KATE HURLEY

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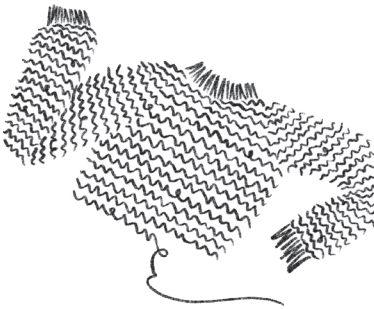

Introduction

Do I Really Need a Minivan in the Game of Life?

I was playing cards with my little friend Isabella the other day. We were playing Old Maid.

You know the game. You each have a set of cards. You draw from the other player and lay down the pairs that you find. Twos, twos, twos. There is anticipation every time a card is drawn from the other player's hand. Who will pair up next?

Another pair, and another pair, and another pair. Each laid down, one right next to the other.

There was one card left in my hand at the end of the game. The old maid. The card had a picture of an older woman surrounded by cats. Apparently cats are the only creatures that will live with single ladies who are mature in age.

Isabella pointed at me and said, "Look, Kate! You have the old maid! That means you're the loser."

I didn't know what to do with this statement or with this game. I don't usually mind losing games to five-year-olds. But I was a little more sensitive about losing this time. In most games, the last person standing wins. In this game, you lose if you're the last person standing alone. I'll let you in on the reason this was difficult for me: I'm

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thirty-something and I've never been married. I felt a strange kinship with the old maid. "Am I the loser?" I thought.

Old Maid is a very old Victorian game. There are versions around the world, many with different names. In Brazil, it goes by the flattering name Stink. The English version is called Scabby Queen, a name that brings up even worse images than the picture of the American cat lady. And my personal favorite is the French version, Le Pouilleux, which means *the louse*—like the parasitic insect. Another word for louse is cootie. Awesome.

In my research, I also found pictures of some vintage Old Maid games. My favorite was a 1940s deck that had wonderful cartoons of very attractive, curvy women. One woman was riding on an airplane. Another was surfing. A third looked like a successful business lady.

The old maid? A little old lady sitting in a rocking chair knitting, which is quite appropriate, since that is where the word *spinster* comes from. One who spins. It seems that single people who are a little older have nothing better to do than to sit in a rocking chair and knit some booties for their favorite nephew.

A few weeks after this incident, I was playing another game with my ten-year-old friend, Collin. The Game of Life. This game has a track on which players move in little plastic cars through various life scenarios. Interestingly, in the late 1980s the game changed the car from a convertible to a Chrysler-esque minivan.

"Wait a second," I said to Collin. "What if I want a four-wheel drive Subaru instead of a minivan?"

Collin retorted, "You have to have a minivan in the Game of Life."

Well, I realized, it made sense that you would need to have decent leg space in a car, since you have to put your growing family into it.

Your family is acquired toward the beginning of the game, when you hit a stop sign in front of a three-dimensional chapel. It is here that you *must* get married and put a new blue or pink peg beside you in your minivan. I looked at Collin and said, "Hey, what if I don't

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want to get married? Or what if, by some crazy turn of circumstance, it just doesn't happen for me?"

Collin gave me a quizzical look and said, "You can't do that, Kate! You have to get married in the Game of Life."

It's true. I did. If I didn't, I would be stuck at the beginning of the game. Forever. I gave in, but mostly because you get $5,000 worth of wedding gifts on the next space.

At the end of the game, the bank paid out money for various things. I wasn't at all surprised that you received a decent amount for each child you were able to raise in your minivan. According to Milton Bradley, apparently, he who dies with the most kids gets the most cash.

These are some of the stereotypes that are placed in our minds at a very young age, and I admit I can relate to some of them. Like the old maid, I have seen my friends pair up two-by-two. I am not as old as the old maid in the game, but I am in my thirties, which is pretty old to be single, especially in Christian circles. And yes, I do put my knitted creations on Etsy.

But that's where our similarities stop. I don't like cats, I have many other things to do with my time than to sit in a rocking chair, and I am really, honestly, not a loser.

Those are good signs that I am not really an old maid, right?

There are also things in the Game of Life that I can relate to. I often feel like society says to me, *You're not married? You don't have children? How could you possibly ride around in your plastic car with one lonely plastic peg in it? Is there something wrong? Are you going to get stuck at the beginning of life and never move on to the rest of your game because of your singleness?*

The truth is, I have played a wonderful round of the game of life. I am a songwriter, a worship leader, a writer, and a teacher. I've made several albums and have traveled all over the world to sing my songs and teach. More importantly, I have many dear friends who are like family to me.

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Despite this, I get very sad when I look at my car with the one pink peg in it. I never really wanted an empty car. But a family has not been a part of my game yet.

This has been on my mind a lot lately, and after talking about the subject to many friends, I realize that it is on a lot of people's minds. There are more single people in the world than ever before. According to the book *Going Solo*, 22 percent of the adult population was single in the United States in 1950. As of 2012, that statistic has risen drastically to 49 percent.[1]

In other words, there are a lot of us. Some have decided that living independently was the best choice for them. Some are divorced. Others, like me, have always wanted to be married but for some reason have not. All of us have probably struggled with feeling rejected a few times. Maybe many times. We have wanted to feel valuable by being chosen by someone. And most likely, at some point in our lives, we have struggled with feeling like a loser.

I am writing this book for all of you. I want you to feel validated. I want you to know that you're not alone. And most of all, I want you to believe that you are deeply valuable. I hope that we can discover our value together.

Here is what I don't want to do with this book:

I do not want to say that if you follow this formula, you will get yourself a mate. First of all, if I knew that formula, I would already be married. Second, in my experience, God seldom works in formulas.

I do not want to say that the sole answer is to be satisfied in God alone. I believe that it is important to be as deeply connected with the Lord as possible. It is part of the answer. But God loves family, and he understands that our relationship with him is different from a relationship with a flesh and blood person.

I do not want to promise that God will give us the desires of our hearts—at least not in the way that we expect them to be given to us. Ultimately, he will give us our desires, even if it's not in this lifetime.

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But the hard truth is that there are people out there who long to be married but never will be. Who want children but won't have any. There are others who will end up with very difficult marriages. We will challenge ourselves to believe in God's goodness even when it seems he is not listening to our prayers.

I do not want to give you the "contentment sermon." We will talk about how important it is to be thankful for where we are in life, but we will also talk about the need to be honest about our feelings. We will look at the paradox of being thankful while still being honest about our frustrations.

Here's what I do want to do with this book:

I want to give hope—and hope for more than a wedding dress.

I want married people and the church at large to have a better understanding of what singles and divorced people go through so that they can better support us.

I want to look at the unique challenges Christian singles face and explore some of the unhealthy perspectives of Christian culture when it comes to dating.

I want to search the beautiful heart of God and discover how he sees us.

I want a wonderful man to read this book, write me romantic love letters, hug dating hello, and marry me, so that my next book will be called *Making Sense of the Scantily Clad Life*.

Our story begins with an event that traditionally ends the story: a wedding. Make that thirty-three weddings.

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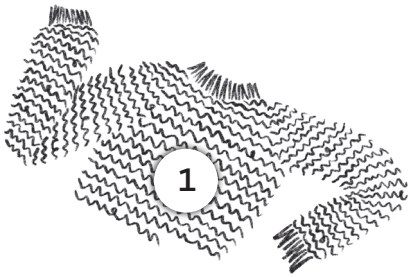

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If You Can't Marry 'Em, Write a Book About 'Em

I have been in thirty-three weddings. I am not talking about how many I've been to; I'm talking about how many I've been in.

I'll tell you some of the most memorable.

When I was twenty-two years old, I was a bridesmaid at my friend Andie's wedding. A few years earlier, I set her up with her future husband, Scott. Their wedding was picture-perfect and traditional. Andie wore a beautiful white tulle dress with a long train and veil. Her hair was piled up on her head. Scott wore an all-white tuxedo. The couple sang "If You Could See What I See" into handheld microphones while looking into each other's eyes. The organ played. The wedding vows were exchanged. It was beautiful.

If you watch the VHS tape of their wedding, I am the bridesmaid at the end of the line crying profusely. I'm sure people thought I was crying because it was my best friend getting married and not me. But that was not the reason. I was crying because I was overwhelmed thinking about all the people I loved who were at the wedding. I was thanking God that I had such good friends in my life.

When I was thirty years old, the wedding I was in was the polar opposite of Andie's. It was my brother Will's wedding. The wedding

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was at a Rainbow Gathering, which is a gathering of about 20,000 people that meet every summer in the national forest. Hippies, Vietnam vets, gutter punks, Hare Krishnas, and everyone in between come together to create a semi-utopian society for about three weeks. I have ministered at the gathering for years, praying for people, leading worship, and giving out food. The believers that I work with every year have become like family to each other.

One year, I invited Will to come to the Rainbow Gathering. He was a shaman at the time. To make an incredible story short, he had a life-changing encounter with God during the gathering that year. He became a follower of Jesus, and he has been one ever since.

Two years later, he married Marie, a dear friend of mine, at the gathering.

I was the wedding coordinator. Marie said to me, "I don't want to do anything. I just want all of our family to give me a wedding." And that's what happened.

Will and Marie got married under a canopy of flowers and branches that our community made for them. There were bagpipes and Irish flutes and about twenty hand drums. The older couples, who loved my brother and his bride like their own children, gathered around Will and Marie and gave them a blessing. Each blessed Will and Marie with the ability to endure something that that particular couple had gone through together, like the ability to make it through a separation, the ability to laugh together, things like that. It was my all-time favorite moment at a wedding.

There was no aisle to walk down at the end of the wedding, so we all circled around the bride and groom and danced. Will spontaneously took Marie's hand and ran with her around a field of sunflowers—God did a fabulous job with the floral design.

Family and friends made the food, baked two cakes, provided the music, made the flower crowns, and did the decorating—all in the middle of the woods. There was something so unique and special about our extended spiritual family coming together to present Will

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and Marie with their wedding as a gift. It felt like the way a wedding was supposed to be.

Never mind that they spent something like sixty dollars on the wedding. Never mind that I had to walk my shy, conservative dad past mud wrestling in the woods to get there. Never mind that there was a random hippie that walked right up to the couple in the middle of the ceremony to take pictures. It was still the most beautiful wedding I've ever been to.

When I was thirty-two years old, two of my dearest friends and neighbors got married. It was a backyard wedding.

Before it started, I spent some time talking to my friend Shannon. Shannon is one of the spunkiest people I know. She and her husband Daniel have been married twenty years and are still deeply in love. They are big fans of marriage—the friendship, the sex, the overcoming of challenges together, the choosing to love. They talk about these things a lot because they think marriage is such a gift. It's inspiring to see the way they love each other.

This is what Shannon said to me that day, as she gestured toward my curled hair, perfect makeup, and eggplant-colored sleeveless dress that showed off my shoulders: "Kate, you look smoking hot. Too bad it's just wasted."

Most of you singles are probably shaking your heads and putting this comment in the mental file of Insensitive Things Married People Say to Single People.

Believe me, that mental file in my own mind is chock-full of comments people have made to me over the years, but this was not one of them. I was not offended by Shannon's remark because I knew she meant it as a compliment. I actually felt flattered.

I knew that what she was really saying was, "What the heck, Kate? You are beautiful inside and out. I don't understand why you're still single."

People say this to me often. It is kind of a mystery to all of us.

During the wedding, I sang a love song that I had written. At the

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reception, my married friend Seth said to me, "Kate, in that dress, singing that song, any single guy here would want to dance with you." I was quite flattered.

Thinking about these two comments as I was eating my chicken à la king, I began to feel confident, brazen even. I was beautiful. Someone would want to dance with me.

I started to anticipate the dancing that was about to begin. I imagined one of those handsome, single groomsmen would see me across the room and think, "That was the girl who sang her song during the wedding. She fascinates me. I want to dance with her." He would walk up shyly and ask me. He would gently take my hand and we would step out onto the dance floor together. Even that would give me butterflies, since no one had touched my hand in a long time. And then we would move together. Two people with different personalities, different weaknesses, different strengths, moving as if they were one. Maybe we would even fall in love.

The time came for the single men to ask the single women to dance. I stood at the edge of the floor in anticipation.

No one asked me to dance.

I wanted to say, "Hey! Single guys! Over here! According to my married friends, this dress makes me look smoking hot! Doesn't anyone want to dance with me?"

I hoped the next song would be falling-in-love worthy.

The next song was anything but romantic. It had nothing to do with wedded bliss and everything to do with an athletic club.

That's right, folks: "YMCA."

Up until that day, I never understood why this song was a staple at wedding receptions. I stood on the dance floor pondering this phenomenon.

Hmmm, I thought. *The Hokey Pokey was probably invented so that wallflowers who never learned how to jitterbug could go out there and shake their booties. It gave them permission. It was part of the song: "You put your backside in, you put your backside out."*

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"YMCA" became the Hokey Pokey of the 80s. If you hadn't learned the incredibly complicated 80s dance that involved hopping up and down, you could at least fling your arms out to spell things.

Look at us! Who says we can't dance? We are so coordinated! We can all spell out the acronym of the Young Men's Christian Association in perfect unison!

Finally, I gathered up my gumption and danced with all the other bad dancers. More accurately, I spelled. If you looked closely, though, you would realize that I wasn't in perfect unison with everyone else, because instead of spelling YMCA, I was spelling WPCD. A secret joke between me and myself: White People Can't Dance. This has been a tradition for me at weddings ever since.

The next song was the Macarena, which was the Hokey Pokey of the 90s. This song has the same concept: a dance that even a person in a wheelchair could do. Again, what does this dance have to do with the sealing of a covenant between two people?

In the songs that followed, I participated in all of the traditional dances performed at Caucasian-majority weddings. You know, like the squat, the double-squat-spin-clap-and-point, the clap-point-point-clap-point-point-and-squat, the hip-breaker, the Caucasian-clap, the point-to-the-Lord, and the fat-rebel.

Finally, toward the end of the reception, the DJ put on the music I really wanted to dance to, even if it was reminiscent of awkward middle school moments.

But no one asked me. There would be no slow dancing for me. Not even in my smoking hot dress.

I wanted love, and, instead, I got the white man's overbite. Seriously, God? Seriously?

That night was like a snapshot of my life. At the beginning of the reception, I sat at the table with good friends and ate. I laughed. I loved being in their company. I was thankful.

But then the dancing came and everyone took his partner to dance. Another pair and another pair and another pair. Twos, twos,

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twos. I sat at the table and slowly ate my wedding cake, an important activity when you don't want to look like you have nothing to do while everyone else is dancing. I cried in the bathroom stall.

This time, it really was because it was not my wedding.

I don't want my singleness to be hard for me. I want to be satisfied in who I am as a single woman. But when I look at those pairs dancing, no matter how hard I try to fight it, I don't feel smoking hot. I feel alone.

I try to remember that I have a wonderful life, as single lives go. I also try to realize that I have it better than almost any single older woman in any other moment in history had it. If I lived as a single woman in another country or in another time, I would be less worried about being a loser and more worried about being alive. I am blessed to live in a time in which I can work to take care of myself and in which I don't need a husband to survive. I try to appreciate my freedom and independence as a single woman.

And yet, if it were my choice, I believe I would give up some of my independence to understand what it's like to be in covenant with someone, even if it were difficult. To have people in my life who were more than just my spiritual family, but who were my blood family. To have a husband and children who would walk with me on this journey. I know that marriage is not the fairy tale our culture makes it out to be, but I still want it.

I never expected to be single at this age. I thought I would have a family by now. I have had to rearrange my life accordingly, and that has been very difficult for me.

In the preface I talked about the *ghost ship,* the parallel life that I sometimes feel I am missing out on. A life in which I have a family.

Part of the problem is that I don't know what that parallel life would really look like. Right now it is just a mystery, a fairy tale. If I were actually in that parallel life, I would probably have days in which I felt useless. I would be exhausted from taking care of my kids. I would most likely feel like the romance between my husband

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and me waned at times, which would be difficult. I would have relational challenges I can't even begin to imagine right now. These are the things that my married friends struggle with every day.

My view of the life of my married friends is probably not realistic, in the same way that their view of my life can be romanticized. All that freedom! All that traveling! I do have a lot of freedom, but that's because the nature of covenant is that lines are drawn around the people within it. I have a lot of freedom because I don't have a lot of covenant. I often struggle with feeling like my life means less because I have no children and no family to invest in.

All the while, my married friends could be sitting at home in their own day-to-day lives, wondering if their lives mean anything because they are at home every day, trying to understand how to connect to the people they love. Many of them, I'm sure, are wondering about their own parallel lives—lives that do not involve marriage or children.

As my friend Aaron said to me the other day, "We spend the first half of our lives trying to meet the one we will marry. We spend the second half of our lives trying to connect with that person."

Most of us, single or married, struggle with the same root sadness of feeling lonely. One of our biggest fears is to be alone. A 2005 Gallup poll about what people fear the most revealed terrorist attacks, death, nuclear war, and, you guessed it, being alone.[1] All of us struggle with it.

I recently heard an interview with David Blaine, the world-famous illusionist and endurance artist. Blaine has lived in a coffin for seven days where he ate and drank nothing but a few tablespoons of water per day. He has been encased in ice for sixty-three hours. He has stood on a hundred-foot-high pillar for thirty-five hours. He has held his breath for over seventeen minutes on the Oprah Winfrey show, beating a world record at the time. He lived in a Plexiglas box suspended over the Thames river for forty-four days, again on only a little water a day.

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It could be argued that this is the least fearful human being on the planet. But the interviewer asks Blaine, "Is there anything that you're afraid of?" Without hesitating, he replies, "No." Then he pauses for a second. "You know, I could say one thing now that I think about it, though. If I have to go sleep in like a big house somewhere and no one else is there, I can't do it. I'd rather just sleep on the street."[2]

This makes me feel better. I may not be able to hold my breath for seventeen minutes, but I have slept in a big empty bed for over thirty years. So you see, even the bravest soul on earth is frightened of being alone.

All of us desire three basic things: to be loved for who we are, to feel like we're valuable, and to know we're not alone. For some mysterious reason, we have a really hard time knowing how to give and receive those things.

And yet we want them. We yearn for them. More than wealth. More than success. More than anything. We want to be seen, understood, and loved. Loved in our strong places; loved in our weak places.

Known.

Where did this desire come from? Is a life that has no intimate witness still known? If we never become part of a traditional family, are we doomed to loneliness or can we build our own, different family? What do we do when no one asks us to dance? Does God see me alone at my table, eating my wedding cake? Does he care? Does he ever feel the same way? These are some of the questions we will explore in the chapters to come.

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