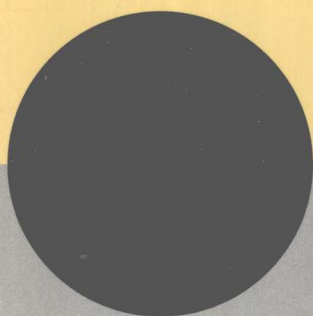


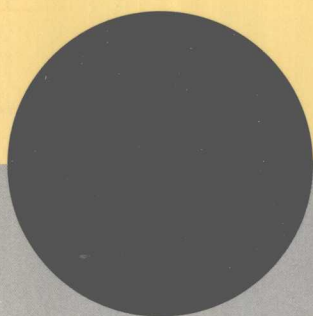
THE IMPROVISED WOMAN



S I N G L E W O M E N
R E I N V E N T I N G
S I N G L E L I F E

Marcelle Clements

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THE IMPROVISED WOMAN

"What a great book. The original and lively voices of the dozens of women here tell the astonishing story of modern marriage and unmarried. More important, Clements's wry and generous cultural clairvoyance gives us permission to be ourselves, to invent our own lives, and to approach the impossibly complicated relations between men and women with wit and integrity."

—Susan Cheever

"Well, now the dirty little secret is out! Instead of sobbing over their solitary micro-waved TV dinners, a great many single adult women are leading quite varied, interesting, highly independent, and eminently fulfilling lives. This is an eye-opening, wonderfully written, wonderfully illuminating book."

—Maggie Scarf

"This book gave me the most fabulous weekend. I spent all day yesterday in front of the fireplace with it, savoring it, marveling at Clements's prodigious mind and reach, nodding vociferously in parts, rereading other parts just for the pure pleasure of her voice. *The Improvised Woman* is a gift to single women and their huge invisible revolution. Marcelle Clements not only dispels the odious myths, she also gives us visibility and the confidence to be seen and heard and respected."

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—E. Jean Carroll

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R e i n v e n t i n g
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W . W . NORTON & COMPANY

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INTRODUCTION

At some point, I came to feel that my life had turned out “strangely.” I never expected to be quite so on my own or to have a place that belonged only to me and to think of it as my home, making all my own decisions, keeping my own hours, sleeping alone. Sleeping alone! I hadn’t imagined that I would ever be setting a professional course (or an aesthetic one, for that matter), without a husband’s or lover’s interference or that I would be financially responsible for myself and a small child. Growing up, I wasn’t sure what I felt about being a mother, and I never expected to be a single mother. I certainly never expected to become the principal point person and liaison between my own mother and the outside world—let alone that I would be that sort of mother and that sort of daughter all at once. If I had imagined the life I now lead, I doubt I would have wanted it, but it also wouldn’t have occurred to me that I could handle it, logistically or psychologically, so I’m surprised and pleased to find that I do. I wandered and meandered my way to here, only figuring out afterward what I had done. This book is, in part, an attempt to do just that.

When I came to the United States from France, aged ten, girls of my generation were routinely exhorted to follow models. And that’s a good thing because if we had been asked what it meant to be a woman, we wouldn’t have had a clue, and even now, casting my mind back, it seems to me there was a problem of too many models. In a way, we collected them—sort of like 45s—a little of this and that, a few of these. I had two complete sets (at least). I came to this

country knowing of Brigitte Bardot and Simone de Beauvoir. I soon learned of Sue Barton, R.N., and Hannah Arendt, Ph.D., and of the great Margaret Mead. That year, according to a Gallup poll, Eleanor Roosevelt was the most admired woman in the United States. I had read Françoise Sagan and Georges Sand. I was yet to discover Betty and Veronica, Archie's girlfriends, and the girls in the love comics who always shed a tear when they were kissed, and the girls who did the stroll on *American Bandstand*. I acquired a collection of Ponytail desk accessories. In both blue and pink plastic, they were stamped with the eponymous teenager, lying on her stomach, feet crossed in the air behind her—and I believe there were spinning 45s hovering about her. I had my own collection of 45s too, and had listened a thousand times to The Teddy Bears' "To Know Him Is to Love Him," in soft, close harmony, with plenty of echo on top; "My Boyfriend's Back"; "Happy Birthday, Baby"; and "Leader of the Pack," the latter being an ode to cool boys, with the sound of a motorcycle revving between choruses. Marilyn Monroe had not yet committed suicide, and Natalie Wood had not drowned. But there was a bevy of adolescent blondes such as Tuesday Weld, Carol Lynley, Sandra Dee, and Yvette Mimieux, who were always "getting in trouble" in movies like *A Summer Place* and *Blue Denim*. At the same time, I had found my way to Willa Cather, Dorothy Parker, Carson McCullers, and Harper Lee. And before much more time had elapsed there was Betty Friedan and Aretha, the Queen of Soul, Jacqueline Kennedy, and Charlotte Moorman, who played the cello naked.

I am not sure when girls totally gave up struggling to define themselves, trying to put together something from all of the above. Women who are older or younger than I am will have their own reference points, but what many of us have in common is that we left the various reductive potentials behind—the perky conformism of the pony-tailed teenagers, the stylized, melancholy-tinged sluttiness of the girls who were not virgins, the majesty of the august widows whose public lives began in earnest only when their duties to their husbands ended. None of us could keep the entire equation in her head at any one time. The Civil Rights movement, the Gay Liberation movement, the antiwar movement, the changes in men, advances in reproductive and contraceptive science—all of these altered how we thought of identity, home, gender, how we viewed

our bodies, how we envisioned the life of the mind and the life of the spirit. Meanwhile, class became a fuzzy category. Money and social entrée, which once had guaranteed security, were daily devalued. Having a husband—*having* a husband—or not became one of the very few self-contained contexts left, a definition of sorts. We didn't expect that this one tidy category would become more and more hazy as time went on.

"I'm off the grid," a woman in her late thirties told me recently. "Self-supporting, bringing up two kids, divorced two years ago and not one date since."

Many women have stumbled into no grid to replace the matrimonial grid, no definition other than the insufficient "married" and its sole official variation, "unmarried." As a result, we have felt ourselves becoming conclusively undefined, and, as it turned out, this is a rather interesting thing to be.

Feminism did not replace marriage as a source of definition. That was the whole point of the women's movement: to explode definition. Many women could allow themselves the luxury of being single only once they had learned to identify with other women, thereby abandoning many of the antiwomen stigmas that had prevented most from doing anything new guiltlessly, let alone live on their own, make their own money, and choose their friends and lovers. Of course, some may say that single women trade one type of stigma—the age-old one of the inferior second sex—for a new type, that of the oddball loner. But then others point to the negative image that some women feel is attached to taking care of their children full time. But, as always with prejudice, if some of us have a problem with any such stigma, we all do, for one woman's image is a little bit every woman's image, no? At the very least, that would be the feminist position, and it's a good one to live by, in my view, although I'm afraid that single women—for all that it may have enabled their emergence—are not what feminism bargained for. The feminist paradigm had to do with the two-person relationship; everything outside of that frame was a free-for-all.

For myself, I have yet to formally agree to any one identity as a woman—I only know that I am one. Like many of my peers, I have given up for now on the entire subject of identity and the boat it came in on. Too busy. But after most of a decade of living alone, I

do have a sense of leading a life that has a certain kind of order and a distinct atmosphere. These aren't always what I would prefer them to be, but I find myself wishing I could improve them rather than ever desiring to leave them behind altogether. It is in this sense that my life has turned out "strangely." At some point there came the very perplexing realization that I was, of all things, the one thing that I would not have expected: I was fine. Alone, I was fine as I had not been earlier in my life. Most surprising of all was my ongoing dearth of tediously enmeshed sentimental (romantic, sexual, whichever you prefer) relationships, a type of attachment I had always had, if anything, an excess of. I had spent nearly all of my adult life in one relationship or another. Some were better than others, of course, but I had never made a determination against the *genre*; I had just assumed that either I sometimes picked the really wrong men or I needed to do more work on myself. One or both may be correct, but I began to consider whether there wasn't an even more generic problem when, at the beginning of the '90s, after the nasty and protracted breakup of an eleven-year relationship, I found myself thinking that I would rather, much rather, be alone than go through anything like that again. Soon I realized that I was not only not living without a man, but that I was also living without looking for one or expecting to be found by one. I didn't rule it out. I don't rule it out. But I came to characterize my present way of living as: permanent, at least for now.

It was then that the idea for this book occurred to me, spurred by my surprise at my own reaction to my circumstances. How was it that solitude didn't feel to me to be a punishment, an unfortunate fate I had to resign myself to? Like many of my subjects, I still haven't gotten completely used to the surprisingly pure pleasure of living alone. On occasion, my very ease in this kind of life feels worrisome to me. And, of course, sometimes I feel lonely. But when I try to decide whether or not I wish it to be an interim solution or a permanent one, even in the safety of my own fantasies I find myself loathe to give up the romance of independence. But then, and this is the thesis of this book, it is when The Plan fails that we notice we've begun a more interesting improvisation.

I certainly had never expected to be anything that I would have been willing to call "single." Had I guessed that I would wind up liv-

ing without a man on an ongoing basis, I would have envisioned this solitude as interestingly “marginal” or “idiosyncratic.” I wouldn’t have thought to place myself in as corny a demographic category as “single”—a word from which there has long emanated the odor of crummy wine, crowded bar scenes, and creepy personal ads, and even this is an improvement over the image that preceded it: the erotically desiccated unescorted female.

Rather than noticing a change in society’s attitude toward single-ness, I was aware of a change in attitude toward marriage. A little less than ten years after discovering “To Know Him Is to Love Him” and Ponytail pencil cases, I was married, briefly. I still see my former husband sometimes, and his current wife, both of whom I like, so that when I look back at my decision to marry, I don’t think that I was wrong. I was only young. Although I did not legally remarry, it would be twenty years before I reached a point where I would think of myself as being neither in a relationship nor recovering from one. Looking back, now it all makes a certain kind of sense.

It’s still true that very few women who are my contemporaries would have made staying single their first choice. But, at the very least, it has become an option that seems preferable to others and, at best, it’s an opportunity for a life that is in a number of ways richer. For older women, too, things have changed. More and more, those who were widowed found that they didn’t necessarily want to remarry. For that generation of women now in their sixties, seventies, and eighties, marriage has very specific, inexorable responsibilities, and remarriage renews them. Many of these women simply don’t want to live with a new boss. As for younger women, independence is no longer a luxury, it’s a necessity for self-fulfillment, and attempting to fulfill oneself is a matter of course.

What happened was an essential change in metaphor. The relationships between men and women once were drama in the age-old style, a sort of opera filled with passion, lust, intrigue, artful dominance and submission, and painful third-act curtains. Sure there were solos, but it wasn’t long before the *tutti* came right back on for the chorus. Now the theatrical old forms seem obsolete, revivals at best. Not only are relationships searching for new forms, but the lack of a central sexual relationship has become a genre all by itself.

Even before I myself became unattached, I had a number of

friends who were, and I knew that the world of these women was as credible and complete a reality as that of the world of couples. I found I was attracted to the atmosphere of their reality. Different qualities are prized in this new group—or, rather, among these people who no longer see themselves as conforming to all the laws of the old group. Independence is very highly valued, for instance, as are a capacity for solidarity and a well-developed sense of humor.

On the downside, some women complain that, as much as they may love being with women, they just don't have enough contact with men and are afraid of being swallowed up in a ghetto of women. And, as always, many women feel that, as single people and/or single parents, they are especially discriminated against because they are women. But, more and more, single women say they feel, of all things, comfortable.

This was already true when I began to live alone, at the end of the 1980s. As time went on, this became even truer. While I was working on this book, the phenomenon I wanted to describe continued to evolve, and what had once seemed eccentric became pretty ordinary. Ten years ago, never marrying or staying single after a divorce was seen as maladapted, even by the women themselves. "I just have to do this for myself," a woman would say, to explain what seemed like crazy behavior. Now being single—at least for a time—seems to many women like the most reasonable option. When I first began my interviews, in the early '90s, I would usually have to explain that I was exploring the possibility that being single is really a choice for a woman and that the second-class status of unmarried women is based on an outdated norm. The women I spoke to seemed surprised to find that they often did not at all envy their married friends. By the time I ended, this was deemed unremarkable. The resulting reorganization in the status hierarchy is still in transition, but some of its consequences are already obvious. "I don't even put down 'divorced' when I'm filling out forms," an attractive fifty-one-year-old woman recently told me. She said that she viewed her former married life as "pathological" and that she felt completely identified with single women. She had married in her twenties, a decision that she now describes as "crazy; I don't know what got into me." Divorced five years later, she has since had affairs but rules out