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Marry Him!

THE CASE FOR SETTling FOR MR. GOOD ENOUGH

By *Lori Gottlieb*

Illustration by Lou Brooks

About six months after my son was born, he and I were sitting on a blanket at the park with a close friend and her daughter. It was a sunny summer weekend, and other parents and their kids picnicked nearby—mothers munching berries and lounging on the grass, fathers tossing balls with their giddy toddlers. My friend and I, who, in fits of self-empowerment, had conceived our babies with donor sperm because we hadn't met Mr. Right yet, surveyed the idyllic scene.

"Ah, this is the dream," I said, and we nodded in silence for a minute, then burst out laughing. In some ways, I meant it: we'd both dreamed of motherhood, and here we were, picnicking in the park with our children.

But it was also decidedly *not* the dream. The dream, like that of our mothers and their mothers from time immemorial, was to fall in love, get married, and live happily ever after. Of course, we'd be loath to admit it in this day and age, but ask any soul-baring 40-year-old single heterosexual woman what she most longs for in life, and she probably won't tell you it's a better career or a smaller waistline or a bigger apartment. Most likely, she'll say that what she really wants is a husband (and, by extension, a child).

To the outside world, of course, we still call ourselves feminists and insist—vehemently, even—that we're independent and self-sufficient and don't believe in any of that damsel-in-distress stuff, but in reality, we aren't fish who can do without a bicycle, we're women who want a traditional family. And despite growing up in an era when the centuries-old mantra to get married young was finally (and, it seemed, refreshingly) replaced by encouragement to postpone that milestone in pursuit of high ideals (education! career! but also true love!), every woman I know—no matter how successful and ambitious, how financially and emotionally secure—feels panic, occasionally coupled with desperation, if she hits 30 and finds herself unmarried.





VIDEO: Lori Gottlieb explains why women should stop holding out for Mr. Right

Oh, I know—I’m guessing there are single 30-year-old women reading this right now who will be writing letters to the editor to say that the women I know aren’t widely representative, that I’ve been co-opted by the cult of the feminist backlash, and basically, that I have no idea what I’m talking about. And all I can say is, if you say you’re not worried, either you’re in denial or you’re lying. In fact, take a good look in the mirror and try to convince yourself that you’re not worried, because you’ll see how silly your face looks when you’re being disingenuous.

Whether you acknowledge it or not, there’s good reason to worry. By the time 35th-birthday-brunch celebrations roll around for still-single women, serious, irreversible life issues masquerading as “jokes” creep into public conversation: *Well, I don’t feel old, but my eggs sure do!* or *Maybe this year I’ll marry Todd. I’m not getting any younger!* The birthday girl smiles a bit too widely as she delivers these lines, and everyone laughs a little too hard for a little too long, not because we find these sentiments funny, but because we’re awkwardly acknowledging how unfunny they are. At their core, they pose one of the most complicated, painful, and pervasive dilemmas many single women are forced to grapple with nowadays: Is it better to be alone, or to settle?

My advice is this: Settle! That’s right. Don’t worry about passion or intense connection. Don’t nix a guy based on his annoying habit of yelling “Bravo!” in movie theaters. Overlook his halitosis or abysmal sense of aesthetics. Because if you want to have the infrastructure in place to have a family, settling is the way to go. Based on my observations, in fact, settling will probably make you happier in the long run, since many of those who marry with great expectations become more disillusioned with each passing year. (It’s hard to maintain that level of *zing* when the conversation morphs into discussions about who’s changing the diapers or balancing the checkbook.)

Obviously, I wasn't always an advocate of settling. In fact, it took not settling to make me realize that settling is the better option, and even though settling is a rampant phenomenon, talking about it in a positive light makes people profoundly uncomfortable. Whenever I make the case for settling, people look at me with creased brows of disapproval or frowns of disappointment, the way a child might look at an older sibling who just informed her that Jerry's Kids aren't going to walk, even if you send them money. It's not only politically incorrect to get behind settling, it's downright un-American. Our culture tells us to keep our eyes on the prize (while our mothers, who know better, tell us not to be so picky), and the theme of holding out for true love (whatever *that* is—look at the divorce rate) permeates our collective mentality.

Even situation comedies, starting in the 1970s with *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* and going all the way to *Friends*, feature endearing single women in the dating trenches, and there's supposed to be something romantic and even heroic about their search for true love. Of course, the crucial difference is that, whereas the earlier series begins after Mary has been jilted by her fiancé, the more modern-day *Friends* opens as Rachel Green leaves *her* nice-guy orthodontist fiancé at the altar simply because she isn't feeling it. But either way, in episode after episode, as both women continue to be unlucky in love, settling starts to look pretty darn appealing. Mary is supposed to be contentedly independent and fulfilled by her newsroom family, but in fact her life seems lonely. Are we to assume that at the end of the series, Mary, by then in her late 30s, found her soul mate after the lights in the newsroom went out and her work family was disbanded? If her experience was anything like mine or that of my single friends, it's unlikely.

And while Rachel and her supposed soul mate, Ross, finally get together (for the umpteenth time) in the finale of *Friends*, do we feel confident that she'll be happier with Ross than she would have been had she settled down with Barry, the orthodontist, 10 years earlier? She and Ross have passion but have never had long-term stability, and the fireworks she experiences with him but not with Barry might actually turn out to be a liability, given how many times their relationship has already gone up in flames. It's equally questionable whether *Sex and the City's* Carrie Bradshaw, who cheated on her kindhearted and generous boyfriend, Aidan, only to end up with the more exciting but self-absorbed Mr. Big, will be better off in the framework of marriage and family. (Some time after the breakup, when Carrie ran into Aidan on the street, he was carrying his infant in a Baby Björn. Can anyone imagine Mr. Big walking around with a Björn?)

When we're holding out for deep romantic love, we have the fantasy that this level of passionate intensity will make us happier. But marrying Mr. Good Enough might be an equally viable option, especially if you're looking for a stable, reliable life companion. Madame Bovary might not see it that way, but if she'd remained single, I'll bet she would have been even more depressed than she was while living with her tedious but caring husband.

What I didn't realize when I decided, in my 30s, to break up with boyfriends I might otherwise have ended up marrying, is that while settling seems like an enormous act of resignation when you're looking at it from the vantage point of a single person, once you take the plunge and do it, you'll probably be relatively content. It sounds obvious now, but I didn't fully appreciate back then that what makes for a good marriage isn't necessarily what makes for a good romantic relationship. Once you're married, it's not about whom you want to go on vacation with; it's about whom you want to run a

household with. Marriage isn't a passion-fest; it's more like a partnership formed to run a very small, mundane, and often boring nonprofit business. And I mean this in a good way.

I don't mean to say that settling is ideal. I'm simply saying that it might have gotten an undeservedly bad rap. As the only single woman in my son's mommy-and-me group, I used to listen each week to a litany of unrelenting complaints about people's husbands and feel pretty good about my decision to hold out for the right guy, only to realize that these women wouldn't trade places with me for a second, no matter how dull their marriages might be or how desperately they might long for a different husband. They, like me, would rather feel alone in a marriage than actually be alone, because they, like me, realize that marriage ultimately isn't about cosmic connection—it's about how having a teammate, even if he's not the love of your life, is better than not having one at all.

The couples my friend and I saw at the park that summer were enviable but not because they seemed so in love—they were enviable because the husbands played with the kids for 20 minutes so their wives could eat lunch. In practice, my married friends with kids don't spend that much time with their husbands anyway (between work and child care), and in many cases, their biggest complaint seems to be that they never see each other. So if you rarely see your husband—but he's a decent guy who takes out the trash and sets up the baby gear, and he provides a second income that allows you to spend time with your child instead of working 60 hours a week to support a family on your own—how much does it matter whether the guy you marry is The One?

Also see:

[Interview: "The Case for Mr. Not-Quite Right"](#)

Lori Gottlieb talks about soul mates, all-consuming love, and why it makes sense to compromise those ideals.

It's not that I've become jaded to the point that I don't believe in, or even crave, romantic connection. It's that my understanding of it has changed. In my formative years, romance was John Cusack and Ione Skye in *Say Anything*. But when I think about marriage nowadays, my role models are the television characters Will and Grace, who, though Will was gay and his relationship with Grace was platonic, were one of the most romantic couples I can think of. What I long for in a marriage is that sense of having a partner in crime. Someone who knows your day-to-day trivia. Someone who both calls you on your bullshit and puts up with your quirks. So what if Will and Grace weren't having sex with each other? How many long-married couples are having much sex anyway?

"I just want someone who's willing to be in the trenches with me," my single friend Jennifer told me, "and I never thought of marriage that way before." Two of Jennifer's friends married men who Jennifer believes aren't even straight, and while Jennifer wouldn't have made that choice a few years back, she wonders whether she might be capable of it in the future. "Maybe they understood something that I didn't," she said.

What they understood is this: as your priorities change from romance to family, the so-called "deal breakers" change. Some guys aren't worldly, but they'd make great dads. Or you walk into a room and start talking to this person who is 5'4" and has an unfortunate nose, but he "gets" you. My long-married friend Renée offered this dating advice to me in an e-mail:

I would say even if he's not the love of your life, make sure he's someone you respect intellectually, makes you laugh, appreciates you ... I bet there are plenty of these men in the older, overweight, and bald category (which they all eventually become anyway).

She wasn't joking.

A number of my single women friends admit (in hushed voices and after I swear I won't use their real names here) that they'd readily settle now but wouldn't have 10 years ago. They believe that part of the problem is that we grew up idealizing marriage—and that if we'd had a more realistic understanding of its cold, hard benefits, we might have done things differently. Instead, we grew up thinking that marriage meant feeling some kind of divine spark, and so we walked away from uninspiring relationships that might have made us happy in the context of a family.

All marriages, of course, involve compromise, but where's the cutoff? Where's the line between compromising and settling, and at what age does that line seem to fade away? Choosing to spend your life with a guy who doesn't delight in the small things in life might be considered settling at 30, but not at 35. By 40, if you get a cold shiver down your spine at the thought of embracing a certain guy, but you enjoy his company more than anyone else's, is that settling or making an adult compromise?

Take the date I went on last night. The guy was substantially older. He had a long history of major depression and said, in reference to the movies he was writing, "I'm fascinated by comas" and "I have a strong interest in terrorists." He'd never been married. He was rude to the waiter. But he very much wanted a family, and he was successful, handsome, and smart. As I looked at him from across the table, I thought, *Yeah, I'll see him again. Maybe I can settle for that.* But my very next thought was, *Maybe I can settle for better.* It's like musical chairs—when do you take a seat, any seat, just so you're not left standing alone?

Back when I was still convinced I'd find my soul mate, I did, although I never articulated this, have certain requirements. I thought that the person I married would have to have a sense of wonderment about the world, would be both spontaneous and grounded, and would acknowledge that life is hard but also be able to navigate its ups and downs with humor. Many of the guys I dated possessed these qualities, but if one of them lacked a certain degree of kindness, another didn't seem emotionally stable enough, and another's values clashed with mine. Others were sweet but so boring that I preferred reading during dinner to sitting through another tedious conversation. I also dated someone who appeared to be highly compatible with me—we had much in common, and strong physical chemistry—but while our sensibilities were similar, they proved to be a half-note off, so we never quite felt in harmony, or never viewed the world through quite the same lens.

Now, though, I realize that if I don't want to be alone for the rest of my life, I'm at the age where I'll likely need to settle for someone who is settling for me. What I and many women who hold out for true love forget is that we won't always have the same appeal that we may have had in our 20s and early 30s. Having turned 40, I now have wrinkles, bags under my eyes, and hair in places I didn't know hair could grow on women. With my nonworking life consumed by thoughts of potty training and playdates, I've become a far less interesting person than the one who went on hiking adventures and performed at comedy clubs. But when I chose to have a baby on my own, the plan was that I would continue to search for true connection afterward; it certainly wasn't that I would have a baby alone only to settle

later. After all, wouldn't it have been wiser to settle for a higher caliber of "not Mr. Right" while my marital value was at its peak?

Those of us who choose not to settle in hopes of finding a soul mate later are almost like teenagers who believe they're invulnerable to dying in a drunk-driving accident. We lose sight of our mortality. We forget that we, too, will age and become less alluring. And even if some men do find us engaging, and they're ready to have a family, they'll likely decide to marry someone younger with whom they can have their own biological children. Which is all the more reason to settle before settling is no longer an option.

I'll be the first to admit that there's something objectionable about making the case for settling, because it's based on the premise that women's biological clocks place them at the mercy of men, and that therefore a power dynamic dictates what should be an affair solely of the heart (not the heart *and* the ovaries). But I'm not the only woman who accepts settling as a valid choice—apparently so do the millions who buy bestselling relationship books that advocate settling but that, so as not to offend, simply spin the concept as a form of female empowerment.

Take, for instance, books like *Men Are Like Fish: What Every Woman Needs to Know About Catching a Man* or *Find a Husband After 35 Using What I Learned at Harvard Business School*, whose titles alone make it clear that today's supposedly progressive bachelorettes aren't waiting for old-fashioned true love to strike before they can get married. Instead, they're buying dozens of proactive coaching manuals to learn how to strategically land a man. The actual man in question, though, seems so irrelevant that, to my mind, these women might as well grab a well-dressed guy off the street, drag him into the nearest bar, buy him a drink, and ask him to marry her. (Or, to retain her "power," she should manipulate *him* into asking *her*.)

The approaches in these books may differ, but the message is the same: more important than love is marriage. To achieve that goal, women across the country are poring over guidebooks that all boil down to determining, "Does he like me?," while completely overlooking the equally essential question, "Do I like him?" In other words, whatever compromises you have to make—including, but not limited to, pretending to be or actually becoming an entirely different person—make sure that you get some schmo to propose to you before you turn into a spinster.

Last year's *Why Smart Men Marry Smart Women* makes the most blatant case for settling: if women were more willing to "think outside the box," as one of the book's married sources advises, many of them would be married. The author then trots out tales of professional, accomplished women happily dating a plumber, a park ranger, and an Army helicopter nurse. The moral is supposed to be "Don't be too picky" but many of the anecdotes quote women who seem to be trying to convince not just the reader, but themselves, that they haven't settled.

"I should be with some guy with a vast vocabulary who is very smart," said Heather, a 30-year-old lawyer turned journalist. Instead, she's dating an actor who didn't finish college. "My boyfriend is fun, he's smart, but he hasn't gone through years of school. He wanted to pursue acting. And you can tell—he doesn't have that background, and it never ever once bothered me. But for everyone else, [his lack of education] is what they see." Another woman says she dates "the 'secrets' ... guys other women don't recognize as great." How's that for damning praise?

Meanwhile, in sugarcoating this message, the authors often resort to flattery, telling the reader to remember how fabulous, attractive, charming, and intelligent she is, in the hopes that she'll project a more confident vibe on dates. In my case, though, the flattery backfired. I read these books thinking, *Wait, if I'm such a great catch, why should I settle for anyone less than my equal? If I'm so fabulous, don't I deserve true romantic connection?*

Only one popular book that I can think of in the vast "find a man" genre (like most single women confounded by their singleness, I'm embarrassingly well versed) takes the opposite approach. In *He's Just Not That Into You*, written by the happily married Greg Behrendt and the unhappily single Liz Tuccillo, the duo exhorts women not to settle. But the book's format is telling: Behrendt gives perky pep talks to women unable to find a worthy match, while Tuccillo repeatedly comments on how hard it is to take her co-author's advice, because while being with a partner who is "beneath you" (Behrendt's term) is problematic, being single just plain "sucks" (Tuccillo's term).

Before I got pregnant, though, I also read single-mom books such as *Choosing Single Motherhood: The Thinking Woman's Guide*, whose chapter titles "Can I Afford It?" and "Dealing With the Stress" seemed like realistic antidotes to the faux-empowering man-hunting manual headings like "A Little Lingerie Can Go a Long Way." But the book's author, Mikki Morrissette, held out a tantalizing carrot. In her introduction, she describes having a daughter on her own; then, she writes, a few years later and five months pregnant with her son, "I met a guy I fell in love with. He and my daughter were in the delivery room when my son was born in January 2004." Each time I read about single women having babies on their own and thriving instead of settling for Mr. Wrong and hiring a divorce lawyer, I felt all jazzed and ready to go. At the time, I truly believed, "I can have it all—a baby now, my soul mate later!"

Well ... ha! Hahahaha. And ha.

Just as the relationship books fail to mention what happens after you triumphantly land a husband (you actually have to live with each other), these single-mom books fail to mention that once you have a baby alone, not only do you age about 10 years in the first 10 months, but if you don't have time to shower, eat, urinate in a timely manner, or even leave the house except for work, where you spend every waking moment that your child is at day care, there's very little chance that a man—much less The One—is going to knock on your door and join *that* party.

They also gloss over the cost of dating as a single mom: the time and money spent on online dating (because there are no single men at toddler birthday parties); the babysitter tab for all those boring blind dates; and, most frustrating, hours spent away from your beloved child. Even women who settle but end up divorced might be in a better position than those of us who became mothers on our own, because many ex-wives get both child-support payments and a free night off when the kids go to Dad's house for a sleepover. Never-married moms don't get the night off. At the end of the evening, we rush home to pay the babysitter, make any houseguest tiptoe around and speak in a hushed voice, then wake up at 6 a.m. at the first cries of "Mommy!"

Try bringing a guy home to that.

Settling is mostly a women's game. Men settle far less often and, when they do, they don't seem the least bit bothered by the fact that they're settling.

My friend Alan, for instance, justified his choice of a “bland” wife who’s a good mom but with whom he shares little connection this way: “I think one-stop shopping is overrated. I get passion at my office with my work, or with my friends that I sometimes call or chat with—it’s not the same, and, boy, it would be exciting to have it with my spouse. But I spend more time with people at my office than I do with my spouse.”

Then there’s my friend Chris, a single 35-year-old marketing consultant who for three years dated someone he calls “the perfect woman”—a kind and beautiful surgeon. She broke off the relationship several times because, she told him with regret, she didn’t think she wanted to spend her life with him. Each time, Chris would persuade her to reconsider, until finally she called it off for good, saying that she just couldn’t marry somebody she wasn’t in love with. Chris was devastated, but now that his ex-girlfriend has reached 35, he’s suddenly hopeful about their future.

“By the time she turns 37,” Chris said confidently, “she’ll come back. And I’ll bet she’ll marry me then. I know she wants to have kids.” I asked Chris why he would want to be with a woman who wasn’t in love with him. Wouldn’t he be settling, too, by marrying someone who would be using him to have a family? Chris didn’t see it that way at all. “*She’ll* be settling,” Chris said cheerfully. “But not me. I get to marry the woman of my dreams. That’s not settling. That’s the fantasy.”

Chris believes that women are far too picky: everyone knows, he says, that a single middle-aged man still has appealing prospects; a single middle-aged woman likely doesn’t. And he’s right. Single women are painfully aware of this. I hear far more women than men talk about getting married as a goal to be met by a certain deadline. My friend Gabe points out that this allows men to be the true romantics; when a man breaks up with a perfectly acceptable woman because he’s “just not feeling it,” there’s none of the ambivalence a woman with a deadline feels. “Women are the least romantic,” Gabe said. “They think, ‘I can do that.’ For a lot of women, it becomes less about love and more about what they can live with.”

Not long ago, Gabe, who is 43, dated a woman he liked very much one-on-one, but he broke up with her because “she couldn’t be *haimish*”—comfortable—with his friends in a group setting. He has no regrets. A female friend who broke up with a guy because he “didn’t like to read” and who is now, too, a single mom (with, ironically, no time to read herself) similarly felt no regrets—at first. At the time, she couldn’t imagine settling, but here’s the Catch-22: “If I’d settled at 39,” she said, “I always would have had the fantasy that something better exists out there. Now I know better. Either way, I was screwed.”

The paradox, of course, is that the more it behooves a woman to settle, the less willing she is to settle; a woman in her mid- to late 30s is more discriminating than one in her 20s. She has friends who have known her since childhood, friends who will know her more intimately and understand her more viscerally than any man she meets in midlife. Her tastes and sense of self are more solidly formed. She says things like “He wants me to move downtown, but I love my home at the beach,” and, “But he’s just not *curious*,” and “Can I really spend my life with someone who’s allergic to dogs?”

I’ve been told that the reason so many women end up alone is that we have too many choices. I think it’s the opposite: we have no choice. If we could choose, we’d choose to be in a healthy marriage based on reciprocal passion and friendship. But the only choices on the table, it sometimes seems, are settle or risk being alone forever. That’s not a whole lot of choice.

Remember the movie *Broadcast News*? Holly Hunter's dilemma—the choice between passion and friendship—is exactly the one many women over 30 are faced with. In the end, Holly Hunter's character decides to wait for the right guy, but he (of course) never materializes. Meanwhile, her emotional soul mate, the Albert Brooks character, gets married (of course) and has children.

And no matter what women decide—settle or don't settle—there's a price to be paid, because there's always going to be regret. Unless you meet the man of your dreams (who, by the way, doesn't exist, precisely because *you dreamed him up*), there's going to be a downside to getting married, but a possibly more profound downside to holding out for someone better.

My friend Jennifer summed it up this way: “When I used to hear women complaining bitterly about their husbands, I'd think, ‘How sad, they settled.’ Now it's like, ‘God, that would be nice.’”

That's why mothers tell their daughters to “keep an open mind” about the guy who spends his weekends playing Internet poker or touches your back for two minutes while watching ESPN and calls that “a massage.” The more-pertinent questions, to most concerned mothers of daughters in their 30s, have to do with whether the daughter's boyfriend will make a good father; or, if he's a workaholic, whether he can provide the environment for her to be a good mother. As my own mother once advised me, when I was dating a musician, “Everyone settles to some degree. You might as well settle pragmatically.”

I know all this now, and yet—here's the problem—much as I'd like to settle, I can't seem to do it. It's not that I have to be dazzled by a guy anymore (though it would be nice). It's not even that I have to think about him when he's not around (though that would be nice, too). Nor is it that I'm unable to accept reality and make significant compromises because that's what grown-ups do (I can and have—I had a baby on my own).

No, the problem is that the very nature of dating leaves women my age to wrestle with a completely different level of settling. It's no longer a matter, as it was in my early 30s, of “just not feeling it,” of wanting to be in love. Consider the men whom older women I know have married in varying degrees of desperation over the past few years: a recovering alcoholic who doesn't always go to his meetings; a trying-to-make-it-in-his-40s actor; a widower who has three nightmarish kids and who's still actively grieving for his dead wife; and a socially awkward engineer (so socially awkward that he declined to attend his wife's book party). It's not that these women are crazy; it's that the dating pool has dwindled dramatically and that, due to gender politics, the few available men tend to require far more of a concession than those who were single when we were younger. And while I have a much higher tolerance for settling than I did back then, now I have my son to consider. It's one thing to settle for a subpar mate; it's quite another to settle for a subpar father figure for my child. So while there's more incentive to settle now, there's less willingness to settle too much, because that would be a disservice to my son.

This doesn't undermine my case for settling. Instead, it supports my argument to do it young, when settling involves constructing a family environment with a perfectly acceptable man who may not trip your romantic trigger—as opposed to doing it older, when settling involves selling your very soul in exchange for damaged goods. Admittedly, it's a dicey case to make because, like the divorced women I know who claim they wouldn't have done anything differently, because then they wouldn't have Biff

and Buffy, I, too, can't imagine life without my magical son. (Although, had I had children with a Mr. Good Enough, wouldn't I be as hopelessly in love with those children, too?) I also acknowledge the power of the grass-is-always-greener phenomenon, and allow for the possibility that my life alone is better (if far more difficult) than the life I would have in a comfortable but tepid marriage.

But then my married friends say things like, "Oh, you're so lucky, you don't have to negotiate with your husband about the cost of piano lessons" or "You're so lucky, you don't have anyone putting the kid in front of the TV and you can raise your son the way you want." I'll even hear things like, "You're so lucky, you don't have to have sex with someone you don't want to."

The lists go on, and each time, I say, "OK, if you're so unhappy, and if I'm so lucky, leave your husband! In fact, send him over here!"

Not one person has taken me up on this offer.

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