

THE BEAUTY OF CHOOSING MOTHERHOOD IN MIDLIFE

Oritte Bendory

“Nothing has a stronger influence psychologically on their environment and especially on their children than the unlived life of the parent,” said psychotherapy founder Carl Jung.

But what if the parents are, rather than in their unripe twenties or thirties, already much older and wiser when they have children? What if by the time you do become a parent - in your late forties or fifties - you have no unlived lives left to lament and have made peace with the path you are on?

When my husband and I married seven years ago, I was forty and he thirty-one. Understanding that my eggs and the odds of pregnancy were declining, we quickly dove into fertility treatments over the next two years; three IUI cycles, two IVF, followed by a fraught and painful uterine surgery to remove my fibroids, which had apparently been there throughout and had grown larger because of the hormone treatments, preventing implantation. Each failure gutted us. As we grieved the loss of our dreams to have a biological child, we tried to assure ourselves that the unlived paths that lay unformed before us still needed to take shape. We took solace in the fact that regardless of my age, perhaps we needed more stages – more time to grow as a couple, and as individuals. Perhaps we needed to accrue more life before we created a new one.

A year passed, and then another, as my husband obtained his Master’s degree and a new job in data science, and I finally fulfilled my dream to become an acknowledged writer; selling the film rights to my short story - about the trials of motherhood no less. These successes served to validate our belief that had we been able to have a child, our long-awaited professional accomplishments and the new path that had appeared before us would not have materialized.

And yet, with each passing month - birthdays, baby showers, and my aging parents’ health scares – my internal ticking clock screamed that time was flying. I was now forty-five, which my body loved to remind me of with daily aches and pains. If I pulled my back out making the bed, how was I going to

sustain holding my ten-pound baby? If I needed reading glasses to discern the hormone injection

instructions, would I need them to cut my baby's tiny toenails, too? These questions plagued me, as more time passed.

"You're not getting any younger," warned my sister, who birthed her children in her twenties. "What are you waiting for?"

"I'm not waiting," I bristled. "It's not as simple, or passive, as having sex and then finding out you're pregnant. We have active decisions to make on how and when. Electing to create the possibility of having a baby is very different than just suddenly finding out you've got one."

While my reply was partially true (if not also candidly brash), I began to ask myself whether I was deflecting. Was I being defensive, and if so, what was the underlying reason? The realization that my own eggs were no longer viable was a bitter pill to swallow, and yet we embarked on the search for a donor egg, found a promising match, and flew out to Seattle during thanksgiving holiday with high hopes for the implantation procedure. We booked a cozy and beautiful hotel room that overlooked the water, the cold light and velvety grayness enveloping us in a warm cocoon of safety and promise. I rested and adhered to all the protocols. My husband bought me a soft brown teddy bear from the hotel gift shop; the hotel's logo emblazoned on its little red sweater to commemorate the momentous occasion. I slept with that teddy bear for the following ten days, cuddling it to me as we awaited the news.

When the doctor called to tell me that she was terribly sorry but the results were negative, the ensuing moments were a blur. Only later did my co-workers tell me they heard me wail through the office walls.

A new fibroid had unfortunately emerged, and the embryo didn't stick. After my husband and I processed the news, I realized I too was once again stuck - the next step in the road ahead obscured. Not only was I forced to once again confront the unwelcome reality that we could no longer pass on our genetics, but now I needed to confront the shattering of my hopes to carry my child and give birth.

I had always longed to be a mother. And yet now that it looked completely

different, did I still? I avoided the question by throwing myself back into my youthful lifestyle, where others exclaimed they thought I was in my thirties, and my shaken and thirsty self-esteem drank in the elixir of their compliments. I submerged myself in my work, endless social activities, and embarked on writing a new script - another motherhood tale that evoked and explained my deepest fear: What if there was a way to continue living my life unchanged, pursue my writing career and freedom, without having to disrupt it with the challenges of pregnancy? What if my husband and I could mitigate some of the terrifying unknown by helping to ensure that our child would be healthy?

Surrogacy seemed to alleviate some of that angst by affording a semblance of control. We could screen and select a pre-vetted donor egg and pass down my husband's robust genetics with a surrogate.

We dove into this option with conviction and zeal, as I began to envision what the "rest of my life" would look like. I'd be fifty-nine when my child would be bar mitzvah age, and in my mid-sixties when the empty nest college years arrived. While I didn't admit it aloud, I thought about whether I would live long enough to be at my child's wedding - or meet my grandchildren. I was about to make the irreversible choice of reframing the rest of my life, invoking an entirely new path that would otherwise not exist. It was daunting, but at forty-seven years old, it was time.

Friends and family cheered us on, thrilled that we had finally arrived at that momentous decision.

And yet, we paused. As life's obligations once again took priority, the stack of paperwork glared at us for weeks, and then months, unsigned. We were getting older yet avoiding confronting it. Something was holding us back. Did we still want to be parents, or was it something else?

"Maybe you don't want to be a mother anymore," I was told. "Just be honest with yourself. Being an older mom is going to be really hard. Are you sure you want to take that on?"

The answer was both yes and no. Maybe I was indeed too old. Maybe I was afraid that sleep deprivation and all-consuming parenting could strain our marriage and jeopardize my career. Moreover, I was becoming increasingly

aware and fearful of life's fragility. What if I did something that could mess up my kid? What if an accident or unforeseen health condition put them in peril? My maturity - and its accompanying sensitivity to mortality - suddenly felt like a liability.

My therapist assured me that the answer was not a binary one. Both conditions can co-exist. "You can desire to be a mother and also be terrified to become one."

While I was conflicted and bereft of providing a rationale answer to the well-intended cheering squad, my husband and I agreed to listen to - and trust - our hesitation. I pondered whether subconsciously, what I really believed was that while I was aging, I was wizening - being present in my experiences and their impact and trusting that cumulatively, those moments would congeal into a readiness light bulb.

And when it did, it struck me with force. Over Sabbath dinner at my sister's house in NJ, as my young nieces sat in my lap while liking things on social media and my mother filled my plate with chicken and gefilte fish, a dormant memory suddenly unspooled before me from six years prior.

On a snowy winter evening, several months after my husband and I wed, we had left our first consult with a fertility clinic to discuss IVF and had tea at a midtown cafe to regroup. As we rehashed what the doctor had said, the words "lab," "harvesting," "follicle stimulation" and "blastocyst" reverberated. I became unexpectedly anxious, tears pooling in my eyes. My husband looked at me with concern.

"What's wrong? Are you ok?"

I was surprised by my immediate and articulate response as if it had been something I'd previously contemplated and believed for decades.

"What if science is not the plan for us?" I said. "What if it's not God's plan?"

My husband is Christian, and I am Jewish. Our faith in God had been the cornerstone of our union. "What if there is a baby out there who needs us?" I had choked, surprised by my emotional outburst. "A soul that is about to come into this world, or already has, and is supposed to find us? What if our choosing to make a baby will rob that baby of having us as parents?"

When we left my sister's house after dinner and returned to our apartment in Manhattan, I pulled out the folder labeled "Surrogacy," scrawled in my childish cursive, and opened it. The documents

were bent and wrinkled and had accumulated coffee stains. I stared at them for a long moment and then closed the folder, stashing it away. The answer, the path, suddenly became clear.

Regardless of where we started or what our original plans were when we met; what others had hoped for us, or what we had hoped for ourselves - an alternate path has appeared before us. It had always been there, buried deep in our hearts - waiting for the right time to reveal itself to us.

Adoption.

If we are going to be parents, it must be meaningful. If I'm going to help a child navigate this world and love him or her into adulthood, it's going to be via nurture rather than nature.

And when I look down the adoption road - my imminent new life - I feel a surprising sense of peace. Life is long, but it is also short.

For me, the remaining piece of the life pie is smaller than I could have planned for, and with this comes profound relief. Unlike in my twenties, where the road ahead loomed long and large, or where those who had children dreaded their empty nest forties and fifties where they'd be forced to confront the state of their marriages and identities, and what they were going to do with the long life that ominously beckoned - becoming a mother later in life absolves me of that angst.

In turn, I hope that my child will be freed from the projected obligation of taking on lives we never got to live.

And when I send him or her off to college, with my reading glasses obscuring my tears as I say goodbye, I'm at peace knowing that the life and family nest my husband and I are about to build, will be full.

BIO

Oritte Bendory is a NYC based screenwriter, novelist, and essayist. Her sci-fi short story, *"Her Better Self,"* has been optioned by Amblin Entertainment for feature adaptation, and her thriller screenplay *"The Holiday Club,"* previously optioned by 20th Century Fox, is in pre-production at STX Films. She has several books in progress, including a novel based on her sci-fi short in development, and has published essays in HuffPost and a Simon & Schuster anthology *"Live and Let Love: Notes from Extraordinary Women."* She is the founder of the writing coaching service The Pitchsmith, which helps bring writers' stories to life while positioning them for success. She lives on the Upper West Side with her husband and rescue pup.

"After a traumatic divorce in my thirties, I happily remarried at forty and embarked on the daunting task to become pregnant. This difficult beginning, where the unknown loomed before me, is encapsulated in an essay I published over a decade ago. And so my new essay and its publication in this collection, MIDLIFE ON FIRE, RISKY BUSINESS, REAL STORIES, WOMEN WRITERS, is synchronistic and significant and marks the culmination of perseverance, maturity, and acceptance that motherhood comes in various forms and life stages."