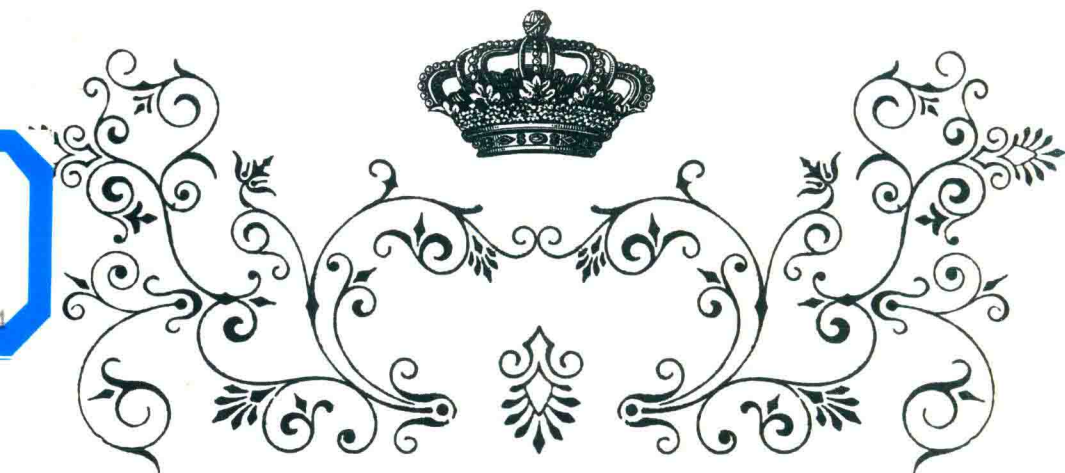




The Single Woman
& the Fairytale Prince



Jean-Claude Kaufmann



THE SINGLE WOMAN AND THE
FAIRYTALE PRINCE

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FOREWORD TO THE NEW EDITION

It was seven years ago [1999]. The first edition of this book was about to be published and was about to leave its world of paper. It set off shock waves all around it, which was a strange experience for the author. The book was in tune with a burning question of the day: the highly charged issue of the growing number of people who live on their own. As for Prince Charming – the Fairytale Prince – I had refused to believe he existed when I began my research, but he took the opportunity to make a spectacular comeback. Although he had been reduced to nothing more than a residual archaism that only little girls would admit to, he escaped the mawkish and highly stigmatized imagery to which he had been confined and suddenly began to crop up regularly in ordinary conversations – with a hint of ironic distance, of course, but that could scarcely conceal the intensity of the women's dreams and expectations. Cinderella 69 admitted it quite openly in her blog: 'Fed up with dates that lead nowhere. Fed up with websites posting the same old profiles and promising what I imagine to be relationships that are enough to make you weep even before they've got off the ground. I'm still waiting for my prince to come, still waiting for Mr Right, the man who will understand me and carry me off, far away from this bloody drab existence, into a wonderful world, all cuddles and sweet as sugar. Has my prince gone to sleep, or what? Quick, give me a sign; I really am getting impatient.' Over the next few weeks, Cinderella 69 received 30 or so offers in response to her blog. Unfortunately, they were a bit dull and they were all the same. Not everyone can become a Prince.

I too received a lot of post when the book came out: a flood of fascinating and detailed first-hand accounts (enough for a second volume). Strangely enough, almost all of them had the same structure.

First, detailed descriptions of the personal quirks to which I had not paid enough attention in the book. Linda told me: 'Personally, and this is the big difference between me and your single women, I secretly dream about Princess Charming. Unfortunately, it goes no further than that because I don't have it in me to go through with it.' Second, a reappropriation of my analysis, followed by well-argued criticisms and proposals for variants. 'In my opinion, you underestimate the need for sex. That's another norm that's forced upon us: the obligation to perform. And as it happens, it undermines men even further. As you say, it's nice to have a shoulder to cry on, but a Prince needs to have rather more exciting attributes too! Poor things! Men feel that they have to prove themselves and they have to be good enough in that area too. Sex has become the number one topic of conversation for me and my girlfriends' (Eve). Third, expressions of thanks for the book's liberating effect. Because it stressed the power of a social trend that is making individuals embark upon autonomy trajectories despite themselves, it made it possible to remove the terrible self-doubts. 'I've finally realized that it's not my fault and that I've done nothing wrong. The worst thing of all was not knowing what I might have done wrong. Obviously, because I hadn't done anything wrong!' (Raïssa). The removal of the feeling of guilt begins with the surprising discovery that she is just like everyone else in her position and the realization that a description of certain forms of the social can provide insights into something very intimate. 'You've stripped me naked. It borders on the obscene. How did you manage to describe my life, when you don't know me? I thought I was the only one, and now I discover that I belong to a sort of secret community. It's very reassuring (I feel a bit less alone), but it's also unpleasant. Thanks and no thanks. Thanks for making the good times feel even better. And no thanks for the bad times, because you don't offer any solution and you've made them even worse. You say that the single life is a life divided, a mixture of tears and laughter. And you're quite right. But, having read your book, I feel even more torn than before' (Carline).

Although it was usually the case, reading the book did not always have a beneficial effect. The author has no control over what use is made of his book (which is, for better or worse, just as it should be). I remember, for example, one young couple who studied *La Trame conjugale* (Kaufmann 1992) too closely. Book in hand, they both watched their partner-enemy's every gesture like hawks. Their married life obviously became a living hell and I was the (unwitting) cause of the disaster. I was very touched by the story Malvina confided in me as I was writing this book; I feel somewhat guilty and I feel for her. To

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celebrate her 30th birthday, she treated herself to a trip to India and took *La Femme seule et le Prince charmant* with her. Reading it made the penny drop: time was passing and she needed to find a father for the children she could already imagine herself having. Our states of mind change the way we see others and it seemed to her that she had found the ideal candidate as soon as she got home, especially now that her biological clock was ticking. Being an experienced womanizer, Richard promised her the earth and lived up to all her expectations. No sooner were they married, unfortunately, than he turned into an ugly frog and went back on all his fine words. ‘I liked him because he didn’t run a mile when I talked about commitment – I wanted a child quickly – and what he said seemed to fit in with my principles. It was along the lines of “I don’t want you to iron my shirts for me: you’re not my maid.” That was four and a half years ago, our daughter is three and a half and – I CAN’T STAND HIM! What annoys me most is his chauvinist attitude, things like: “What? My green shirt hasn’t been ironed, and I wanted to wear it this morning” (in the meantime, the other 15 are clean and have been ironed: the green shirt is the only one in the linen basket!). Or: “What’s this pigsty? You might tidy up! You’ve been at home all day” (I had in fact marked 35 sets of homework, made a meal and done two lots of washing, but I had left the bin bag outside the front door). And the worst thing of all about all this is that he regularly goes out on his own with his mates while I stay at home to look after our daughter, whereas I’d like to go to see a movie or go to an evening do at school. He makes a big scene just to put me off wanting to go out.’¹ Being in a relationship is like buying a ticket for the lottery: you don’t always win the big prize.

This is why the number of people living on their own has risen inexorably over the last seven years all over the world. When the time came to prepare a new edition, I had to take stock, to see what had changed and to decide whether some passages had to be revised. I did not have to take anything out. Apart from a few minor details (the diaries have become blogs), the questions were still the same and the most detailed observations had not changed one little bit. New and very important elements have, however, obviously emerged, and they merited discussion. A number of chapters have therefore been added. There have been three main developments.

First, there has been a change of atmosphere. Since the first edition appeared (in 1999), we have had speed dating and *Sex and the City*.

¹ The story of Malvina’s life with Richard will be continued in a forthcoming book on how couples fall out.

The trendy atmosphere of the big cities means that the single attitude now has a huge screen presence and seems to have become very fashionable. All those wretched couples trapped into their narrow domestic lives look so behind the times. Singles seem to have become the standard-bearers of a joyous and inventive freedom.

The sad truth is that the revolution has been purely superficial. It has certainly let some air in and has made it easier to talk about all this. But what I am saying in this book is that society speaks with forked tongue: 'Everyone is free to do what he or she wants, but . . .' The more the 'free to do what he or she wants . . .' crops up in the light banter of urban parties and TV dramas, the louder the 'but . . .' becomes in the depths of society. The discrepancy between the two is growing. Coupledom is not out of date. On the contrary, the settled home life quietly asserts itself as the norm, more so than ever in a society that makes so many psychological demands of us. It surreptitiously stigmatizes the singles who thought they had freed themselves from the dead weight of its norms. Even where it should be least oppressive: in their private domain and in the places where they meet. As we shall see in chapter 9, a Net surfer who posts her vain quest for love for too long is very quickly pigeonholed and begins to look suspicious to her fellow surfers. The accusing finger can be pointed on the Internet too (see chapter 2), and that is even more cruel because the Net is so intimate: the traitor is inside the gates. Singles' relationship with money is probably the best example of this. It should allow them to indulge in all the little treats they can afford because they are single and not accountable to anyone (and especially not to a mean husband). But their existential fragility and their anxieties about the future put paid to that dream: two-thirds of single women see themselves as more frugal and less extravagant than married women.²

The second new element is far from being just a ripple on the surface: the Internet really has revolutionized the ways we can meet others. A new chapter is therefore devoted to it. Making contact has become astonishingly easy and (apparently) risk-free. All it takes is one click, and you can choose between an infinite number of offers, each more attractive than the last. All it takes is one click, and a new world opens up before the eyes of the astonished surfer, who can write words of love, receive endless virtual kisses and even flirt at a distance. She can break out of her loneliness whenever she likes, make friends,

² Survey (of 609 single women) carried out by IPSOS on behalf of GE Money Bank in December 2005.

find confidantes, and become involved in passionate debates about all kinds of subjects. The Net can quickly become a drug for anyone who ventures on to it. And, as with any drug, there is a danger that she will no longer be able to do without it and that it will have painful side effects. Some of the side effects are harmless: she's had all she can take, and suddenly becomes sick of virtual reality. And some are terrible: emotional commitment becomes even more problematic. The illusion is to believe that the Internet makes everything easier. In reality, it makes it easier to make contact but makes commitment more problematic than ever precisely because making contact has become easier. Falling in love has become a problem. Christelle explains it very well: 'Falling in love is one thing. Staying together is another. Personally, I've never met a real flesh and blood man.' In the first edition of this book, commitment was already described as the real problem; the 'Internet revolution' has just made things worse.

The last element, finally, has to do with the globalization of exchanges. At first sight, it too appears in the best possible light because, having rebelled against the sinister forces of cultural isolationism, our era dreams of hybridity and has acquired a taste for the Other. The globalization of singledom also allows particular categories (such as farmers) to break out of their isolation and to find, somewhere in the world, partners who live up to expectations that their local territory can no longer satisfy. But if we look more closely, it transpires that, as in the economic domain, the globalization of the marriage market has its down side too. A profoundly unequal structure of exchange between the North and the South (to which we can add the countries of the East) is in fact being established. Men in the North are demanding (and obtaining from the South) women who are young, beautiful and submissive. Of course they are attracted to the autonomous and highly educated women of the European metropolis. But when it comes to beginning a relationship, they think of all the effort they will have to make it 'good enough' (see chapter 8). They therefore prefer old-style women and wives who can provide them with a quiet married life, who are submissive and who are good housekeepers into the bargain. What is more, they are demanding women who are young and beautiful. There is therefore a danger that men in the South, and especially poor men, will find it more difficult to find partners. At the same time, educated women in the North who have reached an age that means that there are few suitable single men available (see the Appendix: 'The Globalization of Singledom') will increasingly face new forms of competition that makes the existing age difference even greater.

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As for the young women of the South, marrying a foreigner does provide them with an opportunity to escape their poverty. But that is not all it does. They often dream of romantic love too. Just as he is ubiquitous on the Net, so the eternal Prince Charming still plays the leading role in the globalization of singledom. Sadly, there have probably never been so many carriages that turn into pumpkins.

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INTRODUCTION

This book tells the story of a strange couple: Prince Charming and the single woman. It is a sort of modern fairytale, but it is also a true story. Its main character is the single woman, who is present throughout. And she is very much alive: her every move is described and we can spy on her dreams and thoughts. Prince Charming is an ambiguous figure who only appears from time to time.¹ Is he an outdated cliché who is summoned up far too often in our modern era? We will have to wait for the end of the story before we can tell.

This book does not simply tell a story. I may as well admit it from the start: the story is really no more than a pretext, an Ariadne's thread that will guide us on our way as we analyse singledom. The single life is an inextricable labyrinth and there is a danger that we will get lost. The reader may, however, prefer the pretext to the analysis and, by skimming through a few chapters, can follow the adventures of Prince Charming and our modern Cinderella.

The reader is, however, advised to prefer the analysis, which is the important part of this book.

I have been working for eight years on the question of men and women who are not part of a couple, and loneliness. For a long time, all I did was to come up with new categories and more and more

¹ Prince Charming's constant comings and goings between the imaginary world and reality confuse our analysis: who are we talking about? Women who dream about their fairytale Prince are well aware that he is a fictional (but wonderful) character. But women who are quite prosaically looking for a man who suits them and call him their Prince are quite happy to sprinkle stardust on a man who would look quite ordinary in the cold light of day. They are able to believe in their Prince because he probably isn't a Prince any longer. In order to differentiate between these very different figures, the real Prince – the one in their dreams – will be given the distinction of having a capital 'P', whereas princes who turn out to be very ordinary will be denied that honour. There are Princes and princes.

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specific questions: the isolation of men in the peasant world, the feeling of loneliness experienced by housewives, and so on. There came a point when accumulating more and more details without any guiding thread simply confused the issue. That is the paradox of atomized knowledge: the more we know about something, the less we know. And the less we know, the less we can say about it clearly and loudly. And that is precisely what men and women who live alone are waiting for: they want – finally – to hear a clear message that explains their strange lives and that helps them to take decisions about their future.

I have therefore decided to use Ariadne's thread to do all we can to understand the central process, even if it means ignoring marginal or particular categories. Nothing will be said here about the difficulties farmers have in forming relationships, about the loneliness of housewives, or about a thousand other problematic micro-contexts. Nor will there be anything about the isolation of old people. And very little will be said about men. Men are obviously not a marginal category, and their absence may be regrettable. But that is the price that has to be paid when we look in depth at any subject, especially when its content is complex: we have to concentrate on the central issue.

In this case, the story is undeniably centred on women, and there is nothing arbitrary about the choice of women. Nor is there anything arbitrary about the decision to concentrate on one age group: women aged between 20 and 50. It is women in that age group who are most affected by the social mechanism we will be examining in detail in the pages that follow. We will see that the single life is a combination of two contradictory component elements: the single life is a divided life. This is because the hidden model of private life assigns women of this age a different role: they should devote themselves body and soul to their families. Caught between the impulse to be autonomous and the pressures of the secret model, single women are in the eye of the cyclone. They are torn apart and constantly wonder why their lives are so divided. They also write about themselves a lot: it is thanks to an analysis of a corpus of letters that we are able to explore their innermost thoughts. My description of the most factual aspects (and especially the portrait painted in Part II) is also based upon a synthesis of quantitative surveys and studies.

In many respects, the life of single men is, however, similar to that of women. They embark on this biographical trajectory with the same carefree energy, the same desire to construct their lives as they see fit. And the time for question and doubts comes for men too. Sometimes

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it is the corrosive effect of a loneliness that is just as cruel as the loneliness of single women. Sometimes it is the desire for a family, and sometimes it is the desire to have a baby (our most vivid dreams are about the things we do not have), the desire for intimacy, warmth and social recognition, and for domestic peace and quiet, and normality. Single men can therefore read this book and recognize themselves in many passages in it: hiding away at home, the sudden decisions to go out ('I'll meet her tonight'), and the pleasures and pains of existential lightness. They will, however, be surprised to find a clearer and more detailed picture of the mechanisms that structure their day-to-day existence: looking at women allows us to look at those mechanisms through a magnifying glass. In Part III, we will, for example, see how the 'logic of the shell' forces single women to show themselves in their best light and to construct their identities on the basis of how the gaze of the Other legitimizes that half of them. Men become caught up in this process too, but to a lesser extent, and they find it easier to admit how it tears them apart inside. For men, the 'logic of the shell' does not develop into the 'paradox of appearances' which eventually traps some women who have become too intimidating and perfect to remain approachable.

Being alone does not necessarily mean being lonely (only people who have not come to terms with being on their own say they are lonely), but it is true that loneliness is common. Let us be quite clear about this: the loneliness of men is no less acute than that of women. Although it is difficult to quantify these things, it is even likely that slightly more men than women are lonely. This is because men are accustomed to the reassuring presence and support of a woman (a mother, a devoted wife), and because they are less autonomous when it comes to organizing their domestic lives. Suddenly, an essential support is no longer there: this is actual loneliness in a raw state. Women too experience an emptiness when something is missing, but they do so in slightly different forms (they tend to miss not having a shoulder to lean on rather than not having someone who is devoted to them), and it is sometimes experienced so intensely that it raises the traditional expectations of marriage. It is, however, no more than one element in their inner turmoil. The social mechanism is stronger: their loneliness is hard to understand because it is the product of a strange exteriority. It is obvious to the sociologist that this is where the real questions lie.

Part I will set the scene, mainly in historical terms: why the steady and considerable increase in the number of people who are living on their own? Part II will go into various details of everyday life in order

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to paint a picture that would not have this overall coherence if it were not the product of a social mechanism. Part III, finally, will provide the main explanatory key: the autonomy trajectory. Single women find themselves caught up in it despite themselves, and they have no option but to pursue it because it makes their lives easier. This triggers a merciless war between two radically different possible identities: devoted wife (devoted to a hypothetical family) or autonomous woman? That is the recurrent and obsessional question.

In an earlier book (Kaufmann 1997), I analysed how families are structured by becoming moored to everyday objects, and how individual identities are in their turn constructed by the weight of these objects and by family routines. Here, we see the other possible side of self-realization. Not the stability and the calm that is provided by the immobilizing mass of the concrete. On the contrary, we see the uncertainty and lightness of an identity that changes as the individual's mood changes. The fact that the revolt against domesticity is such a central issue for single women is no accident. Domestic responsibilities are of course the symbol and the mark of the alternative choice of identity (the family), which weighs heavily on women because it inserts them into a natural order that has inherited a lot from a distant past. The autonomy trajectory, in contrast, thrusts them into an unknown and open world. The greatest pleasures come from freedom in everyday life: doing only what they like, when they like, not cooking meals and living on snacks. But it is also the source of the most disturbing question of all: what is the point of a life without any structure and in which nothing relates to anything else? Women's dreams take them in opposite directions, and the Prince's face changes to fit in with their expectations of the moment. He turns into a sort of gentle husband-father when they are thinking of committing themselves to a family career at all cost; he is unrealistically perfect when a combination of autonomy and romantic ideals (which encourage them not to settle for mediocrity) remains their supreme value.

Prince Charming has no male equivalent because, no matter whether we are talking about commitment to the family or the ideal of love, men's ambitions are more limited. More and more men do dream of having a family and finding love, but much less so than women. Men can find loneliness very difficult to live with, but it is essentially a private matter. That is the big difference between men and women, for whom being single is at once a private matter and something public that concerns society as a whole. When women take the decision to embark on the autonomy trajectory, they take a decision

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that does not just affect them: they challenge a basic structure (the family, which is based upon the role of the devoted wife), and they pose a threat to the entire social edifice.

These are no doubt only the first questions to be raised by the irrepressible trend for women to become autonomous.