FINDING LOVE

Love stories aren't always linear, or related to having a partner. Six women share how they found love in all its wonderful forms

LOVE SECOND TIME ROUND

Author Helen Garlick, whose memoir *No Place To Lie* was published in 2019, says she had done everything by the book when it came to finding love.

"I am from the silent generation where we didn't talk about stuff and just got on with it," the 65-year-old, originally from Yorkshire, explains.

"I was told that unless I would find a husband by the age of 30, I'd be on the shelf.

"My first marriage lasted for nearly 25 years. It was very much as if I had been given the template: it was getting married, get a house, have children, do all this kind of thing. But, ultimately, he wasn't the right man for me."

After a "difficult" divorce, Helen moved to London with her youngest, to be closer to her other daughter.

"I was on a journey of rediscovering myself just before I was 60," she says. "We moved into a tiny flat in Hampstead. I was back working as a family lawyer, but I was doing a lot and just learning to love myself and creating a life."



Helen and Tim connected by phone

Helen's journey didn't come without challenges. In early 2016, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Still, it was this curveball that would lead her back into the world of dating after she recovered.

"I was thinking, 'I love long conversations into the night'," Helen explains. "I love books, I love laughing, going out and doing things – and I'd love to have a partner doing all that."

So, she signed up to dating site match.com and created a profile, detailing what she wanted in a potential partner.

"I decided to put what I was looking for, and put quite a high bar," Helen says. "I got the usual scammers and people pretending to be something else. Then Tim got in touch with me."

The pair soon got talking. "We would be on the phone until after midnight sometimes. The conversations were great."

Things were moving – although, Helen says, neither of them wanted to rush things.

Ultimately, Tim proposed, and the pair have been married since 2018.

While Helen has found love again in a partner, one key thing she wants to share with others is how loving yourself first is key. "I truly believe that you've got to be in love with yourself first. Then you are clear about your values and boundaries and if you are going to have somebody else inside that with you, they got to be good for you."

FINDING LOVE WITHIN

Victoria Rose has recently bought a house by the sea. "I separated from my husband which gave me the deposit to buy my own place," she explains. "I'd always dreamed of a period property, and it wasn't until after my offer was accepted and I sat on the beach that I remembered I'd always wanted to live by the sea.

"It was the first time in over a year that things felt right – sad, but right."

It wasn't just the divorce that sparked the leap of faith. Victoria says another factor was "properly moving away would give me the space to heal" – to love herself.

"When we fail to love ourselves, it's hard to be truly happy," says the photographer and director of Flaunt And Flourish.

"I never realised I didn't love myself fully until I found myself in a position where I had to push through pain and challenges to survive for a prolonged period of time.

"For me, that's what truly loving yourself is: having the strength to believe and act on putting you above everyone and everything. Even if it could be perceived as selfish or encourage other judgements."



Victoria has learned the secret of happiness

A JOURNEY OF LOVE



Love yourself, says Bhavna

Finding love again after divorce is something that Bhavna Radia has personal experience of. She is a former divorce layer and founder of Divorce Right, a service that helps women "navigate the waves of divorce with confidence and clarity so they can reclaim their identity to live a bigger, bolder, fuller life".

Initially, Bhavna says, she wasn't looking for anyone when first getting divorced 12 years ago. "My youngest was 18 months. I had so much on my plate working full-time to survive financially. So, you just don't have the time to think about dating or anyone else. But I was always scared of being on my own. I was thinking, 'My life is over. No one is going to want me. I have too much stuff for anyone to unpack'."

Eventually, she tried online dating but said she "never quite enjoyed it". However, it was through a hobby that she would eventually meet her "other half", with who she shares a blended family of five kids and a cat.

"I was helping a friend run a fitness class," Bhavna explains. "He saw my picture advertising it. He came along and we all became friends."

Over time, friendship turned into something more.

"I hadn't noticed him like that," Bhavna says.

"But when I did, it was definitely the right thing. There was so much history between us, so it worked out quite well. We have been together for six years."

Bhavna agrees. "When you're going through that journey of trying to find that person, you've got to find yourself first. I'm glad I did it that way." →

WORDS: DANIELLA THEIS IMAGES: SUBMITTED BY THE WOMEN FEATURED

LOVING LIFE

Loving herself is something that small business owner Honor Davis-Marks, who runs women's-only retreats in the south of France, is hoping to do more of.

"How can you expect to be in love if you don't love yourself?" she says. "It takes a journey – I hate that word, but it does take that passing of time and experience and life's knocks and all sorts of things for you to get to that place to learn what is important and learn to love ourselves."

Part of the struggle, according to Honor, are the societal milestones everybody faces.

"No matter what age, you have so many comparisons going on. In my generation we all grew up thinking we will all fall in love, grow old together and live this happy life. A mortgage, 2.4 kids and all would be wonderful. And life isn't always like that. Plot twists happen, curveballs get thrown, and you maybe have to re-evaluate it.

"I was married, am divorced, then I met somebody else, and he was the love of my life – or so I thought – until he blindsided me. It shook me to the core."

Despite the break up shaking up her life, Honor says she is optimistic. "I'd say my story isn't over yet. You just don't know what is around the corner.

"I wasn't married forever. Then I had this other long-term relationship and that didn't work out, unfortunately. But that isn't to say that, if I want, there could be someone out there for me. I think a big thing is living your life the best you can. If someone comes along, that is the cherry on top."



Honor's proud of her achievements

One of the things Honor says she is most proud of doing this year is setting up her own community for midlife women. "It is a network of people that have had my back as much as I had theirs," Honor adds. Find out more: honestlywithhonor.com/magical-midlife-membership

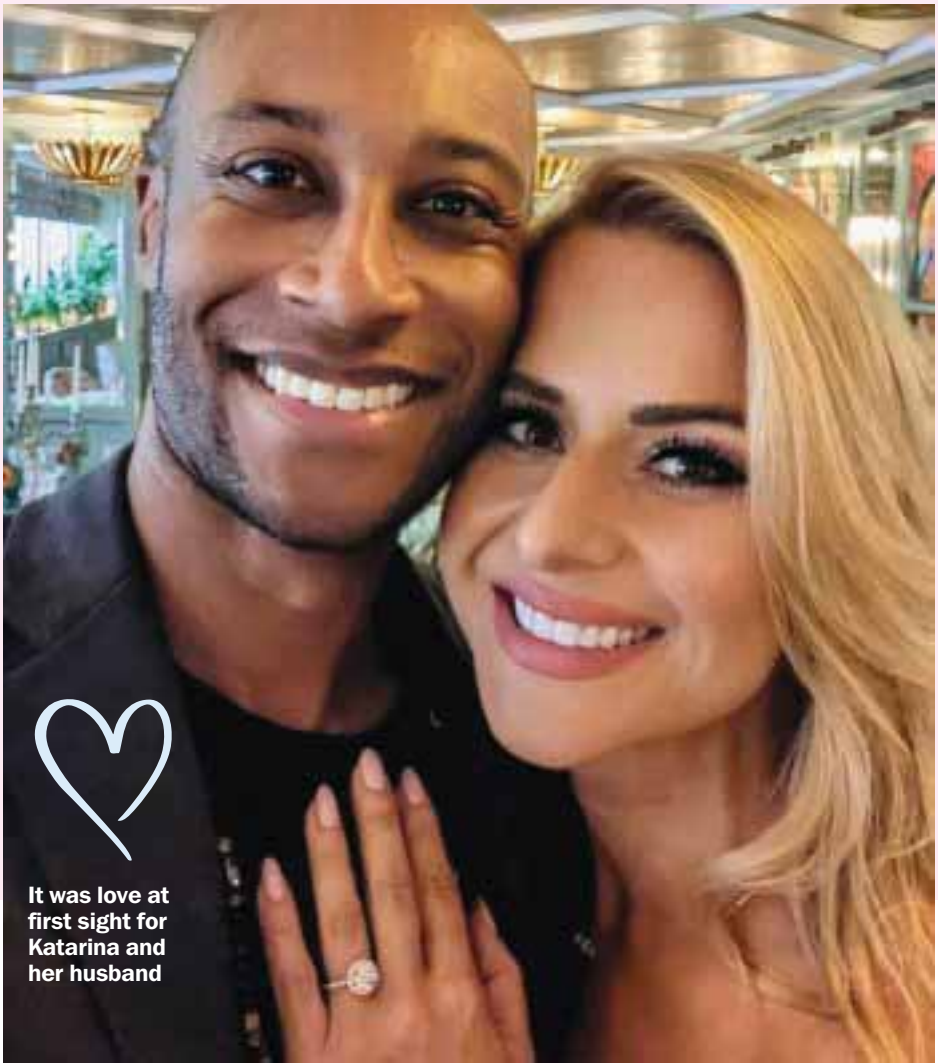
UNEXPECTED LOVE

After an ended relationship and engagement, Katarina Polonská – who has an academic background in gender dynamics and is a relationship coach – says she had given up on love.

"I was so full of such heavy grief. I really didn't think I'd ever find love again. So, then I just made this commitment to myself that I'm just going to have the best life that I can.

"I quit my corporate job. I made plans to go to Spain to have a sabbatical – and a week later, I met my husband. It was love at first sight pretty much. By date three, I knew that he was the one.

"Within about six months, we were engaged, and within a year we were married. And now we live in Spain."



It was love at first sight for Katarina and her husband

LASTING LOVE AGAINST ALL ODDS

Small business owner Paulomi Debnath, who makes hand-made, ethical jewellery (**handmadebytinni.com**), met her husband through friends 19 years ago. They became friends and then quickly fell in love.

"He proposed to me on Valentine's Day," Paulomi says. "I know it is tacky, but that's what really happened."

But their love story faced challenges from the start. Originally from Kolkata, India, the pair met while her now-husband was on a summer break from his postgraduate studies in the UK.

If the pair wanted to continue their relationship, it would be with a 6,000-mile distance between them.

"When he proposed, I said to him I love him, but I wasn't sure about being engaged because not many people make it work long distance. Still, I was willing to give it a shot.

"He had finished his studies and started doing an internship and working at a hotel. I said to him that if our relationship lasts over six months, then I will say 'yes.' The date we set was December 18."

With oceans separating them and living in two different time zones, the pair had to put in hard work, time and money, to stay connected.

"He called me on an international calling card every day. It was really expensive to call international. We are talking 2005 – there was no WhatsApp. There was only Skype or Messenger and the connections were poor.

"I had to buy a stage mic so that he could hear me talking on video.

"What kept us going was making our time communicating count. Because it is so easy now, we don't always value these things. Back then it was hard.

"I was writing long letters, and he was writing a one-page letter every day. That was a big thing for him."

Eventually, Paulomi said yes to the proposal and the pair reunited and got married soon after.

"When we were together, it [the challenges] all melted away," Paulomi explains. "I fell in love even more. It was a test for our relationship, and it feels like we passed the test.

"We have our son who is 13 years old now. We have a life I am proud of. More than anything I love that we are so happy, and we love each other more."



"We are so happy"



Paulomi and her husband



Stronger for the obstacles they faced