

# Never the BRIDE

*Christa D'Souza has been happily unmarried to her partner for 20 years. So how did she feel when he finally got down on one knee?*

The most romantic location on earth? I think it may be Nibilaga, a tiny desert island in the Maldives, where my other half and I have just been dropped off by speedboat for the day. The sea is aquamarine, the sand talcum-powder white, the sky azure blue, and aside from a small army of staff waving goodbye as they head back on the boat towards Soneva Fushi, the resort where we've been staying this past week, we are the only human beings for miles.

It is an indecently spoiling way to end an indecently spoiling holiday, and as we walk down the beach hand in hand, I cannot help reflecting on our good fortune. After a 20-year relationship we still have something to say to each other over dinner, and there have been no temporary separations, nor doors kicked in (well, just the one, but that was *totally* my fault), nor ugly scenes in front of the kids. OK, there is this funny clicky thing he sometimes does with his jaw that drives me a bit crazy, and I know it drives him mad the way I repeat myself when I've had a few, but the fact is, after nearly two decades of living together, we don't just love each other, we like each other. Does it get much better than that?

And then, just as I am musing on what a lucky, fulfilled woman I am, and thanking God we never tried to fix what didn't break by getting married, what does he do but ask me to marry him.

Wait a second. Isn't the fact that we *aren't* married our USP? Aren't most married couples we know just about ready to kill each other? Didn't he hear Django, our youngest son, sagely point out that if you get married, that means you can also get... divorced?

But I don't say any of this, of course. How can I, when he's got down on one knee (and fallen over, because he's half



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in the water)? So I say yes. What else can you say to such a beautiful, adorable question? I don't even ask where the ring is (it's coming, he just knew if he chose it by himself it would be wrong, the prince). And just like that, we're engaged. At least the children's nanny will be pleased.

The Case for Marriage. There is one. There must be one. But I'm not the person to make it. Maybe it is something to do with the way I was brought up.

My lot are not good at marriage. You know how some mothers live for the day their daughters get married? Well, when

my sister and I were growing up, our parents clearly regarded the whole thing as a charade. (They separated when I was four, divorced 13 years later, and when they remarried after nearly half a century it was to avoid death duties.) From an early age my father made us promise never to ask him to walk us down the aisle. The idea of "belonging" to another man appalled my mother. When our next-door neighbour (the politician Andrew Mitchell, as it happens) rang our doorbell and asked to speak to "the man of the house", her outrage helped forever smear any Cinderella fantasies my sister and I may have harboured. Because all little girls have an inherent fairytale fantasy of being whisked off by a handsome prince and getting married in a big white dress, don't they?

Perhaps what finally put paid to any lingering biological fantasy was my own first marriage. Did I not say? Oh, yes, >

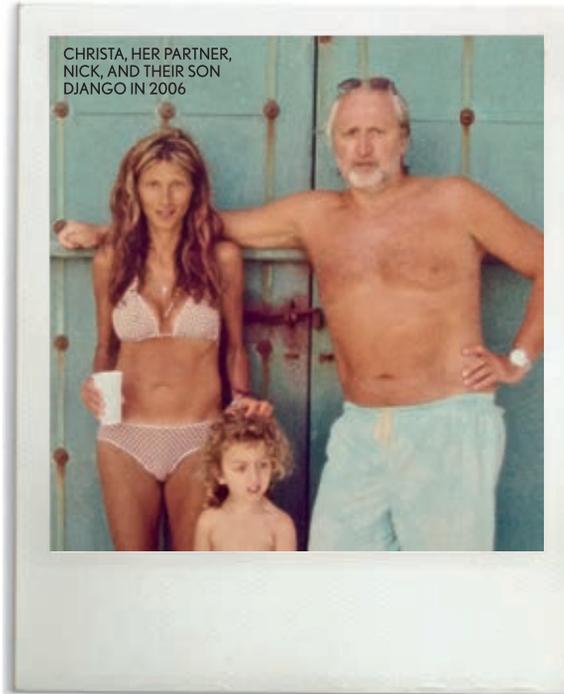
when I was living in America in the Eighties I got married to my boyfriend, as did quite a few English girls at the time, to avoid hassle at immigration every time we went home for Christmas. The “ceremony” at City Hall involved getting in line with a lot of other couples, many of them Hispanic, some bearing plastic flowers. We both went to work straight afterwards and stayed married for decades because... Well, for what reason would you not? It was marvellous being a married woman when I started dating other men in my thirties – something that could be pulled out of the bag whenever needed. That the future love of my life was also married (and still is) gave us both a degree of protection. And liberation. The dreary question of engagement was never going to hang in the air.

It’s obviously a question of different strokes. There are millions who have never regretted promising themselves to each other until death do them part, nor felt claustrophobic at the thought of walking down the aisle. Take my friend Kate, who got married this time last year and says, for sure, she would have dumped her husband by now if she had not. “Every time he’s ridiculous or appalling – and there are many of those times – I would previously have bolted,” she explains over email. “Now that I’m a married woman I don’t really have that option. Maybe getting married has made me grow up and learn to be more pragmatic, rather than live in a constant state of furious teenage righteous indignation. The former is infinitely more relaxing and pleasant; the latter is exhausting.”

Keira Knightley, 29, who married Klaxons keyboard player James Righton in May last year, has another excellent reason. Although not a particular fan of the institution (her own parents, she said, got married only because of the mortgage), what clinched it for her was that when he was involved in a life-threatening accident she was not allowed in his hospital room because she wasn’t a family member. “Imagine,” she said, “some ghastly relative who hadn’t been around in years being allowed in and you not?” Though we are not living in the days of Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (a sad, unputdownable tale of a couple ostracised for living together unmarried), that apparently can still

happen. And there’s the boring old money issue, as friends keep reminding me: there’s nothing like the thought of death duties to put one in a dewy-eyed frame of mind.

Maybe it’s my age. There’s something perversely cool about twentysomethings marrying, probably because “living in sin” is



## *Resisting marriage is my way of holding on to a soupçon of unpredictability*

now considered so un sinful. But somehow, at this stage of my life (fiftysomething with two strapping kids who are amused by the idea of bastarddom), marriage feels like... an affectation?

As my friend Alice, 39, who is not married to her other half of eight years, puts it, “It’s fine to spend a year of your life organising a wedding if you’re 18. But I’ve got better shit to do with my time than worry about how the napkins should be folded.” I can’t even begin to address whom we would invite. Ideally I’d like it to be just the four of us (and maybe the children’s nanny), but my other half, being in musical theatre and a show queen, will, I know, demand a big fat party. Lord. Maybe I can pull a sickie and watch my wedding from the top of the stairs.

Then there’s the ceremony. Those sexist declarations you have to make. Having

to pledge myself to anyone or anything, officially or unofficially, makes me want to bolt. However you dress it up, it feels, as it did for my mother, all too “woman as chattel”. While it’s fun pretending to be the lady of the house in front of the boiler man (like Betty Draper in *Mad Men*), and I like being asked if “you and your husband” are free for supper, because it’s cute and sort of ironic, I hate the thought of becoming plain old “Mrs”. I hate the 2.2 kids/Milton Keynes ring to it.

On the other hand, wouldn’t it be sensible at this stage, when we know we are going to spend the rest of our lives together, to put a ring on it? Aren’t we the bestest of friends, and wasn’t it Nietzsche (not at all the nihilist everyone makes him out to be) who said, “A good marriage is based on a talent for friendship”?

Having been asked the question, I realise my resistance is rooted not in the fact that I don’t care about the institution of marriage but in the fact that I probably care too much. Marriage is not just a scrap of paper. It’s an ancient, formal ceremony that officially acknowledges the union between a man and a woman (or a man and a man, or a woman and a woman, or whatever), that establishes rights

and obligations between them, their children, and, yes, their in-laws. That’s what it is. My mum, who hit 70 this year and has been happily single for ages, once said that the older you get, the happier you get, but that life inevitably loses its promise. More and more I know what she means; life is lovely, but it is quite predictable, and resisting marriage is my way of holding on to a soupçon of unpredictability. Translation: if we don’t get married, then isn’t there always the promise that we might?

But this implies I am holding out for something, when in truth I am not. So I’ve started telling people. Kate, who already has ideas about wedding-dress shopping in Paris and Labrador puppies as hen-party favours, won’t allow backtracking (let’s not forget, my “fiancé” is not divorced yet). Her last email read, “Don’t deny the happiness it would bring us all. At this point it would be *tremendously* selfish of you not to.”

A party is always nice. There are these divine neon candy bowls by Alexandra von Furstenberg, which I can’t quite justify buying for myself. And we do need a new toaster.

Furthermore, I desperately need a reason to get back to Soneva Fushi. ■