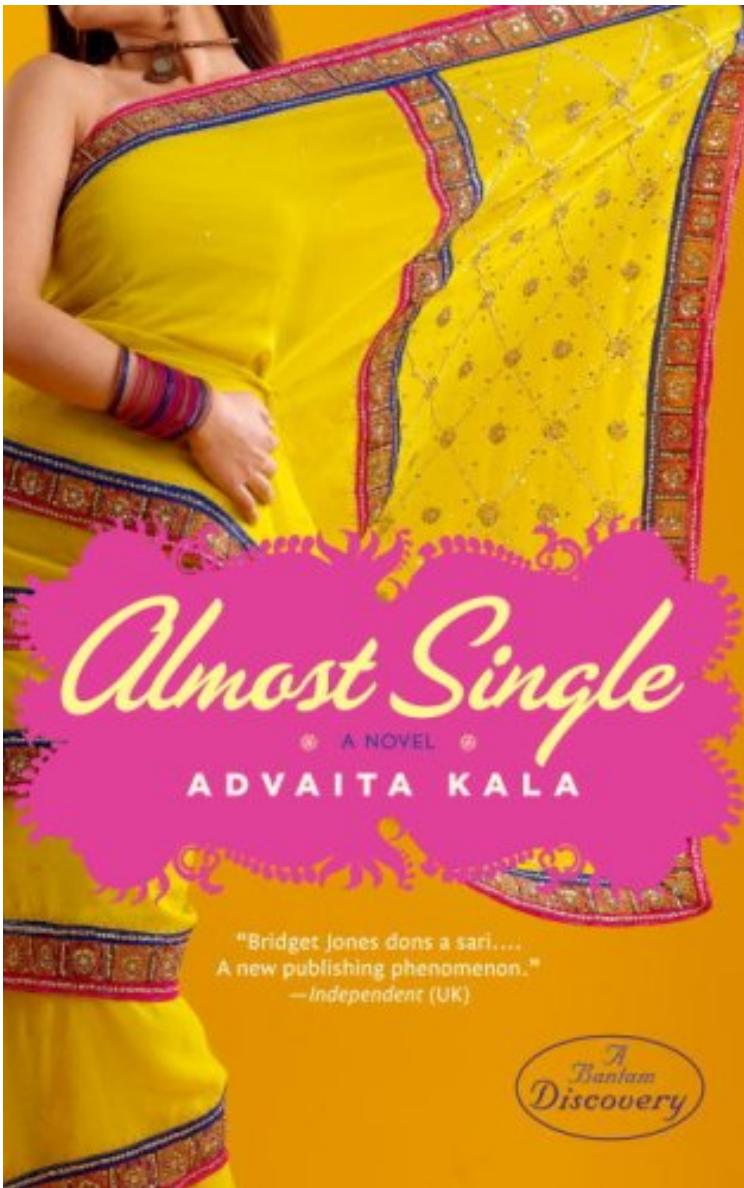


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# Almost Single



Par Advaita Kala  
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Dtails sur le produit Rang parmi les ventes : #1078047 dans eBooksPubli le: 2009-02-10Sorti le: 2009-02-24Format: Ebook Kindle

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**Par Advaita Kala : Almost Single** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Almost Single:

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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn a city where old is meeting new, daughters are surprising mothers, and love is breaking all the rules, this heartfelt and wickedly funny cross-cultural debut novel introduces a smart, irreverent young woman searching for independence and matrimony in a culture bound by tradition. Between elegant soirees and the occasional mortifying mishap, Aisha Bhatias job as guest relations manager at New Delhis five-star Grand Orchid Hotel is intermittently fabulousshe certainly knows her wines and cheeses. But despite a life filled with good friends and first-class travel accommodations, the fact is that not many twenty-nine-year-old women in India are singleas Aishas mother never fails to remind her. Somewhere a

clock is ticking, though as far as Aisha is concerned, it can be cheerfully drowned out by laughter over a champagne brunch. Yet when the handsomely chiseled Karan Verma arrives from New York, Aisha experiences an unexpected attitude adjustment. Karan is everything shes ever wanted—that is, if she actually knew what she wanted. Is it possible that shes about to find out? Savvy, sexy, and unforgettable, Almost Single tackles the loving, exasperating tug-of-war between mothers and daughters, traditional customs and contemporary romance and what happens when a modern Indian woman is caught in the middle. From the Trade Paperback edition.

ExtraitMy WorldThe phone punctures my deep dreamless REM slumber at the crack of dawn. I flop an arm out of the covers, groping for the instrument. Hello, I croak. Aisha, wake up, sleepyhead. Misha sounds like a bottle of the best bubbly ready to pop, and my head feels like its going to explode. Just what happened last night? What time is it? Quarter to eleven o'clock, and its a gorgeous day! Do you want to get a coffee at Barista? We can sit outside. I hang up. Of course it rings again. Damn, some women just dont get it. Yes, Mish, I grind out. No coffee for me, it stains the teeth. Come on! You smoke like a pack a day. Dont give me that. I refuse to dignify this with a response. But knowing there is no point in arguing, I agree to meet her at eleven-thirty, which gives me forty-five minutes more of shut-eye. I lie back in bed, bracing myself for the wave of nausea that I can feel making its way up my throat. It is broken by a flurry of recollection. Last night was girls night out. Let me rephrase that: Most nights are girls night out. The only difference is that last night we stayed in. Misha had invested in a bottle of plonk with some French-sounding label. In consideration of the money spent, we finished the bottle, for which I was paying the full price now. For most people, life and love are like a game of connect-the-dots: The numbers always form a straight line to the goal. The result is a perfect picture. For the lesser half—especially for those who inhabit my world—the vision is a blur of blots and splotches and theres no straight line to speak of. This is my story, and of those who occupy this world with me. My name is Aisha Bhatia, I am twenty-nine years old and single. But before I get into all that, I have a confession to make: I am rather large. I live in denial, of course, and will never tell you how much I weigh. Lets just say that the package isnt too bad as my height sort of makes up for my generous proportions. Maybe this sounds too much like an Alcoholics Anonymous introduction, but I dont know what else to say. I hate my job—actually, my boss so I dont want to get into that. I dont really care for my vital stats at the moment, and I dont have a cute/funny nickname either. Hence this introduction. It stinks, but it sticks. Actually, its quite in sync with the way society looks upon single women of a certain age. In fact, sometimes I think there should be support groups like AA out there for us. If I ever do quit my job, Ill start one. Did I say single? Well, I do have one serious ex-boyfriend. We are now friends and the split was amicable. So why the inverted commas? Because breakups are always tricky. I believe I am going through this love renaissance thingy, which involves reexamining my relationships and social bonds. In all honesty, we are in touch because he is my bitch fix when I have it in for the world, and in particular for the male species. Like, when shrinks tell you that all your adult problems can be traced back to your childhood? My own psychoanalysis tells me that all my present romantic hiccups can be traced back to the ex. I have two friends, Misha and Anushka—soul buddies, really—and their opinions pretty much dictate my life. When Im not busy psychoanalyzing them, myself, others, or the world in general, I work in a hotel and lead a very busy life, meeting a lot of interesting people along the way. Yes, Im being facetious here. People who spend upward of ten grand a night on a bed can be a pain. Though not as much as the sorry man who calls himself my boss—but more on him later. So, in brief, I tolerate my job, hate my boss, annoy my ex, and bond big time with my friends, while routinely suffering from umbilical-cord whiplash thanks to my mother. All this while living under the open sky of the urban, second-fastest-growing-economy-in-the-world, India. And just what do I do at the hotel? Sometimes I have to ask myself that question. Is this what it means to have a calling, a purpose? I work as a guest relations manager at the Grand Orchid Hotel. I dine at five-star restaurants, stay at five-star luxury hotels during my travels, can name old- and new-world wines with great lan, and can tell my cheeses apart. Thats the calling, and Ive found a way of fitting it to a T. Except the T now stands for tedious and tiresome. The hours suck and the salary does not reflect the rates we charge. Anyway, back to the events of last night. It was as we drank the last of the wine that Misha brought up the subject of desivivaha.com. Yup, youve guessed it, Misha is on the wrong side of twenty-nine as well. She knows this person at work whose cousin was sailing in our raft until as recently as last week. (I say raft because a boat would be too large for what is, tragically, a small minority; not too many women in India are over twenty-nine and single, with jobs, not careers, which means the shes-really-career-focused stuff doesnt stick either.) Anyhow, desivivaha.com came to the rescue of this twenty-nine-plus coz and saved her from the dingy raft—also, of course, eating into the rapidly depleting reserve of single and eligible men over thirty. And now,

Misha informed me, there she was, all thanks to desivivaha.com, happily married, dusting rooms, and cooking up a storm of desi (Indian) food in the windy city of Chicago. Did I mention that Mishas one and only ambition is to net the perfect NRI non-resident Indian? It is in pursuit of this goal that she moved from Bhatinda to New Delhi. And now shes decided its a grand idea to register with desivivaha.com the one-stop site for an NRI to hold tight. So we logged on and spent the next forty-five minutes thinking up glowing adjectives to describe our assets and ambivalent ones to dodge the iffy bits. Hike up your annual income by a couple of lakhs, itll keep the broke types away, Misha suggested. So I fudged my salary, and then I fudged my weight and body type. The fudging was addictive, like a drug you couldnt get enough of, though bags of potato chips are more my thing than high-end hallucinogenics. Just as I hesitantly set about posting my glamorously enhanced stats on the net, divine intervention arrived in the form of the absence of my photograph. Misha, however, found a fabulous photograph of herself except for one small detail her ex-boyfriend was in it. A word of advice to those looking at this Internet option: A photograph multiplies your chances of netting a mate exponentially. So we scanned the picture, opened Photoshop, and managed to expunge him from it. Five minutes later we had a pic to die for, except that Misha had a strange arm in black snaking over her bare shoulders. I assured her that one couldnt really tell as it was an evening shot. I knew the bare-shoulder look was a bit bold, but when an Indian girl of marriageable age eschews domestication by pretending that she cant tell her daals (lentils) apart, desperate measures are called for. So, as of this morning, we are both officially registered on desivivaha.com and the man of our dreams is just a click away. I groan as I lie in bed thinking of the intimate and deeply exaggerated details of my life plastered all over the World Wide Web. I know without an iota of doubt that it is going to cost me dearly. I make it to the loo and stand under the hot shower until my skin begins to resemble a wrinkled old prune, probably the kind used to make the horrible wine we had last night. As I pull on my faithful pair of track pants and a tee, I unwittingly catch a glimpse of myself in the full-length mirror. Fresh as a five-day-old daisy in a water-deprived vase. But people who have a higher purpose in life dont let a little vanity hold them back. I open the door and gingerly climb down the stairs, then set off for the neighborhood Barista. Misha, the pint-size dynamo, sits perched on a quaint cane chair, under a huge parasol, in oversize sunglasses and a cloud of Eternity. I shield my eyes with my arm to cut the glare. I thought it was a gorgeous day, I remark snidely. One can never be too careful with the sun, Misha replies, zenlike. Cleansing, toning, and moisturizing are her three steps to Nirvana. I order a double espresso and sit back, squinting in an effort to brave the sun and her radiance. Misha is all of five feet and really cute in a guys-just-want-to-protect-her kind of way. Her hair is cut in a feathered French crop, and she has gorgeous dimples and twinkling eyes. She looks rather like an overfed cherub since she has put on weight lately and her clothes are bursting at the seams. Of course, I would never point that out to her. She gives me the brightest of smiles. Okay, about last nights website thingy, she begins. This is what I love about girlfriends. Unlike with guys, when you have to enact a whole screenplay before you broach a topic, with girls you can just read one anothers minds. Have you got a response? But this time we are clearly not on the same page. When did we register? Like five hours ago? Come on, how can they respond so soon? Aisha, it was daytime in America, and London is a good five hours behind. Be realistic! Right, I forgot the target group. So, how do these potential husbands respond? To your email address, silly. I put your work one down. You do have remote access, right? My work mail? Are you crazy! Vivid thoughts of my oily, rotund boss accessing my email flash through my mind. Recently, an ex-colleague was caught emailing our standard operating procedures to a competitor, so now all email accounts are subjected to random checks. Though it is not standard operating procedure, our boss does it regularly just to keep himself busy. Now he will be privy to my inner desperation. The hotel grapevine will be abuzz with my online shopping for a husband! Misha, you have to get me off this thing. It was a drunken mistake! Misha shoots me a wounded look that becomes one of determination. No, Aisha, we have to take being single into our own hands. There is a whole world of men out there and we have to reach them! This is the way to do it! We are too cosmopolitan for the local boys, we have to expand our horizons and harness the benefits of technology. . . . She is getting onto her soapbox and needs to be knocked down a peg or two. But I can never bring myself to be the one to do it. Okay, okay! Just get my work email off it, all right? And dont talk so loudly. We dont want the whole world to know we are doing this. Misha gives me a triumphant smile. Fine. Ill direct the emails to my account. Just remember that fortune favors the brave. Yup, and men can smell a desperate woman a mile away. Two double espressos later, I am back home and, unsurprisingly, fall asleep again. I guess a monumental hangover followed by a caffeine overdose can be a bit much. It is a waste of a Sunday, but I am too tired to care. I wake up at six in the evening, starving and desperate for something greasy. I

order a pizza and reach for the TV remote. I idly channel-surf, pausing at a shot of a smoky nightclub. Whenever they have a shot of a smoky nightclub on a Hindi news channel, you can be sure that its reportage with a slant on sleaze. The story invariably revolves around illicit sex or drugs when its a scoop and both when its breaking news. And the captions almost always include words like ashleel and jalwa. (Thanks to these channels, my Hindi vocab has improved dramatically, although mostly with words I wouldnt use in polite company.) I watch long enough to spot Ric, a former classmate of mine, lolling his head from side to side with a cigarette in his mouth. The camera pans the crowd again and settles on another dude doing some similarly cool moves. Nic, another good friend. Then and there I am hit by a watershed moment. I realize there is no getting away from the fact that time is running out. And my life is awful. I have a job that sucks, I have not had a steady relationship in years, and my bank balance is . . . well, lets not even go there. I really dont know where I am headed, and yes, I am a smoker. It must be the subject of the program that triggered the moment: Heart Ailments. Suddenly, my peer group is the subject of a demographic study. I feel the onset of an anxiety attack and then, in a telepathic twist, the phone rings. It is my mother. I hope you arent spending time with those boys, they are just trouble. She launches an attack on my friends without preamble. What are the chances that in todays age of a gazillion programs, you and your mother happen to be watching the same channel? I mean, hello, isnt one of those soap opera K-serials on? Come on, Ma, just cuz they are on this silly news clip doesnt mean they are trouble, I say, defending Nic and Ric. Are they married yet? Mama Bhatia can sort through and file people on the basis of their marital status with the speed of a Pentium 4 processor. No, Ma, not as yet. I smile to myself, thinking how horrified Nic and Ric would be at the mere mention of marriage. Well, its all very well for them, they are boys and its okay if they marry late. Dont let that influence you. They dont have to bear children and all. Although which sensible family would give their girls to those two? Well, plenty actually. The older a guy gets, the bigger his dating pool. It works just the reverse for women. We come attached with a best before tag, and if God forbid! we reach the expiration date while still single, its downhill all the way from there. The finest and most honest indicator of ones market value, Ive discovered, is the street urchin or peddler. Heres how it works: You start out being called baby and then the respectful didi, then comes the biggest and most traumatic transition, from didi to the dreaded aunty; and finally, the truly godawful mataji. But in todays Botoxed world, if you get to the mataji stage, you probably dont care anyway. Ive been called aunty on some rare occasions, but mostly didi, so I figure Im still good to go. So, have you met anyone interesting? My mother raises her favorite subject. I am surprised at the time it has taken for her to bring it up. Usually I answer the phone and like a bullet that had already left the cylinder, it is the first thing shot at me. If I ever do get married, I wonder how she will start a conversation with me. Well, no one between yesterday and today, but theres always tomorrow. Dont be sarcastic with your mother. She only asks because she cares about you. When my mother speaks about herself in the third person, she is very upset. I quickly apologize. Anyway, Deepak is getting married, my mother announces. Deepak is the neighborhood catch. God has been economical in the looks and personality departments, but generous with the cash. Every aunty worth her salt with an eligible daughter in tow has been eyeing him since puberty. Its like the gong went off in the ghanta ghar the clock tower the day he sprouted his first facial hair, announcing his availability to everyone. He is? Does he still look like . . . ? I begin uncharitably. Beta, when it comes to boys like that, who looks at the face, my mother answers wisely. Money does conquer all. Someone should update the old adage. Well, good for him, I reply disinterestedly. Everyone is getting married now. Chalo, its all karma at the end of the day. My mother hangs up and I stare at the receiver in dismay. When your parents stop matchmaking and turn philosophical its time to worry. I pick up my phone and speed-dial. No, I dont have a groom on standby. I am calling my astrologer. Nothing is more indicative of my belief in him than the number one status he enjoys on my speed-dial. I am a traditionalist in that sense. I know its trendy to go to tarot-card readers, but Shastriji is very accurate, and he is the family astrologer. Most important, he keeps my secrets. Shastriji, namaste, aap kaise hain? Theek hoon. How are you? I am fine also. I need to ask you something. I state the obvious. Haan, bolo? Do you see marriage in my future? Well, your stars are changing. Lagna yog starts on the twenty-first of this month. This time is very auspicious for marital alliances. Shastriji is a computer whiz; he has it all on his PC. So do you see me getting married soon? I ask, getting straight to the point. Ummm . . . The time is auspicious. . . . So lets see . . . there are indications. Shastriji is also the Artful Dodger; he never commits to anything. I think thats what keeps me going back. I can never say for certain that he was wrong about something. There are always indications. Revue de presse The internationally trendy fiction genre... popularized by Bridget Jones Diary and Sex and the City, now has an Indian avatar. Washington

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