

I may always be single. Do you have a problem with that?

THE RISE OF THE SUPER-SOLOS

Despite going on lots of dates, the writer Aimée Lutkin is 37 and long-term single. And she's not the only one – the numbers of unattached women are rising in every age group. Is being alone the new normal?

In 2016, I had a minor experience at a dinner party that became a major life-changing event, like a pebble thrown into a pond sending waves lapping against the shore. I was 32 years old and I was single. My friends, in a friendly way, asked me that night, "So, what's going on with your love life?"

In a moment of vulnerability, I admitted nothing was going on with my love life. Nothing had been going on for quite some time. And I was pretty sure nothing ever would get going again. I voiced my deep suspicion that I might end up being alone for ever.

Looking back now, at almost 38, I can shake my head a bit at the idea of my younger self struggling with dating, just like my older self might want to shake the person writing

this article some day. It's different being single just out of your twenties from when you're hitting 40. I can see why the people at the table rolled their eyes at her when she said she'd be "alone for ever".

But their reaction quickly grew beyond annoyance. At that dinner party in New York, my friends argued with me. They insisted that I would eventually meet someone because everybody does. I just had to wait for it and be patient and not give up. I was attractive enough, fun enough, I had a job and hobbies and all the stuff that should make me a fine partner. They were trying to be encouraging.

"I think there's this idea that everybody finds someone eventually," I replied, my voice shaking from saying something I often thought but never articulated. "Logically, I just don't see how that could be true."

At that point, I hadn't been in a

relationship for six years. I'd had sex once in that interim. It wasn't something I'd planned, but our habits make us who we are and my habit had become retreat and avoidance.

Since that night, many, many people have told me they've experienced something similar. Being single for years at a time, even an entire life, is not that strange at all. Across the world, the balance of married to unmarried has shifted significantly. In the US, the 2010 census indicated that for the first time in its history, there were more single women than married in the country. People are getting married later or not at all. Many countries reported in the first year of Covid-19 that the pandemic had changed some people's plans about having children. A virus squelched a lot of plans to find love or start a family, even if that was something a single person had no ambivalence about.

In that moment of confession, when I thought I would be alone for ever, I didn't want pity or reassurances. Mostly, I just wanted that to be an acceptable way to exist on this planet. Unfortunately, lots of people will have a negative reaction to the idea that love isn't an inevitable destiny for the pure of heart. It is mostly just luck. We can work on ourselves and become the kind of people who are capable of maintaining a healthy relationship. And that's great, but it doesn't mean you will encounter the special someone else who is capable of the same and who wants to do it with you. Love is about timing, and proximity, and making the choice to cultivate it for as long as you both can.

My friends and I reached no conclusions and moved on to other topics, but I couldn't let go of the conversation. I went home that night feeling incredibly frustrated that I didn't have the right language to make them understand what it feels like to be alone year after year and how one of the most difficult parts of that single state was explaining it. I had to keep up the pretence that I was still looking, that there was a next stage to my life ahead that would be much better than the life I was living right then.

Since my early thirties, I've been a journalist and blogger. Not long after that difficult dinner, one of my editors offered me the chance to write an end-of-the-year post, a sort of state of the union for the soul. On Christmas Day 2016, my essay on aloneness went live. I was taking a taxi across New York to visit my grandparents in Brooklyn, a

casserole on my lap, when people started tagging me on Twitter. My inbox filled up with messages from lonely people who had read my story of alienation from the world of coupled people and saw something of themselves in me. (The post had gone viral and attracted nearly 900 comments.)

It would be nice to be able to say I felt nothing but compassion and empathy for the lonely hearts reaching out to me, but mixed with those emotions there was also a healthy helping of terror. Some of their stories were so grim, so desperate, so steeped in isolation. I wondered if it was a window into my future if I didn't make a change soon.

Along with these messages came a bunch from people who couldn't relate or who had no sympathy for my plight, which was a reasonable response. In most ways, my life is very nice. I grew up in an interesting city, both my parents were alive and I hadn't worked as a cater-waiter for quite a while. These were all things to celebrate. However, I was struck by how many people didn't think I deserved to feel sorry for myself; they actively wanted me to feel worse for other things – my weight, my face, my negative attitude.

Being a writer for the internet, I've always accepted collective criticism from anonymous sources as a part of my job. This was far more personal than anything I'd ever had, though, and I was influenced by it. As 2016 rolled over into 2017, I resolved to find some way to be different. The stasis I'd been living in for six years of no romance had crept into other aspects of my life. I had many friends and a fairly active social life, but some part of me had been dormant and depressed. Now that part was stirring, waking up hungry, and it couldn't be soothed by the usual measures of binge-watching TV and masturbation.

This combination of fear and critical feedback spurred me to make some resolutions and then to follow through. I started working out, keeping a journal and setting ambitious goals. And a few months after the new year, I set the biggest goal of all: I would start dating again.

At first, this was unstructured. I opened up my apps, started swiping and pretended to possess a confidence I didn't have. Eventually, a patient man seduced me in his apartment in the East Village and I was thrilled. Something that had seemed so out of reach and impossible to find – dating and physical

intimacy – was in my world again. I couldn't wait for us to embark on our newfound relationship after our one-night stand.

He ghosted me.

The thing about leaving the dating scene in your mid-twenties and then scrambling to find a toehold there in your thirties is that there is an arrested development. Not engaging with dating or love for so long had left me a bit immature about some things, a bit naive in some ways. While I realised what was happening, it was shocking how much it affected me emotionally. Someone I barely knew had managed to hurt me, like the tender babe I was.

The pain of rejection is not something you feel when you don't put yourself in a position to be rejected and lots of lonely people rightly avoid that sting. It's much sharper when you have been craving acceptance for so long. It would have been easy to retreat again and for a few days I did, wondering if this was a feeling I could tolerate repeatedly.

I decided I could. Instead of running away, I would be going on more dates. Lots more. I set a goal to go on two dates a week, every week, no matter what. I believed that through praxis I could make myself simultaneously immune to hurt and open to love, two things that I would one day understand were fundamentally incompatible. But before I learnt anything from my experiment, I had a really wild time doing it.

I went on a date with a guy who brought a Hitachi Magic Wand vibrator to the wine bar in his backpack. I went on a date with a woman who, it turned out, already had a girlfriend. I went on a date with a man who led kayak trips and snuck me on to a tour. I went on dates with teachers, with entrepreneurs, with bartenders, with Silicon

Valley types, the unemployed. People who had just moved to New York or who were only visiting. They were looking for hook-ups, or love, or they were "ethically non-monogamous", although their concept of ethics was murky. I was open to anything and everything because I wasn't sure what I wanted.

And to a degree, my hope that dating a lot would relieve the pressure and emotional attachment to the process was fulfilled. By the end of that spring and summer of boot camp dating, I got really good at talking to new people. I didn't feel nervous about meeting someone who might be a potential

WE WANT TO BE ALONE! THE SINGLES SCENE

- ◆ Nearly one in seven people in the UK could be living alone by 2039.
- ◆ 61 per cent of single women say they are happy with their single relationship status, compared with 49 per cent of single men.
- ◆ Only one in six British single people say that they believe in the concept of "the one".
- ◆ In the wake of Covid lockdowns, 13 per cent of single Brits don't feel ready to be intimate again and 10 per cent of single Brits say that they enjoy masturbation more than sex with a partner.
- ◆ 25 per cent think they are out of practice in the bedroom and 8 per cent are now more open to exploring same-sex relationships than they were before the pandemic.
- ◆ One in ten single Brits say they feel burned out by dating and that dating apps are to blame.
- ◆ Men are more likely than women to report feeling pressure to find a relationship – 71 per cent of men say they feel this pressure, compared with 58 per cent of women.
- ◆ The number of those living on their own in the UK increased by 16 per cent between 1997 and 2017, to 7.7 million.
- ◆ One in six people aged 45 to 64 live alone in the UK.
- ◆ 48 per cent of singletons say that the pressure they feel to find a partner is related to keeping up with friends and social circles.
- ◆ Women are more likely to say that being single is preferable to being in an unsatisfactory relationship.
- ◆ In the UK, the percentage of people in their forties who are not living in a couple has doubled in the past 20 years.
- ◆ Women in England and Wales are having fewer babies. In 2020, fertility fell to 1.58 children per woman – the lowest

soulmate. I got used to not hearing from people if there was no chemistry and I got used to letting folks down gently when I wasn't interested. Then something I couldn't really practise or prepare for happened. I fell in love.

The details of being in love are extremely banal when described. I could say how he had green eyes and a beard with silver in it. I could talk about how we were driving down the road together in the Hamptons and he took my hand out of my lap and kissed it. There were all the many ways and places where we had extremely passionate sex, which might be a bit more interesting but are still fairly mechanical representations of what it all felt like. The lure of love is how it can seem like you're inventing it when it happens to you, even the patterns that have been well established by all of humanity across many millennia. In this case, a pattern familiar to my personal experience was repeated as well.

He ghosted me.

This rejection was far more painful than the first one that had spurred on all this dating. With the end of that connection came the end of a dream I hadn't realised I'd allowed myself to dream: that I could join the couples and finally be a normal person, an actual adult, someone who had completed that major life step of settling down. With that step would come the sweet validation and safety of fitting into the couple norm. All the things that society sets aside for couples would be mine too – the plus-ones at weddings, the tax breaks, the legal protection of assets through marriage, getting invited on couples trips, splitting the rent, all sorts of stuff both stupidly petty and majorly beneficial to my quality of life.

In the aftermath of this brutal blow, I recovered slowly, with a few setbacks. A phenomenon some sceptics might find hard to accept is that I attract people from the past like a magnet. In theory, the best way to live a healthy, happy life is to move forward, to forgive and forget, but I can't go anywhere without bumping into somebody I know. I'll be walking down the street, minding my own business, and inevitably hear my name being shouted from down the block. Maybe this happens to anyone who lives in the same place for most of their life, but it often seems like a pointed message from the universe.

I started to see this guy everywhere. We didn't live in the same neighbourhood; we

didn't find one another in the same location. He popped up at every coffee shop I tried. I saw him at bars, walking down the street. And that's how I learnt he had a new girlfriend.

All the striving and work I'd done to become just like everybody else, to be in the position and relationship I was "supposed" to be a part of, brought a lot of change into my

life, much of it painful. Pain is not always meaningful and I don't think people need to go through it to become "better". Still, no one avoids it. Common advice for the broken-hearted is to "work on yourself" or "love yourself" and that advice has been manipulated by capitalism to mean "buy things" and "constantly optimise for productivity".

That advice does contain a seed of truth, which is that when we focus too much on romantic love, we are losing out on all the many opportunities there are for falling in love with life, with community and with all the slow, arduous growth it takes to accept yourself exactly as you are. In recovering from pain, I began to invest more in cultivating an internal life and let go of chasing something external I could never hold on to.

For the past several years, I've been writing

a memoir about that period of time, about societal loneliness and the way couplehood is forced on people as a panacea to isolation. But the thing about writing a memoir is that life continues as you write. In the months and then years after all this drama, I let go of my dating ambitions. I let go of what the idea of normal was and then a pandemic hit and a whole lot of people joined me.

While writing, I did a lot of research on the loneliness epidemic and came to some conclusions. One is that the focus on couplehood as the primary emotional connection in life is relatively new in human history. While marriage has long been important (and continues to be important) for socio-economic reasons, that practicality meant families, friends and obligations to the community were once the main way people found fulfilment and value in life. These are not easy things to cultivate in a culture where it seems like every generation has to work harder for less than the one before it. The stress of staying solvent and planning for a rapidly declining future has increased drastically with Covid-19. While individualism is considered a particularly nasty American sensibility, it's kind of a natural outlook for

people everywhere realising that during a worldwide disaster, they're on their own.

In becoming an expert on loneliness, I have also learnt a great deal about romantic love, and not all of it is stuff people want to hear. I've seen that what gets called love is often just compromise, exhaustion, acceptance of what should be unacceptable and striving

to survive. Often what is called love is codependency, fear of the unknown and the delightful addiction of physical intimacy. Life is all too brief and dangerous, so these are choices I completely understand in many cases. But the pressure of obligatory couplehood should be alleviated. People should be able to find validation and connection in all sorts of relationships. They should be able to trust their community to value public health. They should not fear ageing alone because they won't be alone, even if they never find someone to marry and have children with.

Does that mean I really think I will be alone for ever?

Well, in late 2019, I met someone new whom I really liked, but by then I lived in Los Angeles and he was in New York. We saw each other a few times on each coast, around Christmas and again in January after the new year. He was going to be in LA in March and again in April. I was looking forward to it. We all know what ended up happening in March 2020. By the time I moved back to the east coast in November, he was dating someone else. We remain friends.

In the spring of 2021, soon after getting vaccinated, I ran into someone else from my past, just a guy I'd once lived with briefly in the same commune in my early twenties. We started to date and, as the ground thawed, so did my reluctance to open up to a new person. After three months, I wanted a relationship and he didn't. We parted ways. A week later, I saw him on a date with someone else in the park, a complete coincidence created by my damned cosmic pull.

Are we destined to live the same way we always have, for ever? Or can we change the loops we're in by just making a slightly different choice? That day, I didn't bother my former lover or kick over the pink goblets he and I had drunk out of on one of our first dates. I walked away, after standing dumbstruck and watching for a while. Though my life tends to repeat itself, I do not believe I have to be the same way for ever and I don't

think this world has to be the same way for ever. Romance is a really magical, wonderful part of life, but it's just a small fraction of everything else there is to walk towards. ■

The Lonely Hunter: How our Search for Love is Broken by *Aimée Lutkin* is published by Scribe (£9.99)