

A man in a dark suit and patterned tie is sitting at a wooden table in a meeting room. He is looking off to the side with a serious expression. In the background, there is a whiteboard and a wall with some papers or notices.

'My final dream was to have children'

Middle-aged, lonely, childless... and male.

Christina Patterson tries to get Britain's
silent army of single men talking

PHOTOGRAPHS BY LAURA PANNACK

Brave face: Paul Parker, 43, was diagnosed with testicular cancer at the age of 21 and told he would never have children.



'I'd be a very bitter man if I was now told I could,' he says

It started with an email. “What,” said the angry man, in an email forwarded to me by the editor of this Magazine, “about all us men who have never had children? Do you think we don’t feel the same? I could,” he said, “have re-written your article substituting ‘he’ for ‘she’.”

The article he was talking about was one that was published in October, about women who don’t have children, including me. I talked to one woman who had made the active choice not to have children, and to three who, like me, didn’t think they had, but now knew it was too late. Four out of the five of us were single.

I might, said the angry reader, find the “attached spreadsheet” of Census data interesting, showing percentages of people in each age group who were “not living in a couple, single, never married”; or, he added, the information about those living “without dependent children”. I looked at the spreadsheets he’d attached, and gasped. He had given them the heading “The Walking Wounded”.

The figures in the spreadsheets, which were taken from the 2001 Census, showed that there were more men “not living in a couple, single, never married”, and sometimes significantly more, in each age-group under 65 than women. (Over 65 the situation changes radically, since women live longer than men.) In the 2011 Census, there were 6,056,506 men under 65 who were “not living in a couple, single, never married”, from a total of 17,687,723. That’s about 34%, or a third. For women, the figures are 4,987,962 out of 17,959,789. That’s just under 28%. Forget Bridget Jones. There are more single men than women.

“Of the taboo subjects,” said the man who’d taken the time to email, “we can now talk about D-eath and C-ancer and H-omosexuality and I-ncest and P-aedophilia”. There is, he said, “only one taboo left — the L word. Loneliness. No one admits to it or talks about it.”

Well, yes. I know what he means. I had trouble getting to sleep the night before my piece about childless women was published,

not least because I knew it was appearing with a giant photo of me looking a bit grim. He’s also right that this is a subject that’s rarely discussed in relation to men. You’re unlikely, in fact, to hear the phrase “childless men”. There aren’t, as a man from the Office of National Statistics told me, even figures for childless men. Men, he explained carefully, in a way that reminded me of biology lessons about rabbits, don’t always know if they’ve got a child or not.

And those who do often don’t get to live with them. Forty two per cent of marriages are now estimated to end in divorce. Most divorced men live with their children only at weekends. Divorced men are more likely to die earlier than married men, and are 39% more likely to commit suicide. Men, according to the statistics, cope worse with being on their own than women. The word “bachelor” may make being single as a bloke sound like a lot more fun than “spinster” does for women, but the evidence suggests it often isn’t. A recent survey presented to the British Sociological Association even suggested that men may feel more depressed about not having children than women. The angry reader was right. It was time to hear from some men.

When I started trawling my networks for interview subjects, everyone agreed it was a great subject for an article. They all knew men who didn’t have children and were on their own. The men agreed it was a great subject too, but didn’t want to talk. “I am all too aware,” said a friend of a friend in an email, “that I don’t have many more years to find a woman of child-bearing age who is willing to sleep with me. Not many of us have the ‘pulling power’ of George Clooney or Simon Cowell.” He was, he said, irritated by the stock response from women that “it’s all right for you men, you won’t run out of time”. The “pond” of available women, he said, was “getting smaller by the day”. But he didn’t feel, he said, that he wanted to share his “relatively sparse story with the nation”.

The director of a charity would talk, but he wouldn’t be photographed or give his name. “I’m 55,” he said, when I went to visit him at his office in central London, “and I don’t have children, and I’ve come to realise in the last couple of years it’s now highly unlikely. I’ve always wanted them. The short answer to why I haven’t is that I put my career first.” He was, he said, “a very late starter” with girlfriends, “a bit of a nerd” who wore NHS specs. Life changed when he got contact lenses and confidence, and he “had three or four relationships that might have led to marriage”. But none of them did. “With hindsight,” he

said, and I couldn’t help hearing the pain in his clipped English voice, “I was a bit too choosy. I was always looking for somebody who was 75-80% of what I wanted. Some of them were 60% of what I wanted, and I always felt they weren’t quite good enough.”

The poet and novelist Benjamin Zephaniah has been single for 13 years. “My mum keeps going on at me,” he told me when I went to see him at his office at Brunel University in London, where he is now professor of creative writing. “I was emailing this friend,” he said, “and I told her I can’t find anyone who’s vegan, kung-fu fighting, a whole long list of things. And she wrote back and said ‘Benjamin, you’re ridiculous, how can you want so many things from a woman?’” At one point, he said, with the boyish grin that makes him look so much younger than his age, “we did a kind of mock-up of a lonely hearts ad for me. It was really funny, because when you described me it didn’t come over like me. Vegan, dreadlocked 55-year-old. It just made me sound really slow and really hippyish.”

But Zephaniah isn’t childless simply because he’s single. I’m not sure he’d have agreed to talk to me if he’d been childless because he was single. And it isn’t for lack of interest. Whenever I’ve met him, he’s been practically mobbed. The last time I interviewed him, in a cafe in Balham, we were interrupted every two minutes. But I didn’t know, until a mutual friend told me, that he couldn’t have children because of a low sperm count, and hadn’t been able to adopt.

Zephaniah grew up in the West Midlands as one of nine, a twin in a family with two sets. “When I was a kid,” he told me, “I used to say ‘I’m going to get a woman, right, and I want nine kids, but you could spend a lot of time getting nine kids, so I’m going to have triplets and then triplets and then triplets.’” When his mother “ran out of the door”, fleeing her violent husband, Benjamin, who was eight, followed. He lived alone with her in bedsits until he was sent away to “an approved school” for being “a criminal kid”. When he left, at 16, his friends were all having babies. “We didn’t even think of condoms,” he said. “And I just noticed that they were having kids and I wasn’t.”

It took him a while to realise that he was the problem. In the end, he had a test, which showed that he produced no sperm at all. During his 13-year marriage, to a theatre administrator called Amina, he got tested again. This time it was the mid-1990s, on a TV programme about male infertility with Robert Winston. At the end of the show, he said,

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Winston promised to do some research, but when he and the producer followed up, he didn't reply. "It gave us some hope," he said. "Then I kind of gave up."

So was it a source of grief? Zephaniah looked away. "A little bit," he said. "There was a period when I did that thing men do. They look at other men playing with kids in the park and think 'I can't do that'. But," he said, "I've got such a good relationship with kids all over the world. People are always saying to me if you had your own kid, it would probably take away from your relationship with all these other kids, so I just kind of resigned myself to that." What he couldn't take was the people who kept offering him cures. At a Mind Body Spirit festival, he was even told that he'd been castrated, as a slave, in a past life.

When he knew he couldn't have children, he and Amina tried to adopt. In the end he couldn't, not because he had a criminal record but because there were parts of his criminal record they couldn't find. "It's a bit of a long, complicated story," he said, and, when he told it, it was. He was, it turns out, framed. Two police officers — who were later sent to jail for corruption — persuaded a local prostitute to say he'd robbed her. His solicitor told him to plead guilty, but the woman didn't turn up in court. She can't be traced, and the record can't be wiped, so nobody knows whether she was under 18. "My social worker was saying at the time we were perfect adoption candidates," said Zephaniah. "Nice house, school at the bottom of the road. He came and watched me working with kids in schools. He resigned after my case. He thought it was so unfair."

Most of the time Zephaniah doesn't feel lonely. "Sometimes," he said, "when something funny's happened, I think 'Shit, I want to share this with somebody'. I saw something on YouTube the other day, and I thought there are millions of people laughing at this, but I'm laughing at it on my own." What he does fear is growing old alone. "I had this conversation with someone the other day," he explained, "who's elderly and on their own. He said: 'You have to find somebody. Now you're OK. It's all right when you're young and fit, but when you're older you need the companionship.'"

Simon Ricketts won't, if he's lucky, be facing old age alone, but he has accepted that he'll now never have a child. The son of a cleaner and an insurance salesman who both ended up in social work, he always assumed he'd have a family of his own. When he was 20, his girlfriend got pregnant. "We were living with her parents," he told me when I went to see

him at The Guardian, where he works as a night editor, "and we had no means of our own, or not enough." In the end, they decided to have an abortion. "We went to a clinic," he said, "and were taken in and sat down, and when they called her name, I remember thinking I would go with her. It was fairly plain I wasn't welcome. I walked out of the door, and remember walking aimlessly up and down the street." It was, he said, one of the worse days of his life. "I don't imagine what that child would be. I don't do that. I just know that it was a chance for me to be a father and her to be a mother, but it wasn't at the time the right thing for us."

It was years before he faced the possibility of fatherhood again. Having worked as a postman, a milkman and a DJ, and then for a local paper which trained him up, he was now with a different partner and in a full-time, well-paid job. When his girlfriend didn't get pregnant, she tried alternative remedies, including Chinese medicine. "She had to drink all these leaves and barks," he said, almost wincing at the memory, "and these amazing potions that smelled like the bottom of a drain." (I've drunk them too, and they do.) When that failed, they tried IVF. On the third cycle, she got pregnant. The day before Christmas Eve, she felt things going wrong. "We set off for the local hospital. On the way, I can remember her clearly saying 'Let's stop at the butcher's to pick up the turkey.' We then went to the local hospital, and she was losing it."

They couldn't afford to do any more IVF and registered to adopt, but the relationship ended — partly, he thinks, under the strain. "I think it drove a wedge between us — that something we were both so committed to had become the problem, the thing that has driven you apart." His current partner has a grown-up son. "I knew from the start that she couldn't have children. I've accepted that I won't have them. During the time we lost the baby, people were saying it's so unfair, you'd be great parents and you deserve a child. And I said that it wasn't true. There's no such thing as deserving children. Nature sometimes lets you have them, and sometimes it doesn't."

Nature has been unkind to Paul Parker, too. Parker was just 21 when he was told he'd never father a child. A scouser, he'd joined the navy at 17, during the Gulf War of the early 1990s, because he thought it "looked like good fun". His "final dream" he told me when I went up to Liverpool to meet him, "was to be a dad". But at 21 he was diagnosed with testicular cancer and told he'd never have a child. "At first," he said, "I thought they'd got it wrong. And then I thought well, hang on, these are

the professionals. These are far superior to me, in rank as well, so they must be right."

Once he'd recovered from his cancer, he had 13 "happy years" in the navy, and now runs his own personal protection and training company, from an office in the Liverpool Veterans Headquarters, not far from where he grew up. (He sent two cars, and four men with earpieces, to the station to pick me up. I would, he said, be treated as a VIP, and certainly was.) Now 43, he has had quite a few girlfriends, but his longest relationship lasted three and a half years. Had he, I asked, ever had tests to confirm what he was told at 21? Parker grimaced. After a pause, he said: "Probably... the reason I'm not going to get the test done is I'd be a very bitter man if I was now told I could actually have children. Especially at this age."

But it wouldn't, I told him, be too late! If he was a middle-class journalist, he'd think 43 was quite young. "I've got to find a girlfriend first," he said, with a wistful smile. "I can't say I've been with anyone — I don't want to sound derogatory to anyone — who's been 100% worthy of my commitment to do that. Does that make me sound horrible?"

No, I told him, it doesn't. It made him sound like almost everyone else I've met who's single, and who thinks they just haven't met the right woman, or man. Why did *he* think he hadn't met someone? Parker looked away for a moment. "There's a saying round here that all the nice girls love all the rogues." And he, I said, is the nice guy up the road? Another pause. "Exactly."

For the last three years Parker's had chronic pelvic pain and he doesn't, he told me, want to "entertain anyone" until he's got it sorted out. Does he feel lonely? He smiled — a sad smile — and this time the pause was so long I thought he might not speak. "I don't think," he said in the end, "I need to answer that, do I? I feel lonely every time I fly. I felt lonely in Abu Dhabi. I'll probably feel lonely tonight. I miss female company. I miss going out for meals. I miss someone laughing at my jokes."

I left Parker, thinking he deserved a medal for bravery, as well as a lovely girlfriend. But you don't have to be single, or physically unable to have children, to make the possibility of fatherhood seem remote. Corporate lawyer Stefano Nappo always knew he "felt different", but it was only when he was 18 that he finally acknowledged he was gay. "I was lying in my bed, awake at night," he told me, in his art-filled loft in Stoke Newington, "and had a conversation with myself about my options. I said 'Well, you can either kill yourself, because you don't want to be gay, or you can get

on with it.” So he “got on with it”, trying to find diplomatic ways to resist the pressure from his Italian immigrant parents to get married (to a woman!) and produce a child. In his 10 years with his last partner — he’s now 49 — he never discussed the possibility of having children. “My current partner,” he explained, “is completely anti, so I can definitely not have a child while I’m with him. If I were with somebody who said ‘You know what, I’d really like to talk about having a child,’ I think I’d be very happy to.”

What Paul Parker calls the “dream” of fatherhood can, of course, go horribly wrong. Justin Barlow, director of business development at a law firm in Newcastle Upon Tyne, hasn’t told most of his colleagues and even some of his friends, about the pain he lives with every day. His marriage, he told me over the phone, broke up four years ago. At first, he saw his son at weekends, but one day he got an email from his son’s mother saying he didn’t want to see him any more. Now Barlow goes to productions at his school in the hope of catching a glimpse of him. “I went to a concert he was

performing in last year,” he said, “and he was on stage, and I didn’t even recognise him”. When Justin goes out, he looks for his son. “I went into town yesterday,” he said, “and I looked around all the faces in the street, trying to see if he was there. I do that,” he said, and it made me want to hug him, “everywhere”.

After talking to six men about the hopes they’d had, and the sadness they’d learnt to live with, I wanted to talk to someone whose situation had changed for the better. In Stuart Etherington, chief executive of the National Council of Voluntary Organisations, I found him. He married my friend, the charity lawyer Rosamund McCarthy, in May. It was one of the loveliest weddings I’ve ever been to, and not least because it was his first, at 58. Etherington (or Sir Stuart, as I should probably call him, since he was knighted for his services to the voluntary sector in 2010) has had an illustrious career. When I went to his house in Greenwich to talk to him, he gave me a summary of the jobs he’d done. The only child of a mother who was a cleaner and a father who was a painter and decorator, he was

working as a dustman when he got a phone call from Brunel University asking if he’d like to study there. So he did. He read politics while training as a social worker. He has, while being chief executive of various NGOs, managed to get three more degrees.

So what, I asked, about his personal life? Etherington, who really is plump and jovial, laughed. “Well,” he said, “there you are. That’s why there wasn’t much. There were,” he added, “loads of relationships. Many of them were very good fun. But I was quite driven. Because I’d come from a relatively poor background, it was a sort of trajectory to move forward all the time.” And did he want to marry any of the women he was involved with? There was a pause. “Yes,” he said, “I think I did, but it never sort of happened. I think they probably realised more than I did that I was a bit deluded about marriage, really, in the sense that I think they knew that other things were ultimately more important.”

In this, I think he’s right. I think most people who are long-term single are single because “other things” are “ultimately more important”. Sometimes, as for Etherington and the academic, what comes first is career. As many so-called “career women” know, when you make one thing in your life very important, other things don’t automatically follow. But often what’s “more important” than a relationship, for both men and women, is a dream. It’s much harder work to have a real relationship than to dream of the perfect one you’ll have with the person you never quite meet.

So what, I asked Etherington, about the whole primal, biological, masculinity thing? He leant back in his chair and laughed. (He might laugh, but “the masculinity thing” was, I think, the reason no one would talk to me on the record about not having children because they had failed to find the right woman.) “I suppose,” he said, “when I look back there probably is an element of regret, but other things I’ve done have compensated for that. In the end, it’s an experience in life you won’t have, and there are lots of experiences in life you don’t have. And, let’s look on the bright side. I didn’t actually expect to marry. To find someone like Ros late in life is quite a Gremlin moment.”

He’s talking about Prince Gremlin, and his aria in Eugene Onegin, where he sings of the late love that has lit up his life. “I’d envisaged remaining a bachelor for the rest of my life,” he said, “probably with the occasional affair, but living that final part alone. But that,” he added, with such a big smile it made me want to cry, “won’t happen now” ■

“There’s no such thing as deserving children. Nature sometimes lets you have them, and sometimes it doesn’t”

SIMON RICKETTS



Above: Simon Ricketts’ girlfriend had a miscarriage



Stuart Etherington married for the first time at 58