

I
**First Comes Love,
Then Comes
A Little Bit Married**



*Why the Long-Term Relationship
Has Become the New
Romantic Rite of Passage*

Dating is not what it was fifty years ago. Dating is evolving into this gradual process of moving in. It involves nights spent over at one or the other's place. There's the toothbrush, then a few items of clothing. All of a sudden, they realize they've moved in.

—Pamela Smock, University of Michigan
Institute for Social Research

“So, catch me up. What’s going on with school? Your love life?” I asked my friend Sara at our monthly girls’ night in. “School is fine,” she said, glossing over the details to get to what she really wanted to talk about: her relationship. “But I’m in a stalemate with Adam,” she confided. Her boyfriend of over a year had just dropped the bomb that he wasn’t sure if he was ready to get married. She told us, “He says he is waiting for some sign that this is right. I’m twenty-five and he is twenty-seven, shouldn’t we be moving toward

marriage? And now do I just wait around for him to be ready? My time is valuable.” Right, in other centuries women gave their virginity, now the equivalent is our time. The room fell silent as everyone channeled some version of their own current or past “Adam” situation.

My grandparents went on five dates over a ten-month period before my grandfather proposed. They were happily married for forty-seven years. Nowadays, five dates is the point when you’ve friended each other on Facebook and are in the midst of a series of coy e-mail and text-message exchanges. The era in which my grandparents courted was defined by a compressed time frame—everything happened very fast. It’s the opposite today; the courtship and dating rituals have been elongated. In another not-so-distant time, to even sleep in the same bed—let alone live together as a couple—was considered an unspoken agreement to get married. But today, as Evan, twenty-nine, who has been dating his girlfriend for six years, puts it, “You can start your life without a gold band on your finger.” Marriage is no longer the big bang it was for earlier generations. There is now a huge stopgap between dating and marriage—it’s a place where young men and women are forming long-term relationships that have many similarities to marriage, yet aren’t quite. Welcome to the age of *A Little Bit Married*.

The Odyssey Years

In a widely circulated piece, “The Odyssey Years,” David Brooks, an op-ed columnist at the *New York Times*, recently pondered

the new pathway to adulthood. He wrote, “There used to be four common life phases: childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age. Now, there are at least six: childhood, adolescence, odyssey, adulthood, active retirement and old age. Of the new ones, the least understood is odyssey, the decade of wandering that frequently occurs between adolescence and adulthood.”¹ Professor Michael Kimmel, a leading researcher on men and masculinity and the author of *Guyland*, says his bird’s-eye view of the dating landscape is “dizzying”: “Today, I see a lot of young people leaving college and eventually they start dating and drifting in and out of a state of arrested development.”²

Are we a generation defined by the hook-up culture of casual sexual encounters? It’s true that shows like *Entourage* and *The Hills* popularize the image of singles on the prowl for a different sexual partner every night of the week. And in real life, many twenty-somethings are angsty over the protocol after a one-night stand. However, there is another storyline to Generation Y romances that sounds more like, “What should I get his mother for her birthday?” Long-term relationships are an equally common romantic state of affairs. In her “Sexplorations” column for *The Columbia Spectator*, student Miriam Datsokvy documented the sex lives of her peers for two-and-a-half years. She observed that there are two ways to be romantically involved when you are in college: hooking up or intense monogamy, otherwise known as the “college marriage.”³

In fact, a Pew Research study found that about a quarter of unmarried Americans (26 percent or about 23 million adults) say they are in a committed romantic relationship⁴—this

means that well over half of the eighteen- to-twenty-nine set are or are seeking to be coupled.⁵

“A Little Bit Married” is a term I coined to describe a new romantic rite of passage taking place among the urban, college-educated, under-thirty-five demographic: the long-term, unmarried relationship. Yet, despite its pervasiveness, multi-year dating for young people is terra incognita, whose terrain we are just starting to map. For Gabby, twenty-eight, the half-decade she spent dating her boyfriend was a precursor to marriage: “We had dinner with his parents, went on each other’s family vacations—we basically did all the same things that we now do now that we have a marriage license.” Robert, twenty-four, says A Little Bit Married is an apt description for his year-and-a-half relationship: “I realized I was in deep when I went to two Passover Seders with her, and I’m not even Jewish. We go on vacation, do holidays with each other’s families, and I flew across the country for one day just to be her date at a wedding.” For many, A Little Bit Married (ALBM) is a relationship pattern that they ebb in and out of for a good part of their twenties and thirties. It’s not unusual, as many ALBMs noted, to stop playing house with one partner and then move in or start seriously dating another. Serial monogamy is back, except now it comes with a dog and a shared mailing address. Jason, twenty-eight, dated his girlfriend for over two years and described their dynamic as “very domesticated.” “We were like an old married couple, except that we didn’t have rings.” Chloe, thirty-one, has been A Little Bit Married a few times in her twenties. She even went as far as talking about buying a house

with one of her long-term boyfriends, stating, “You share things with the person like you are married, but you aren’t, which can be quite confusing.”

Signs You Are ALBM

The baseline ALBM definition I’ve come up with is being in a monogamous non-matrimonial relationship for at least twelve months. In practice, however, what being A Little Bit Married means varies dramatically. Maybe you and your boyfriend have lived together long enough to reach what many states would deem a legitimate common-law marriage. Or maybe you’re not living together, but are fielding questions from relatives about where you two would like to eventually settle down. Perhaps you’ve talked about honeymoons, or made geographical adjustments to accommodate the other’s career. Tara, thirty, who dated her boyfriend for four years before getting engaged, captured a prevailing theme: ALBM is all about living in the hypothetical. “When we were A Little Bit Married,” she said, “everything we talked about was qualified with an ‘if.’ It’s not the kind of conversation I would have if I were talking to my husband.”

Sure, prolonged dating is full of fun coupley things: there are anniversary dinners, vacationing together, and owning a dog. But ALBM is riddled with emotional baggage. We are giving up on dream jobs and other goals to be close to our partners. We’re settling for each other’s foibles and imperfections as if we were married. And more often than not, we’re emotionally,



QUIZ: ARE YOU A LITTLE BIT MARRIED?

1. My boyfriend and I have spent the last three holidays together. YES or NO
2. We live together. YES or NO
3. His parents and I talk on the phone. YES or NO
4. We've been on each other's family vacations. YES or NO
5. We're casual about using statements like, "When we get married..." YES or NO
6. We talk about and plan for the future. YES or NO
7. I often wonder, "Where is this going?" YES or NO
8. If I got a great job in another city, he'd probably move for me and vice versa. YES or NO
9. I'll be ready to get married within the next year. YES or NO
10. I don't think my boyfriend is ready to get married anytime soon. YES or NO

For every "Yes" give yourself a point. If you scored above a six, you are one of the millions of ALBMs.

financially, and psychologically banking on these relationships turning into wedding invitations—when many times they don't. The consensus from those in the throes of this life stage is this: A Little Bit Married is a gray area. And a gray area is the midwife of relationship stress.

Beth, twenty-eight, says “percolating anxiety” described how she felt about the future and the meaning of the past three years that she and her boyfriend, Alex, had spent practically living together and integrating into each other's families: Where is this going? Where is the ring? Why is he not proposing if we spend every holiday with his family or mine? She explains that, “It was difficult being in a state of unknown.” Beth recalls the many occasions she raised the question of her future with Alex: “At the time, he said he wanted to finish graduate school and then see where he was at. That was two years away. I was so baffled that he didn't know where we were at. I definitely felt like he was putting the brakes on the whole marriage thing. I wish I had had some guidance during that period, because it was really tough.”

Nina, thirty, who has been dating her boyfriend for five years, says dating for half a decade took her by surprise: “It never occurred to me that this would be a form of a relationship . . . that I could be dating someone for this long without it being legally sanctioned by the state. Yet we definitely function like a married couple, in that we know each other's families and live together.”

It's a morass of confusion out there about how to swim through this life stage toward marriage and not just tread water.

And, as Beth points out, it's hard to hold back when you get deeply entrenched with someone, not to mention their friends and family. *A Little Bit Married* isn't only about always having a plus-one; there are a bevy of issues with which to contend during this period of marriage-lite. Couples have to negotiate how to harmonize their career goals, how to live together and manage the problems that come with domesticating, not to mention figuring out how, or if, to take the next step—crossing the marital readiness gap. There are custody battles over the parrot or about apartments with rents that can't be paid because the “breadwinner” isn't ready to tie the knot. It's a life overshadowed by the looming questions: Is this right? If it is, how do I know? You are beyond the point of being just boyfriend and girlfriend, but you aren't married, so you exist in this constant state of limbo that even the most intrepid daters can find unsettling.

But here's the thing: Just as there are rules for casual dating, shouldn't there be rules—or at least guidelines—for relationships that will take up the better part of our early adulthood?

Why Is Everyone Dating for Such a Long Period of Time?

It's now become the norm for couples to date for three, five, even ten years.⁶ But after a few years, people get restless. Lilly, twenty-six, who has been dating her boyfriend for three years

and currently lives with him, says she's gotten the A Little Bit Married itch: "It's hard for me because I'm such a planner, and it feels like I have no control over when it happens." Melanie, thirty-two, now married, says she hit her wall at five years: "At our four-year anniversary, I was kind of like, whatever, but at half a decade, I thought I was wasting my life."

Many A Little Bit Marrieds say that while they've been dating, they've seen friends circle through a whole "life cycle"—they've met, gotten engaged, married, bought a house, and have had kids during the duration of the ALBM's relationship.

Here's a bit of context for why you and all your friends are plodding along with no imminent plans to send out save-the-date cards. Let's start with this: The median age for a first marriage in the United States is the highest it's ever been—27.1 for a man and 25.3 for a woman⁷—and it tips even higher in many cities. As people have postponed walking down the aisle, other new dating rituals—prolonged courtship and cohabitation—have become socially acceptable. In fact, the number of cohabiting couples has grown more than tenfold during the last forty years. Forty years ago, in 1970, only about 500,000 couples lived together in unwedded bliss; now, over five million opposite-sex couples in the United States live together outside of marriage."⁸ A 2005 article in the *Detroit News* came close to calling the rise of cohabiting couples an epidemic, complete with a governmental response: "The burgeoning number of cohabiting couples—about 8 percent of American households, and most between the ages of 25 and

34—has sparked a national discussion among sociologists and researchers about the political, social and economic ramifications of so many marriage-wary people living together. It also prompted the Bush administration to push for more marriages with the Initiative for Healthy Marriage.”⁹ As you’ll see in the chart on page 19, there is a massive cultural shift taking place about how people go about tying the knot.

A Little Bit Married is a product of modernity. We live in a time when loose and undefined dating structures have become the norm. Remember, though, that formality was a large part of the dating culture for previous generations. In early parts of the twentieth century, a man would “pin” a woman with his sports pins or give her a class ring as a sign they were now “an item.” Though many have eulogized courtship and formal dating, that might be overstating and oversimplifying how people today date, but what is indisputable is that dating has fundamentally changed.

And yet, although it seems like a modern phenomenon, Dr. Helen Fisher, a Rutgers University biological anthropologist at Rutgers University and author of *Why Him? Why Her?*, says the story of *A Little Bit Married* is an ancient one: “Hunters and gatherers had relationships that were akin to *A Little Bit Married* called trial marriages. A trial marriage, very much like it is today, is when you move in and try it and see how you get along together, and if it doesn’t work out, then you don’t have to go through the full number of rituals. They are very common in tribal societies.”¹⁰



DATING: THEN AND NOW

Dating	How Your Grandparents Did It	How You Do It
Age	Meet your mate, get married in your early twenties, buy a house, and have two kids by twenty-six.	Go on 875 bad dates, sign up for Match.com, and then get married in your late twenties or early thirties.
Become an adult at	Twenty-one	Thirty-five
College	Go to college to get your M.R.S. degree	Go to college to get your B.A. with high honors and then start globe-trotting.
Dating ritual	Courtship	Long-term relationship
Dating mantra	Get married	I want to find my soul mate.
Career	Work for one company and retire with a gold watch forty years later.	Work in eight different jobs before your thirtieth birthday.
Cohabitation	Living together outside of wedlock was considered scandalous.	Today, 5.2 million unmarried heterosexual couples live together.
To be married in your twenties means . . .	You were in the majority.	You are in the minority.
Conventional wisdom	You're an old maid if you're an unmarried woman at thirty.	Don't get married before you're thirty.
"Marriage is forever"	What people believed.	What? I was raised by a single parent.

Fast forward a few thousand years to the 1850s and you can also see the origins of *A Little Bit Married*, according to Kathleen Gerson, a sociology professor at New York University. She argues that, as the industrial revolution proceeded, adult children were gradually freed from parental control over their choice of when and whom to marry. Men and women became increasingly free to choose their mates, and romantic love, based on a couple's sense of compatibility and shared feelings, became the ideal.¹¹ *A Little Bit Married* is that idea on steroids: It's the ultimate statement that taking your wedding vows is a genuine choice.

Jeffrey Arnett, a research professor who studies twenty-somethings and the author of a seminal book on young adults called *Emerging Adults*, attributes the radical change in courtship to the loosening up on the timeline of when someone should become an adult. "The concept of emerging adults," he states, "didn't even exist before Gen Ys, because in previous generations there was no transition into adulthood, you just become one." Today, there's a common conversation between parents and children that often sounds something along the lines of: "When I was your age, I already had a mortgage, a career-track job, and your mom was pregnant with your little brother." The zeitgeist today, however, is captured by lines like: "I'm in no rush. There are developing countries to visit and graduate degrees to be accrued." The timeline to adulthood now looks a lot like the continent of Africa—sprawling.

Arnett's analysis mirrors what the vast majority of the men and women I interviewed expressed: What's the hurry? Right,

exactly, especially when there are multiple careers to be forged and climates to be cooled. Mark Golin, the former editor of the lad magazine *Maxim*, described how an American man's adolescence may now last until age thirty-five or forty: "In the past you grew up at 21 and you were a sober, productive part of society. Now, you have guys who are 35-year-old 17-year-olds. When it comes to dating, they're out pulling some girl's pig-tails. It is not grown-up behavior."¹²

Flexibility Is Convenient

Another factor driving us toward long-term dating is the scattered geography that fosters a great deal of impermanence. Young people today lead a peripatetic lifestyle. The map of a twenty-something life often looks like a cross-country road trip or an around-the-world ticket. You grew up in Denver, went to college in Boston, migrated to New York for your first job, did a stint abroad in Australia, and then moved to Washington, D.C., for your second job. Nathan, twenty-five, is one of these nomads. From college in San Francisco to a year abroad in Chile to his first job in New York, he is now on the brink of transplanting himself again, this time to graduate school, which could mean going back to San Francisco or perhaps to Boston or Philadelphia. He has been dating his girlfriend Allison for three years, but says ring shopping is not on his to-do list. "I still want flexibility," he says. "I want to go to business school and figure out what I want my career to be. I still want to travel with friends."

Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, the co-director of The National Marriage Project at Rutgers University, wrote, “Neither men nor women have the time or a pressing desire for marriage, especially when they can get some marriage-like benefits without it. So they put it off and enter into relationships that offer some combination of sex, companionship, convenience, and economies of scale.”¹³ But even economies of scale have issues. How are these career calculations impacting long-term relationships? Is career first and love second in the calculus for both men and women? These are questions that Chapter 3—“Career Compromises and Christmas Trees: Should You Be Acting Married When You Aren’t?”—will tackle.

Perhaps, though, the most widely touted reason for today’s new dating landscape is a tiny little pill. The birth control pill (and easily accessible contraception in general) changed the face of courtship irrevocably by eliminating sex as the main impetus for marriage. Men and women could now have sex with less fear of committing to childrearing responsibilities. Today, premarital sex is the norm, with the exception of small pockets within religious communities. Birth control ranks up there with the vote as an agent of female liberation. It’s given generations of women control of their fertility and marriage timetables and allowed them to wield their sexual freedom in ways that has made it possible for them to forge careers and marry for love. In the process, the birth control pill has produced its own offspring: *A Little Bit Married*. As Mike, twenty-eight, who is in a long-term relationship, puts it: “If I had to be

married to have sex, I would probably be married, as would every guy I know.”

Looking for Mr. (and Ms.) Perfect

What does this all mean for the millions of us trying to figure out how, when, or if to get married? It seems that we are now mining our relationships for intangibles. Rather than marrying for sex and money, the twenty-first-century relationship is based more on abstractions, like love and compatibility—giving way to some Mt. Everest-sized expectations. Adam, twenty-eight, when trying to explain the reason he broke it off with his girlfriend of five years, said, “I don’t know, I just stopped getting those butterflies in my stomach every time I saw her.” However, Adam could have been any number of people interviewed for this book. The stakes for coupling have never been higher. Contentment has become ever more elusive as marriage has gone from an economic to a romantic contract. It has prolonged the time we spend looking at our current partner for signs of a soul mate.

Keep in mind that the soul mate is a rather novel concept in our romantic history. Marriage used to be much more utilitarian. Love was a factor, but that’s not why couples ended up at the altar: Women needed a base of economic support, and sex outside of marriage was considered too risky before the advent of birth control. Esther Perel, a marriage and family therapist and the author of *Mating in Captivity*, says what we now

expect from one person is what a community used to provide: “We are looking for the staples of marriage—economic stability and family—plus some. So it’s not that one thing has replaced another. It’s the addition of all these other things.”¹⁴ But who could blame us for wanting this magic—and some might argue unattainable—mix of qualities in our partners? As our life spans increase, you could easily be celebrating forty-five-, fifty-, or sixty-year wedding anniversaries. The notion that we could spend five or six decades with one person has given new weight to the words “I do.”

And marriage can be an even more daunting prospect for a generation that spent their weekends being shuttled between two different houses and could say “joint custody” before they were even out of diapers. Jonah, twenty-six, witnessed his parents endure an extremely acrimonious divorce. “It’s made me scared about getting married. I just want to be sure,” is how he explains why he ended his two-year relationship with his girlfriend. “I just didn’t have that certainty, but I think that’s because I was so scarred by the model of my parents’ marriage.”

Of course, being *A Little Bit Married* isn’t fueled only by growing up in non-nuclear families, commitment phobia, or the wish to write a smaller rent check every month. For many—even those that came from nuclear families—marriage can look like a treacherous institution that should come prepackaged with a full-body, steel armor suit and a helmet. Allison, twenty-eight, who was in a relationship for two years before she got engaged, summed up a common sentiment about the

romantic rite of passage and the feeling of wanting to enter marriage well equipped and well informed: “It’s given me a big window of time to see how he interacts with my family and friends and feel more confident about taking the next step.”



THE SIX SIGNS OF MODERN DATING

1. Cohabitation is the norm.

It's not living in sin, it's just living like the rest of your friends.

2. Hooking up isn't our only romantic ambition.

A term as popular as the *booty text* is the *college marriage*.

3. We hold off on ring shopping.

This generation has been told to take their time. The twenties are one's odyssey years of exploring and experimenting.

4. We aren't going to settle.

An overwhelming majority (94%) of never-married singles between 20–29 agree that “when you marry you want your spouse to be your soul mate, first and foremost.”¹⁵

5. She is (still) ready before he is.

A 2005 poll on Gen Ys found that women were a bit more eager: 55 percent wanted to get married in the next five years, compared to 42 percent of men¹⁶.

6. “Men bring home the bacon” and “women raise the children” is a thing of the past.

Today, Gen Ys are placing more value on forging egalitarian relationships. The notion that “a man is a financial plan” is an anachronism.

What You Will Find Inside

Here's a brief geography of this book:

- What are the main markers of marriage without marriage?
- What does it mean to date in a time when we have another decade before we have to “grow up”?
- How do issues about careers, living together, and religion get figured out when there isn't a ring?
- Why—and in what ways—is this romantic rite of passage different for men than for women?

To that last question, Chapters 5 and 6—“The Female Proposal” and “I Do. Or Do I?”—probe more about the gender dynamics of *A Little Bit Married*, but it's such a pervasive undercurrent of this relationship stage that I want to wave at it early on. Yes, we've seen a woman run for president, vice president, and, in general, women are breaking all types of glass ceilings. Yet there is still a relationship ceiling where many women hit their heads. The source? There's a fundamental power imbalance when it comes to the decision of when to get married. In the vast majority of cases, it's still the man who sets the marriage timeline, leaving many women wondering and waiting about the future of their relationship. Brynn, twenty-six, like many *A Little Bit Marrieds*, said there was no mutual timeline: “Even though Jack and I had been dating for five

years, it was his timeline and it was assumed he would propose when he was ready. I felt like I was marching to the beat of his drum.” Brynn and many other women hit on a passivity that is endemic to *A Little Bit Married*. The common echo from women in the stage of “waiting to seal the deal” was that being *A Little Bit Married* can feel like running an emotional marathon, except you aren’t always sure whether there is a finish line.

Interviews with former and current *A Little Bit Marrieds* are the backbone of this book. The real-life stories, insights, and advice have shaped the topics explored in the next seven chapters. In those coming chapters, you’ll be hearing from a slew of experts ranging from psychologists to sociologists to anthropologists to relationship experts. Melding my own reporting with the texture of expert advice and opinions, *A Little Bit Married* will help you sort out the following:

- How to read the signs about whether or not you’re headed to the altar
- How to have those tough conversations in which you address the big questions: Where is this going? How can we reconcile our religious and political differences? What are our views about money? Do we both have the same vision for the future?
- How much you should be acting married if you aren’t
- What to do if you or your partner is unsure about whether the other person is “the one”

- Whether moving in together is a good idea
- How to move on after a long-term relationship ends
- How to take the step from A Little Bit Married to Married

This generation is in the process of writing its relationship history. Historians, anthropologists, and sociologists will look back and document that Gen Ys took part in a series of long-term relationships before saying “I do.” A Little Bit Married is defined by more than sharing a mailing address, splitting the bills, or having joint custody over Fido. More than those physical markers, it’s defined by the length of time of that the relationship lasts. The sprint to the aisle is a gait of another generation. We now seek less corporeal elements in a partner, and instead we are after something more squishy and hard to pin down—love, compatibility, and friendship—and, in doing so, heralding new types of commitment structures.

What follows is an excavation of this new romantic rite of passage. The following chapters will peel through the various layers, discuss the practical realities, and be peppered it with both real-life stories and expert advice. On that note, let’s start with a topic that frames a central part of the A Little Bit Married conversation: the new trails to adulthood.

A Little Bit Married Rules

As I conducted my 120th ALBM interview, common themes and threads began to emerge. So at the end of each chapter,

you'll find a few A Little Bit Married "Rules"—2.0 style. The following quartet are some general principles. At the end of each of the following chapters, you'll find more specific ones.

Be Honest with Yourself

Will you be happy if the status quo remains the same for the next two years without any commitment about the future? Do you even want to get married? Do you want to have children? Do some soul-searching about what you want from the relationship. That way, you'll be able to have an honest and empowered conversation with your partner about how, when, or if, to take the next step.

Ask the Right Questions

Yes, you can berate your partner with the vague four-word question: Where is this going? However, that might not help you get your finger on the pulse of what you really want to know. Take a more specific route and pose questions about career goals, priorities in life, and where does s/he see himself at thirty-five.

Set Time Frames

This one is geared toward the ladies. Time is the most valued commodity of the twenty-first century. Yet there's an epidemic

of women out there who waste precious years of their lives, hoping that hope will proffer a marriage proposal. The consensus regarding this was that you should be firm about how long you'll tolerate the inertia.

Don't Make Assumptions

Emma, twenty-nine, assumed that Ted, her boyfriend of three and a half years, would factor her into his decision about where to move after graduate school. She stated that, "I was floored when he said to me, 'I think we should both just take the best job we are offered.'" Emma assumed that the three years they spent having a long-distance relationship between London and New York, countless weekends spent with the other person's family, and simply the duration of the relationship created an iron-clad contract that, after two years of long distance, they would try to end up in the same time zone. Find out if you are the same page (i.e. ask questions such as: Are we are on the same page about taking jobs in the same city after business school?).