

Jessica Hepburn

the
pursuit
of
motherhood



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For all the women who know how it feels

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PROLOGUE

It's a Sunday in September. It should be autumn but feels like summer. As I put my make-up on in the car mirror, I start to count the number of babies that our friends and family have had since we began trying to conceive.

'Vicky: two. Beth: two. Joanne: two. Sarah Jane: two. Jo: two. Antonia: two. Harriet: one. Mel: one. Caroline: three!' My voice crescendos on the number three.

Peter glances over at me.

'Are you going to be OK?' he asks.

'That's seventeen babies. One more isn't going to make it any harder,' I say, leaning into the mirror to take advantage of a few moments at a red light to apply my eyeliner.

We're on our way to a family lunch. My cousin, who now lives in Peru, has just come over to the UK with her husband and their new baby – number eighteen. We're late, as usual. I've actually been up since 4 a.m. finishing a report for work but Peter couldn't drag me away from the computer. I flip up the car mirror, reach for my mobile phone and text:

Sorry. Running Late. Don't put our dinner in the dog :)

When we arrive pre-lunch rituals are already in full swing. Adults chatting; children playing; delicious smells emanating from the oven. Someone thrusts a glass of Prosecco into my hand. I take a large gulp. My cousin and her Peruvian husband, Guillermo, look so relaxed and happy, with eyes for no one but each other and their beautiful baby.

'So...,' Guillermo says, pulling himself away from his new daughter. 'How's work?'

The first question everyone asks me.

'Busy,' I say. 'Good busy, though. I've just raised a lot of money to build an extension to the theatre.'

'Wow. That sounds exciting.'

'Yes, it is, I guess.'

I can tell I sound distracted. With my other ear I am straining to hear a conversation that has just started across the kitchen and I've never been good at doing two things at the same time. They are talking about the wife of another cousin of mine who got married just a few months ago.

I overhear someone saying: 'Well, if you do the maths, she must have conceived on the actual day of the wedding, or thereabouts.'

'Yes,' someone else says. 'And she looks fabulous with a bit of weight on her.'

I look down into my half-drunk glass of Prosecco as my stomach lurches with an all-too-

familiar feeling. Time to add another name to the list of all the women for whom getting pregnant seems to be as easy as the simple steps in the book my mother bought me when I was a little girl: *How Mummy and Daddy Make a Baby*.

All the women, that is, except me.

SMILING FACES

‘Bottle of Chardonnay?’ Vicky says, throwing her things down on the chair and taking her purse out of her bag.

Tara and I both murmur our approval.

‘And get some crisps,’ I call after her. ‘I can’t drink without a canapé.’

‘What flavour?’ she calls back. ‘I know you’re particular about these things.’

‘Plain,’ I say decisively. ‘You *can* only have plain crisps with white wine.’

‘You mean *you* can only have plain crisps with white wine,’ Tara says, smiling at me.

I’m on an evening out with a bunch of old school friends. The fact that Tara’s here makes it extra special. She emigrated to Australia a few years ago and rarely comes back to London. For old times’ sake, we’ve chosen to meet up at the Railway Tavern, although it’s not actually called that any more. A few years ago, around about the time we were all turning thirty, it became a gastropub and was renamed the Garden Gate, which sounds much more like the sort of place you’d go to have fishcakes. But for us it will

always be just 'the Railway', venue for my eighteenth birthday party (messy), many a hard-fought pool tournament (for the record I've never been good at pool, so I'm glad those days are over), and toilet tears (so many toilet tears).

'Isn't it funny how much things have changed?' Tara says while Vicky is at the bar. 'In the old days it would have been a bottle of Lambrusco and a packet of ten Silk Cut.'

'Do you think they still make Lambrusco?'

'They should do. It was the cure for everything.'

'It was,' I laugh.

'And do you remember how we always said that I would be the first to have a baby because you'd be too busy focusing on your career.'

'And my penthouse apartment.'

'Yes. Sorry. And your penthouse apartment.'

'Not sure what happened to the penthouse...'

'London property prices.'

'That and choosing a career in the arts. Anyway, Ta, I've not had a baby yet. We're still working on it.'

'You will soon though,'

'And so will you.'

'Gotta meet the right person first. There's just the small problem of supply and demand.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean there's too much demand and not enough supply.'

‘Yeah, why are there so many more attractive, intelligent, successful single women in their thirties than there are men?’

‘I don’t know, but feminism has a lot to answer for.’

Vicky comes back from the bar as another of our school friends, Beth, arrives.

‘Glass of white OK?’ Vicky asks her.

‘Perfect,’ Beth replies.

Vicky pours four large glasses.

‘So Vic, I take it there’s no need for me to start knitting yet,’ Tara says, pointing at her wine glass.

Vicky got married last summer and, like me, she is also trying for her first baby.

‘No news yet,’ she says. ‘We’ve been at it like rabbits for over six months though.’

‘Snap!’ I say.

‘I’ve got some news,’ Beth interrupts suddenly.

‘Yes?’ We all turn to her.

‘Thomas and I have decided to start trying.’

Beth and Thomas got together last year so you could say that this is relatively fast work. But I won’t.

‘That’s great,’ Vicky says. ‘We can all be yummy mummies together.’

‘Yummy mummies and their maiden aunt,’ Tara jokes.

I kick her under the table.

‘So here’s some advice,’ Vicky says to Beth. ‘Get

yourself down to the chemist tomorrow and buy yourself an ovulation predictor kit.'

'A what?' Beth asks.

'It basically tells you the two days each month you are most likely to conceive,' I explain. 'Contrary to what Mrs Smith told us in biology, it doesn't just happen as soon as you stop using contraception.'

'Do you remember those classes?' Tara says. 'I still feel sorry for her. She was so much more comfortable talking about photosynthesis.'

We all laugh and then raise our glasses to old friends and Mrs Smith's biology lessons.

'I wish I'd known about the ovulation thingy earlier,' Vicky continues. 'I feel like we wasted the first few months.'

'Relax, Vic,' I say. 'I've read loads of stuff that says it's completely normal for it to take up to a year to get pregnant.'

'I've read that too,' says Beth. 'Especially if you've been on the pill.'

'We all need to stop worrying...,' I say sagely as I lick the crisp salt off my fingers and take another sip of wine. 'And just keep on having lots of fun trying.'

Yeah. Right.

Like many women of my generation, I didn't even think about having a baby until I was in my thirties. Anytime before that would have been – for want of

a better word – *uncool*. I went to an all-girls comprehensive which was renowned for turning out independent, career-driven young women. Getting married and having a family was something you assumed you'd do when you were older. Much older. I didn't break the mould.

When the school careers adviser asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up, I said that I wanted either to run a theatre or become an expedition leader and travel the world. He didn't bat an eyelid. Motherhood didn't figure in any of my dreams when I was eighteen and the thought of being a young mother was not only an embarrassment but anathema. Along with most of my friends, I spent my twenties pursuing my career. By my early thirties, I was running one of London's leading theatres. It would have made my careers adviser proud.

I had just turned thirty-four when Peter and I first started trying for a baby. (If you could wind back and ask my eighteen-year-old self what the perfect age was, I'd probably have said this was it.) We had been together nearly four years and the topic had been under discussion for a while. Then, one Christmas Day, just as we were sitting down to dinner with my family, Peter looked at me across the table and mouthed: 'Let's do it!' It was one of those movie moments when, for a few seconds, our eyes

locked and it was as if we were the only two people in the world.

Soon after we finished Christmas pudding and coffee, we made our excuses to leave. Compelled by our silent exchange across the dinner table, we were desperate to see how it felt to be alone with such a momentous decision. It felt good. In fact, it felt good for weeks, as we had a lot of fun having sex for the purpose that it was originally intended. We even decided to have a ritual throwing-away of all the contraception in the bathroom cupboard – condoms, pills, the cap I never got on with and which hardly left its box. It was a good reason for opening a bottle of bubbly.

‘It’s kind of a like a pre-wetting of the baby’s head,’ Peter said.

I laughed. ‘Does that mean you’ve stashed away a couple of boxes of condoms so we can have another pre-wetting tomorrow?’

One month of unadulterated love-making later, it was a bit of surprise when my period arrived and I hadn’t got pregnant. Ditto the following month. But then, it must be one of the most successful fallacies of 1980s sex education that Man + Woman + Unprotected Sex = Pregnancy. It’s actually quite a complicated process.

Most months most women release one egg from

their ovaries (there are two of them – ovaries that is – one on the left and one on the right). Both are filled with tiny follicles containing eggs, and from the first day of your period it takes approximately two weeks for them to mature. At this point the largest follicle releases an egg, which heads off down one of your two fallopian tubes. Here, it relies on meeting an active and able sperm, which then has to bury itself into the egg in order to fertilise it. As sperm only survive for a few days, there's just a small window of opportunity for everything to be in the right place at the right time for conception to occur. It's kind of a miracle that so many people manage it.

Now of course this is how it's meant to happen, and you do hear all sorts of stories about women getting pregnant at unusual times. But for most women, most of the time, conception only occurs in the middle of their monthly cycle. If we'd known that when we were teenagers, it might have saved a lot of distraught late-night telephone calls to friends.

A few months in and we start to focus our efforts around the right time. With this a whole new phase begins. *Sex To Order*. It doesn't matter how tired we are or how much we're in the mood: come the middle of the month, I demand we have sex. It brings a whole new meaning to the word 'dominatrix'. Fun at first. But only at first.

A few months after that, still with no results, we

progress to the ovulation predictor kit, a clever little thing that, like Beth, I didn't even know existed until we started trying for a baby. The kit is designed to detect the onset of ovulation – the moment when your egg leaves your ovaries – from a surge in the hormone known as LH (the luteinising hormone), which can be measured in your urine. To maximise your chance of conceiving, you should have sex within forty-eight hours of the surge taking place. There are several types of kit available. I like the one that shows a smiling face when it detects the LH increase. Partly because it's the easiest one to read, and partly because it's such a lovely symbol of hope that everything is working properly and the time is right.

I soon discover, however, that although the ovulation predictor kit might improve the accuracy of our mid-cycle sex, it also brings with it a further sense of imperative. The moment I see that smiling face, we start to have fractious conversations about when and where we're going to make it work. We already have busy lives and it becomes yet another urgent meeting that we have to fit into our diaries. One morning I get the smiling face when Peter's staying out of town for a couple of nights, working. I ring him with a plan.

'You're going to have to drive back late tomorrow night otherwise we'll miss another month,' I say. 'We'll already be thirty-six hours in, but maybe we

can do it a couple of times during the night to make up for it.'

'Don't you think quality is better than quantity?'

'No. I think we need to get as many of the bloody buggers up there as possible.'

'You're so romantic,' he says.

'Romance is overrated. This is business.'

The following night the phone rings. It's Peter. He sounds tired.

'Would you mind if I set off really early tomorrow morning and we can do it before you go to work?' he asks. 'We'll still be in time, won't we?'

'It's cutting it fine. But OK, just as long as you're here by seven. I need to leave by eight.'

At 6 a.m. I am awake and waiting. When I ring Peter to check on his progress, I discover he's overslept and is still in his hotel room. Another month lost. Another fractious conversation. But even when the timings work out, getting your kecks off and getting on with it is hardly the best way of making love or conceiving a child.

The one consolation in all of this is that in the early days of us trying to conceive, I'm not on my own. Lots of my girlfriends are going through exactly the same thing. But gradually their fun delivers results, whereas Peter and I have month after month after month of smiling faces and nothing whatsoever to smile about.

The Infertility Diaries Part I

I opened the newspaper today and saw the headline 'GENERATION X PUTS WORK BEFORE KIDS'. The first sentence read: 'They were supposed to have it all but nearly half the university-educated women in Generation X – born between 1965 and 1978 – have no children.'

I was born in 1970. I have a career. I don't have children. I guess on the face of it the statisticians would include me in their hypothesis.

In the article they describe these women (me!) as 'child-free' rather than 'childless'. It's a subtle distinction but the implication is that we have actively chosen work over having a family.

I haven't.

My own theory – not statistically proven, of course – is that women of my generation who don't have children actually fall into one of three categories:

- 1. Women who have a career and don't want children;*
- 2. Women who have a career and do want children but can't find the right partner;*
- 3. Women who have a career, do want children, do have a partner but can't get pregnant.*

As for the women who do have children, well, they've either had to sacrifice their career, or I suppose they must have it all. (And frankly, if there is any woman out there

who has achieved that Generation X dream, then I don't think I want to know as it will only make me feel like a failure.)

I am Category Three. I have a career and a partner but I can't get pregnant. I'm pretty sure that if I had got pregnant when we first started trying, my career would have stalled. But that would be another story...

MADE IN 1970

Here are some other things it might be useful to know about me:

I was born and brought up in London – north not south, a distinction that is very important to the indigenous community of the capital.

I essentially grew up as an only child. I've got one half-sister – from my mum's first marriage – but she's much older than me, and left home to live with her boyfriend when I was only four.

When I was six, my teacher announced that the person in the class with the largest family could take home the Halloween pumpkin. I took her aside at the end of the day and told her there were nine of us – my mum, my dad, three sisters, three brothers and me.

A few weeks later, I overheard my teacher saying

to my mum: 'I do feel for you. It must be a lot of work with all your children.'

'Not really,' my mum said brightly. 'I only have the two.'

I kept my head down. The way I figured it, the basis for awarding the pumpkin was unfair anyway. I always wanted a big family. It wasn't my fault that my mum and dad didn't have one.

I wasn't the '-est' anything at school. The prettiest, the cleverest, the funniest, the naughtiest (believe me, that pumpkin lie was nothing in an inner-London state school). I've never played the lottery because I know I'm not the luckiest. I strongly believe it's the '-ests' that define us. If you ask any of my friends they'd probably say I work the hardest of most people they know.

I have been an obsessive list-maker all my life. I have lists of all the books I've read; all the countries I've been to; all the things I want to do before I die. If our house caught fire, my little library of list-books would be the first thing I'd grab from the burning building.

My guilty pleasures include eating out at nice restaurants, staying in posh hotels, and buying new season when I'm supposed to be shopping in the sales. I have expensive tastes and modest means. Any month in which my income exceeds my expenditure

is an occasion for celebration – which often means that next month I'm back in the red.

I love food, but please don't give me carrots and tomatoes in the same dish. In fact, any combination of red and orange on the same plate is a no-no. I'm also very particular about olives. I only eat even numbers, although I can do five at a push. Apart from that I'm a perfect dinner party guest. I eat everything. Oh, except caviar. It's a texture thing; I don't like the way it pops in your mouth.

Like everyone, I have my weaknesses and weirdness. When infertility happens you can't help wondering whether these have anything to do with it.

The Infertility Diaries Part II

One of the things you notice when you start trying hard to have a baby is that the world is full of pregnant women. The strange thing is, I never noticed them before. But now they're everywhere. They're walking towards me on every street; they're all over the television, looking glamorous; and they're on the Tube with their 'Baby on Board' badges, just in case I didn't notice them in the crush.