



CULTURE CLUB

One in five Canadian dating singles is in a cross-cultural relationship. Why do so few end up tying the knot? TEXT: OLIVIA STREN

Russell Peters, the Toronto-born comedian of South Asian descent, once predicted, “There’s not going to be any more white people; there’s not going to be any more black people. Everyone’s going to be beige.” But the stats reveal a different story—one that makes Peters’ beige-is-the-new-black vision look more like utopic, Jetsonian-style futurism. With 200 distinct ethnic groups living side by side in Canada, it’s no surprise that 21 percent of dating singles are in cross-cultural relationships. What may surprise people

is that only three percent of those couples end up walking down the aisle.

The instigator behind these pre-nup breakups is usually family disapproval, says Dr. Faizal Sahukhan, a Vancouver-based sex therapist who specializes in multicultural relationships and author of *Dating the Ethnic Man: Strategies for Success*. “There’s often racism on both sides, but it’s usually the ethnic family who opposes a cross-cultural union,” he says. “The ethnic-minority partner succumbs to family pressure and ends the relationship.” ▷

The root of this disapproval is often fear of losing one's heritage—especially to the traditionally dominant culture. “Visible minorities who arrive in Canada often face racism,” says Sahukhan. “They feel subservient and view the Caucasian as the oppressor.” Instead of encouraging assimilation, the immigration experience can exacerbate a hermetic nationalism that encourages ethnic groups to stick to their own kind and preserve their own traditions—whether that means that older relatives live with newlyweds or that wives stay home with their kids. Some rigidly patriarchal cultures prize female chastity so highly that women are driven to behaviours such as hymen reconstruction and dousing honeymoon bedsheets with fake blood to appear to be in a virginal state upon marriage.

As in all relationships, the issues in cross-cultural dating are complex. To better understand the challenges facing the modern multicultural couple, ELLE explored a quartet of Canadian love stories.

THE YOUNG FAMILY

Kristine and Daniel Opposition has long surpassed Spanish fly as the ultimate aphrodisiac. (See Romeo and Juliet, Tristan and Isolde or Kermit and Miss Piggy.) When asked about her own forbidden teenage romance with a Polish Catholic boy, Kristine, a Korean Christian, says: “There was a lot of lying and deception—I had to lead a double life. But when you're a rebellious teen, that's all part of the fun.”

Kristine and Daniel met in grade 10 and have been together now for almost 17 years. It took Kristine's family nearly a decade to accept their relationship. Her parents—strict, devout first-generation immigrants—were horrified to discover that their daughter was dating a white boy. “The ethnic family is collectivistic in nature,” explains Sahukhan. “It's about preserving the community; it's about the descendants. Western culture is more individualistic. What the Asian family fears is that their child will become a ‘banana’: yellow on the outside and white on the inside.”

The couple did what any smitten teens would: They lied and cast friends as their alibis. “I wasn't allowed to wear makeup or date anyone—let alone a white guy,” says Kristine, “and Daniel had a ponytail and a leather jacket, which made things worse. But I had to live my life.” (As Daniel recalls: “Kristine's mom chased me out of their house once with a kitchen knife.” Kristine: “It wasn't a knife.” Daniel: “Believe me, it was a knife.”)

It wasn't until Daniel lost the leather and began attending his girlfriend's church that Kristine's parents began to soften their stance. “Daniel coming to my church was the clincher,” says Kristine. “I wouldn't have married him anyway if he didn't share my religious views. Our core

beliefs are the same, and I wanted our children to have the same ones.” (The couple now has two children: Charlie, 3, and Sarah, 10 months.) Daniel befriended Kristine's pastor, bonding with him over their shared love of motorcycles, and underwent a baptism ceremony in her church. “I had been raised in a God-fearing home, but I wasn't a practising Catholic,” says Daniel. Now, Kristine's parents love him. “I'm a hero now,” he says, laughing. “At work, people joke that I'm more Korean than I am white.”

THE NEWLYWEDS

Janet and Manjit For one traditional Punjabi Sikh family, the trajectory of their youngest son's love life was more Hollywood than Bollywood—and it couldn't have been further from the script they had imagined for him. Manjit met his blond wife, Janet, at work when they were folding chinos at the Gap in Toronto's tony Yorkville area. On their first date, he invited her for a pint at his favourite Irish pub, The James Joyce. Ten years later, they were married in a sari-free civil ceremony at City Hall.

Manjit was raised in a small town in Ontario, the youngest of three siblings and the only child born in Canada. His parents moved from Punjab to Canada in the

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'70s and remain loyal to and protective of an India that no longer exists. “India has evolved, but they haven't,” says Janet bluntly. “They're afraid of losing their roots.” Manjit's siblings were betrothed via arranged marriages, but when his

parents tried to prepackage his nuptials, Manjit refused.

Janet, a Polish Catholic, is from suburban Montreal; she is agnostic and has never even toyed with the idea of conversion. “Manjit would never expect me to,” she says proudly. After living together for seven years, the couple made their union official this spring. Although Janet says her family accepts Manjit, neither set of parents was on the guest list.

“The ceremony was true to us: discreet and stress-free,” she says. “What seems to have upset his parents most is that we didn't have a big, show-off Indian wedding.” (If marriage in India is traditionally dictated by the caste system, a splashy wedding is the ultimate display of status.) “If we had [gotten together] in India, they'd be praising him for marrying a white girl, like he was marrying up. It's so offensive. It's not reverse racism; it's just plain racism.” >

Janet and Manjit hope that eventually there will be a rapprochement with his family, but as Janet says, “Manjit made his choice. I asked him, ‘What if your parents never want to speak to you again?’ He said, ‘Oh, well.’ He made it clear that he wanted to be with me, regardless of the fallout.”

THE ONE THAT DIDN'T WORK OUT

Julie and Brandon “In our case, colour wasn’t the point,” explains Julie, a half-Lebanese Protestant, half-Italian Catholic who dated Brandon, a Punjabi Sikh, for four years. “We were a tri-ethnic couple. It was a clash between three dominant, ancient cultures.” While Brandon’s parents accepted Julie, her parents couldn’t bear the prospect of their daughter marrying a Sikh. (Julie’s parents are religious—her dad taught theology at a Catholic school—and want her to find a Romeo who is a Christian doctor or lawyer.) The disapproval led to desperate measures: The couple lived together for a year and kept it secret from Julie’s parents. “I told them that I was living alone,” she says. “When they came over, I hid all of Brandon’s clothes. I had to juggle all the time.”

Neither Julie nor Brandon was willing to convert. “If I can hardly accept my own religion, I can hardly adopt someone else’s,” says Julie. “And Brandon didn’t want to compromise: He was a single child growing up in an Indian family. His view was ‘You have to come with me; I’m not going with you.’ He didn’t want to fight the fight.” Another point of contention was the idea of the actual wedding day. “We couldn’t picture it,” says Julie. “My parents would never have gone to a temple, and that would have embar-

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rassed Brandon and his family. I felt a lot of pressure because I knew, at the end of the day, my parents would never accept us together.”

Julie now interprets her parents’ inability to accept Brandon as a result of the hardships they endured. “My parents fought insurmountable odds to offer their children every opportunity, and they became very protective of us,” she says. “It’s the classic immigrant story. They wanted to remove all possible threats from our lives.” A Sikh boyfriend didn’t fit with the ideal life they had envisioned for their daughter. “They wanted their children to have the best and easiest life possible,” says Julie. “Marrying into what they saw as a foreign culture put me in an

uncomfortable position. They also feared that his family would make traditional demands on me as a wife.”

Julie, a firecracker with movie-star looks who is as wilful as she is charming, may have also threatened Brandon with her strength. “Ethnic men aren’t used to strong women,” says Sahukhan. “If a couple butts heads, the ethnic man feels that he should prevail.” There were also complicating astrological and cultural factors at work: “We’re both Aries, so that didn’t help either.”

THE HAPPILY-EVER-AFTER

Jenn and David Even their how-we-met story has an against-the-odds flavour: Both plastic surgeons, Jenn and David were introduced at a plastic-surgery conference in Hamilton, Ont. “Probably the least romantic place on earth,” says David, laughing.

Jenn moved from Shanghai to London, Ont., when she was 10 and taught herself English in part by watching *The Young and the Restless*. “I was always looking for a place to belong,” she says. “I felt a little on the margins in whitewashed London.” Enter David, who was raised in a kosher Jewish home, went to synagogue on Saturdays and assumed that he would marry a Jewish woman. “Judaism is as important to my family as it is to me,” says David. “I’ve always wanted to have a Jewish home for my family and my children to feel comfortable in the Jewish community. I feel that this wouldn’t be possible if their mother wasn’t Jewish.” As Jenn says, “David worried that if he brought me home, I would break his parents’ hearts.”

Now, Jenn—who says she had no concept of Judaism growing up (“I didn’t even know what a kippa was!”)—is converting. “I’m doing it for family reasons, not just religious ones,” she says. “I love going [to David’s parents’ house] for Shabbat dinner. It gives me a real sense of having the big family I always wanted—the kind I only used to see on TV.” His parents have warmly welcomed her into their family, and hers are just as supportive. “My dad said, ‘If you can’t marry a Chinese, Jewish is the next best thing,’” says Jenn. Her father believes that both cultures are united by the value they place on family and hard work.

Jenn, whose mother practises Buddhism, says she’s not subordinating her religious views for her partner’s. “If I were really a Buddhist, I would throw out all of my Christian Louboutins,” she says. “I would even have to stop wanting to shop for Christian Louboutins.” Instead, she’s shopping for a rabbi. “How sweet would it be if our children could speak English, Chinese and Hebrew?” Her poetic, free-spirited view of life is only encouraged by her work—she specializes in cancer reconstructive surgery and spends her days hospital-bound, a witness to illness and family tragedies. “When I leave work,” she says, “I choose to look only at the positives.” L