrait that stirs emotion, or writing a play that moves an audience. If I can be outside, paint and enjoy the company of my friends and community, I will be a happy person.



Maggie Whittingham-Lamont

68, Portuguese Cove, N.S.

I lost my husband when I was 46. After some bad dating experiences, I embraced being single—and I have no regrets.

IN

1981, my friend and I, both nurses from England, were living in Tunisia. We wanted another adventure, so we took positions in Saint John, N.B. After settling in, we went to the nearest bar. That's where I met Ned, an American merchant seafarer. We saw each other every night for six weeks, and then he had to leave. The next time we met, we travelled together for six months down the eastern seaboard. We got married in October 1982 and settled in Halifax.

After we had our two girls, I worked as a chaplain for the ships that came into the Halifax port. Ned and I had a happy marriage. He liked my dry British humour, and we found the same things funny. Our many private in-jokes used to drive our kids crazy.

In 2001, Ned was diagnosed with esophageal cancer, which spread to his brain. He died in 2003 at age 56. We were married for 20 years.

I think I was done with relationships when Ned died. I didn't go into widowhood with the hope that I'd remarry. I was lucky to meet the ideal person once; I didn't expect it would ever happen again.

Initially, I was so enveloped in grief that I wasn't thinking about dating. But my younger daughter was keen for me to try. Five years after Ned's death, she signed me up for an online dating account. The next day, she was excited to see that I had a match. Unfortunately, it was with a close friend's husband. That was my one and only attempt at Internet dating.

I used to go to a singles' dance with another single friend on Friday nights, and I met a couple of people there who were looking for a relationship. I just didn't want that at the time. I remember one of the men not taking it too well; he told me I would die an old, lonely woman. Hopefully I'll die an old woman, but I won't be lonely!

Looking back, I think I was dating for company—I wanted to go to a movie or dinner with someone. But the men my age who were dating were looking for more serious commitment.

One guy I met invited me to dinner at his house. It turned out he had asked a neighbour to cook the meal because he couldn't do it himself. He was clearly looking for somebody to take care of him. I love cooking, but I'm not going to date someone only to become their housekeeper!

After these experiences, I decided I preferred to remain single. I miss the physical closeness of having a partner but not enough to be in a relationship. Singlehood becomes easier as time goes on. I have always been very independent, and I became more so after Ned died, especially having to look after my then 14-year-old and 17-year-old daughters. I didn't want to bring different men into their lives and have it not work out. I also didn't want to go through the pain of losing someone again because it was so hard with Ned.

In 2016, an intoxicated driver hit my car head on. I subsequently suffered from three strokes that left me visually impaired. My daughters are very supportive of me, and I share a house with them now.

I fly to England every year to see my family. I also spend a good portion of my days sewing. I make quilts to raise money—I've probably raised \$50,000 so far—for different nonprofit agencies, including a dog rescue in Spain and the Parkinson Society Nova Scotia. I've always been good with my own company, and I'm very content with how my life has turned out. ©

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