Reader's Digest Feature in UK Edition by Shana Ting Lipton

First Time at 40

Never-marrieds are choosing to live together rather than marry in their forties—but will the trend become the new normal?

BY SHANA TING LIPTON

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FIRST TIME AT 40

IF THE CLICHÉ SO OFTEN LAMPOONED IN POPULAR CULTURE is to be believed, our forties are a restless decade, full of "last hoorah" temptations: red sports cars, fiery flings and regrettable tattoos. Not so for me.

Never really the marrying kind, until now, my life has felt like one long midlife crisis—filled with spontaneous global travels, a parade of bohemian, free-spirited friends and my fair share of boyfriends and romantic drama. It wasn't until turning 40 that I decided to settle down and live with my partner of nearly three years—a refreshingly kind, straight-laced fellow with a stable job and good values—who I met when I went to evening school to study law.

If anything, I experienced a midlife reversal in my forties—abandoning my single-party-girl lifestyle in favour of much-delayed but contented coupledom, albeit of an unwed variety. Thankfully, though, I can find comfort in the fact that I'm not alone.

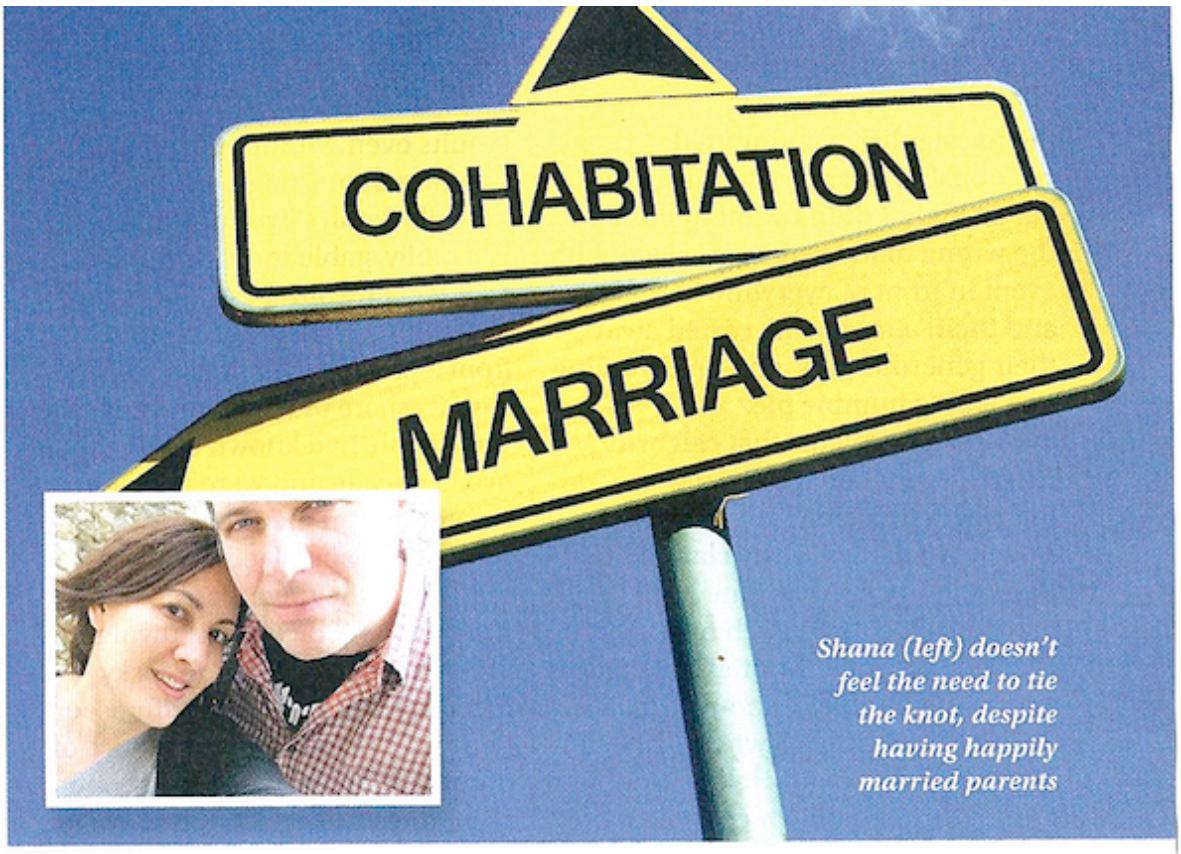
According to recent findings from an ongoing survey by the Office of National Statistics (ONS), the married percentage of the general population in England and Wales has decreased from 54.8 per cent in 2002 to 50.6 per cent in 2015. Those never married but living together has increased by 2.7 percent—a small but palpable shift. This trend "could be associated with people increasingly choosing to cohabit as a precursor to or as an alternative to marriage", according to Emily Knipe from the ONS's Demographic Analysis Unit.

"One of the largest changes can be seen in the 40–44 age group," she adds, explaining that for those of us born between 1971 and 1975, there has clearly been a collective shift in "behaviours surrounding marriage". And more generally, the population of never-marrieds living together between ages 40 and 49 has increased by a whopping 163 per cent since the start of the survey.

> I WAS AGAINST MARRIAGE—I DIDN'T WANT TO BE BORING LIKE MY PARENTS

This trend may be partially due to gun-shyness about marriage on the part of the now middle-aged children of divorced parents, in the opinion of couples counsellor and marital therapist Andrew Marshall, who authored the book *It's Not a Midlife Crisis, It's An Opportunity*.

"This is a time bomb. Parents, the first generation, got divorced in big



Shana (left) doesn't feel the need to tie the knot, despite having happily married parents

numbers...and in some cases spectacularly badly. We don't want to make the same mistakes as our parents did, so we tend to be incredibly cautious to the point that it's actually impossible to make a commitment."

YET EVEN THE OFFSPRING of steady marriages can be reluctant to walk down the aisle. Sarah*, a 48-year-old never-married mother has lived with her 60-something partner Dan* for five years, and has happily married parents. Her less traditional path was born of an appreciation for the unorthodox. She rebelled against what she perceived as feminine stereotypes and typical gender roles. "I was politically against marriage," Sarah explains, "I didn't want to be boring like my parents. I thought they were very staid and suburban."

Like Sarah, my parents had a stable relationship. But in contrast, they met in Swinging Sixties' London, and moved to Los Angeles, a city infamous for such Hollywood habits as serial divorce and "trading up". It took my father, an inveterate bachelor, until his late thirties to marry and even then tying the knot was anti-climactic—a spontaneous lunch-break visit to the registry office. I've clearly followed in his footsteps.

My parents' exemplary marriage, amid a sea of 1980s and 1990s divorces, made it more difficult for

*Names have been changed

me to establish a committed relationship because they'd set the bar so high. I didn't want to marry the wrong man at some showy public event in front of everyone in my life and then, after having carted away their generous gifts, end up divorcing and eating humble pie.

Marshall explains that celebrity marriages fuel myths around marriage. A-listers Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie famously claimed that their relationship was fine until they married. Of course, such notions are easily disprovable—both in real life and in the bubble of show business.

Tim Burton was 43 when he began his relationship with Helena Bonham Carter, throughout which the couple lived apart in adjoining houses. Yet the eccentric duo, who shared two children and 13 years together, called it quits even without the alleged pressure of marriage.

While Sarah's live-in relationship is happily stable these days (she and Dan recently purchased a home where they reside with her daughter from a previous relationship), it began with its share of drama and baggage. The couple had known each other for over a decade and were working together when they became romantically involved. Dan was married at the time. "It was serious. It was all a bit dicey," she divulges.

But their partnership's rocky inception also brought unforeseen benefits. "Because of the nature of our relationship, we're really open and honest with each other. We talk a lot." Sarah adds that maturity and previous experience in long-term relationships have helped them learn

Celebrity divorces fuel cultural myths around marriage

more about themselves. Such open communication, along with what Marshall calls "the life skills to negotiate", are among the benefits of 40-something cohabitation.

Sarah believes that in young relationships, roles and habits develop quickly and can be hard to change later on. However, "when you're in your forties or older, you've got a chance to try it again, but with experience." Yet her relationship with Dan—who she describes as "not her type" and "establishment"—appears to have all the emotion and intensity of a younger coupling. "We're just very passionate and think we were meant for each other."

ALTHOUGH MARSHALL CLAIMS that romanticised concepts such as soulmates and love at first sight aren't necessarily age-specific, he argues that older cohabitation relationships "can actually have a little bit more reality about them. There's less fantasy involved and that's always good."

His point about practicality resonates with me, to some degree. A realistic outlook has certainly coloured my relationship—my first ever live-in situation with a romantic partner—as we started out as friends and built on that trust. But I also now see the romance and magic in simple everyday things, something my melodramatic, nonconformist 20-something self would have scoffed at. And like Sarah's partner, my better half is also starkly different from me—traditional and old-fashioned, despite being raised the only child of artist parents.

I'm an only child too, so respecting each other's privacy and space has always been a priority. According to Marshall, "If you're living with a partner for the first time in your forties, it's more difficult to be flexible, but you do at least know who you are and what makes you happy and you're prepared to communicate that."

> IN YOUR FORTIES OR OLDER, YOU'VE GOT A CHANCE TO TRY AGAIN, BUT WITH EXPERIENCE

After we discussed our need for space, my partner Tom laid claim to the living room, turning it into a veritable man cave with his 40-inch TV, surround sound, Xbox, pizza boxes and the odd stray sock. I have co-opted our spare room and styled it as a colourful neo-Georgian office, as I work from home and my career and work space are paramount for me.

Much of my energy in my twenties and thirties went into a laser-like focus on my career goals—which may account for me being a late bloomer in relationships. Marshall

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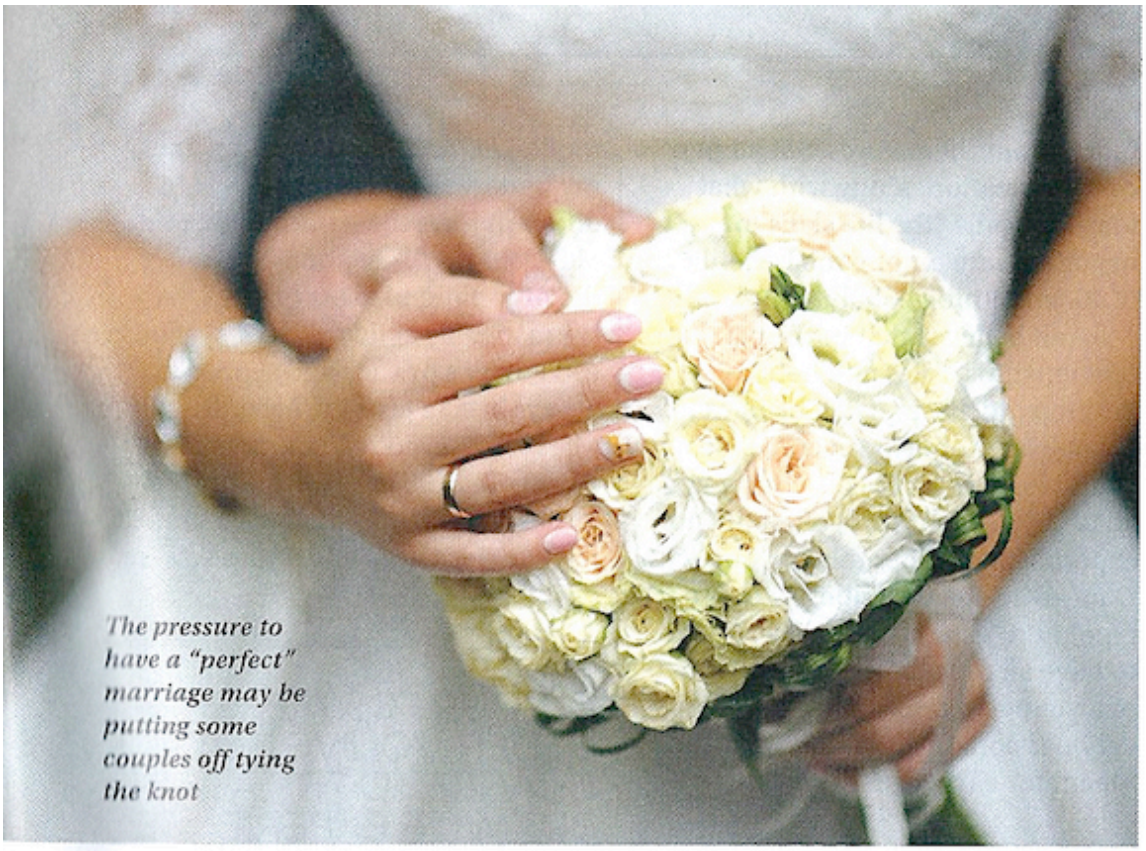

The pressure to have a "perfect" marriage may be putting some couples off tying the knot

confirms that a career-driven, perfectionist view of marriage can factor into some 40-somethings' decisions to move in together rather than wed—something he says some of them don't feel "good enough" to embark on.

"A lot of people are under huge pressures to be perfect. They're often golden children who did very well at school, at university, and got good jobs," he explains. "Passing exams and getting on at work requires entirely different skills to being successful in a couple."

Sarah too admits, "I very much identify with what I do," adding that as a habitual bread-winner, her career had always been her focus. Her taste in men began changing not long before she embarked on her relationship with Dan.

"I was a single mum and my career was at an intense point. I'd only just been made partner," she says. "I had a lot on my shoulders. I always used to be attracted to unstable people, but this time I wanted someone who would prove more reliable."

Certainly, having a child—whether married or cohabiting—changes everything. "One reason that people choose to get married is that it's the best way of protecting your assets and your children's welfare. It protects everybody's interests," says Marshall of the legal certainty of marriage. Sarah admits that she and

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her partner have discussed marriage and that she's more open to it these days. Her young daughter has also changed her tune and "she's now into the idea that we get married".

AS FOR ME, embarking on later-life motherhood is more of a priority than "putting a ring on it". Tom and I jokingly refer to each other as common-law husband and wife, but that's the extent to our marriage talk.

Our relationship is free of pressure, and apparently becoming the new normal. Ultimately, we're together because we want to be and we enjoy one another's company—something that's hugely important in your forties, fifties or any age.

> I HAD A LOT ON MY SHOULDERS AND THIS TIME I WANTED SOMEONE RELIABLE

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IT TAKES TWO

These adorable matching t-shirts prove that the best things come in pairs:

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