

## INTRODUCTION TO THE OTHERHOOD

I'm having dinner in TriBeCa with two old high school friends. Both have recently moved to New York City. Charles, the head of finance for a cable network, is happily married with three kids. Bruce is in pharmaceutical sales, father of one, happily divorced and dating around.

We've covered the usual subjects: The weather, work, the wife, the ex-wife, the kids. Appetizers have been cleared. Another bottle of wine has been ordered. And so I'm waiting.

When you're a single woman of a certain age in a place like Manhattan and you go out with friends—friends from out of town, or friends who married long ago; friends who know you and love you, or new friends you've recently met through business—they all want to know one thing.

Bruce leans forward. Charles holds his breath. I know it's coming.

"So . . . is there any special guy in your life?" Bruce asks.

"No guy," I say.

"I don't get it!" he exclaims, throwing himself back in his chair in exasperation. "You're an amazing woman!" Bruce looks at Charles, who nods in agreement on my left.

"I don't get it either," Charles adds, mimicking Bruce's bewilderment.

I know how the rest of this story goes. The main course is now being served and I'm all too familiar with the meal I'm about to get a taste of.

"You're like my friend Jessie, the one I dated last year right after my divorce," Bruce says as he takes a bite of his chicken. "She can't find anyone either and she has everything going for her. She's cute, smart, fun to be around . . . I'm not ready for something serious right now, you know, but if I were, she'd be the girl I date."

Bruce may not be looking for a serious girlfriend, but he's clearly curious about why I don't have a boyfriend. "Since I moved to New York, I've met so many fantastic women. Why are they still single? Why are *you* still single?"

I've got no good answer to Bruce's question. But if you're over thirty-five, single, and a woman in Manhattan, it's going to be asked. My hope is that it's meant to be rhetorical—like when men ask each other why girl-on-girl sex is so damn hot. But that's never the case. Apparently, the fantastic single woman needs a fantastic explanation for why she's still single.

"I just haven't met the right guy yet," I say nonchalantly.

"Really?" Bruce says. "But you're cute, smart, successful . . . you can't find a guy who wants to date you?"

I ignore the unintended insult that it's the men who are rejecting me rather than the other way around. I know Bruce means well.

"I meet men," I go on, now by rote. "Just not anyone I want to be with long-term."

"I just don't get it," Bruce says. "I can name ten women I know, one more amazing than the next, who are all single. No kids. And they'd make great moms. I feel like the guys should be lining up."

Bruce looks around the room, clearly in thought, trying to figure it all out. There's nothing left for him to blame but my career. Which

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is a good sign. It means we’re almost done. “Do you think it’s because you’ve been too busy with your business?”

Anyone who knows me knows that the idea that I chose a career over marriage and family is about as preposterous as the idea of choosing an elephant as a household pet. Yet people love to point at that very elephant in the room, declaring, “*J’accuse!* You’re a career woman! You’ve left behind familial pursuits for your job!”

“It’s true, I’m busy with my company,” I say to Bruce, perhaps a little defensively, “but I’m also always out meeting people, more than I ever met while working in corporate America. And when I do meet someone I like, I make the time. The problem is not my career.”

At that point, if I’m lucky, Bruce and Charles will give up. But often—and, true to form, on this night—the dating questions are followed by the baby questions.

“Don’t you want kids?” Bruce asks. There is judgment in his tone.

Often, a woman’s involuntary childlessness, such as mine, is misinterpreted as having come about by choice. In fact, I’ve always envisioned motherhood as part of the romantic wholeness of marriage and family—and in my mind, it still is inseparable from love. Without one, I haven’t had a chance at the other.

“I very much always wanted children, but I wanted to have children with a man I love. Now that I’m in my early forties, I’m not sure if it’s in the cards for me.” I’ve gotten used to saying this without disappointment. Or at the very least, hiding it.

There’s an awkward silence. Bruce sighs and Charles peers over his shoulder, pretending to look at something across the room. It seems these two men are finally ready for a change of subject.

Men, in fact, tend to go pretty easy on women like me when talking about fertility; somehow they can intuit the boundaries. Other women, not so much. Here’s how the questions keep coming just a week later while I’m out for cocktails with a married mother of two:

“Did you freeze your eggs?”

People ask about egg freezing—which can cost \$12,000 to \$15,000 in a place like New York City—as if it’s something you pick up in the dairy section at the supermarket: “Did you remember to freeze your eggs?” No. I did not freeze my eggs. Not because I was naïve or because I didn’t want to take responsibility for my fertility, but because by the time egg freezing became a really viable option for women, I was already forty.

And from a colleague at a breakfast meeting the next day:

“Would you have a baby on your own? You could totally do it. Celeste is expecting, you know. She couldn’t meet a guy and went out and got herself pregnant.”

I wonder when single motherhood became the sole barometer of one’s true desire for children.

“You don’t even have to go to a sperm bank,” my colleague continues. “Do you know some gay guy who’d have a kid with you?”

No. My life is not an episode of *Will & Grace*.

From a new female acquaintance:

“Ever think of just sleeping with someone and—oops!—getting pregnant?”

The “oops baby” is not an uncommon term today, the implication being that it might not have been an “oops” at all. (Women tend to have figured out how to use birth control by their midthirties.) No, I have never considered that. Deception is not the way I’d want to begin a lifelong partnership with the father of my child.

And lastly, from a female business acquaintance comes the scientific “proof” that I will indeed, one day, meet expectations:

“My friend’s sister’s cousin had her first—twins!—at forty-five. You have lots of time. The way reproductive technology is these days, you’ll meet someone and then have kids. Don’t worry.”

I’m not worried. I’m just out for a cocktail. I’m just having coffee. I’m just attending my breakfast meeting.

Back at dinner with Charles and Bruce, Charles pushes this idea that women—meaning me—still have attractive options. “My colleague Bridget is really fantastic and the head of her entire division at the network,” he says as he waves to the server for another round. “She hasn’t met anyone and is considering a baby on her own. I admire her so much. I mean, what an incredible thing to do. She’s determined to be a mother.”

I smile wide, as if I agree that Bridget is indeed a courageous woman. And I do. But inside, I feel small.

Bruce chimes in again about Jessie. “She’s got the most amazing attitude about life. She’s so sweet. And if I do say, damn hot. She just moved out west for some TV show she got a part in. Where were women like that when I was looking to get married the first time? I’ll say it again: How did *you* not get snatched up back then?”

“Who knows?” I say with a shrug. “We’re all just doing the best

we can, right?” I smile and finish my wine. I don’t let it show that I no longer presume life will be as I once imagined.

I motion to the server for the check. It’s time to move on.

But walking home, I can’t help thinking back on how I’ve gotten to this point. I have always wanted to get married and have children. As a little girl, I was constantly refining my plans for my backyard wedding. When I was twelve, I purchased baby-name books in anticipation of the son and twin daughters I imagined I’d one day have. In my teens, I was a camp counselor and frequent babysitter, often stopping by to visit my charges even when I wasn’t on duty. I’d already thought a lot about the type of mother I would be—loving, generous, and supportive of my children’s autonomy.

When I was twenty-three and interviewing for my first job in New York City, I inquired about maternity benefits to make sure the employer was right for me and my expected lifestyle. I focused my career in the nonprofit sector, hoping it would allow me more flexible hours. And I dated only men with traditional values.

By age thirty, I’d moved into the for-profit sector (so that I could afford life in New York as a single-income dweller), ultimately landing at a global beauty company in my midthirties where my hours were only getting longer. As my job responsibilities as a senior executive grew, so did my requirements to travel overseas. I loved my career but grew increasingly anxious about what it meant for dating and, eventually, for my future family.

At the same time, I suddenly found myself beginning to suffer the prejudices of being an “older” single woman. At thirty-four, a male friend said he wanted to set me up with a man our age but held that I was just “too old.” At age thirty-six, another man told me he’d (reluctantly) date me since I could probably still “pop one out.” Just weeks before that, a man I had been seeing told me flat-out that

he could not continue to date a woman my age. While he and I had never discussed marriage or children, he felt that a woman between the ages of thirty-five and forty was too desperate about her biological clock. “It’s just too much pressure,” he admitted. It seems he had heard my clock ticking as loudly as I did.

In the midst of all this, I became an aunt. Aunthood has undoubtedly provided an outlet for my loving, maternal urges. My desire for children of my own, however, did not wane with the birth of each niece or nephew. My heart still aches for my very own baby to hold in my very own arms, my loving husband by my side.

I am now in my early forties, still single, and understand the likelihood is that I won’t give birth to children of my own. But my story is only one of millions of stories of childlessness due to being single or finally finding the right partner at late age. My generation of women expected to reap all the social, economic, and political equality our mothers did not have. The husband and children they did have, we just assumed we’d inherit those as well. And yet for so many of us, those things have proven elusive.

The rise of childless women may be one of the most overlooked and underappreciated social issues of our time. Never before have so many women lived longer before having their first child, or remained childless toward the end of their fertility.

People today often presume that when a woman like me is childless, it’s probably by choice. Not true. Me and my fellow childless-not-by-choice women are perceived as an exception, not a norm. Not true. Society so often dismisses us—sisters, daughters, friends, and coworkers—as outliers. In reality, none of this is true.

In fact, an American woman today is virtually as likely to be a

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mother as not. Nearly half—47.1 percent—of all American women of childbearing age do not have children of their own, whether or not we’re married, according to the U.S. Census publication *Fertility of American Women: 2010*. That’s a steep rise from 35 percent in 1976. Meanwhile, a study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that 80 percent of all unmarried women are childless. Perhaps the most compelling part of that study, though, is the fact that 81 percent of those unmarried, childless women say they plan or hope to have children one day.

So why is it that when these hopes and dreams don’t come to fruition, for whatever reason, we’re chastised as if we’ve actively chosen this fate? A 2011 report from the U.S. Census Bureau, for example, labels the trend of women having their first child at a later age “the delayer boom”—as if marriage and family are life stages that we’re intentionally, even selfishly, putting off. Meanwhile, pop culture portrays us time and again as being naïve about the length of our fertility, or we’re belittled in the mainstream media for being “too picky” in our quest for a mate. All this further supports the assumption that our childlessness is something we’ve either chosen or, even worse, deserve.

Right now, we’ve got a collective case of “mom-opia”—the myopia of seeing the world through mother-colored glasses, seeing motherhood as the only normal, natural way to be a woman—and



it's blinded us, all of us, to the reality of what's really going on. The assumption that the significant majority of women are or will be mothers is false. When we continue to assume it's true, we rob ourselves of the chance to understand why this shift, the social and emotional impact of our childlessness, intentional or unintentional, has come about, and how this "new normal" is going to impact our relationships and our lives for decades to come.

My own experience of not becoming the woman I expected to be—neither married, nor a mother—and the similar experiences of my cohorts, friends, peers, colleagues, and the multitudes of women who connect with me through my work, inspired me to explore the story further, deeper.

I wanted to more intimately understand the truth about who we are, not the stereotypes we're assumed to be. I wanted to understand why we are where we are today, in this time, and how our expectations—our assumedly natural paths toward love, marriage, and motherhood—have eluded us.

We have gone without definition or visibility for too long. I am offering "Otherhood" as a name for our misunderstood group of women doing our best to live full and meaningful lives despite the frustrations of some of our most cherished longings. We, the Otherhood, who have yet to find our rightful, equitable, requisite place in society, deserve one. Our otherhood denotes our state, our condition, our character, our nature, and our tribe.

*Otherhood* uncovers, explores, and examines the experiences of this overlooked and misunderstood segment of contemporary women. Part anecdotal storytelling, part inspiration, part reportage and part manifesto, *Otherhood* sets out to get to the heart of the issues, enliven the societal consciousness, and trigger conversation in and around our tribe.

The experience of the Otherhood is not mine uniquely, of course. It is the story of a generation of women who followed the path their mothers and aunts prepared for them: Getting a good education, finding the means to support themselves, and setting out to find love, get married, and have children. The motivation to get a degree and a job, of course, were not politically motivated or a way to wave a feminist flag. They're simply the things many women do in life. (And if we don't all have the college degree, certainly we all need to have jobs.)

But as we got closer to thirty, then thirty-five, then forty, still looking for love, marriage, and, for many of us, motherhood, other people imposed a political or even radical tag on our very normal decision to earn a living. At some point, we were called "career women," an anachronistic term that a generation ago described those women who worked when most women did not.

Today, the typical woman of the Otherhood is still single (or single again, following a divorce) long past the time when she thought she'd be settled down—whether that means that she's in her late twenties or midforties. She probably feels that her personal growth has been stunted, that she's become alienated from her peer group, that she's fallen short of the expectations of family and friends (on top of her own), and that a great number of people around her presume, falsely, that she's chosen her lifestyle and treat her accordingly. She might seem enviable for the perceived glamour of that lifestyle—her career, her income, her freedom, her sex life—even if "glamour" may be an entirely erroneous perception. And at the same time, she is also often misperceived, sometimes even vilified, as careless and selfish, superficial and undisciplined, cold and solely career-focused.

Most of us childless women in our thirties and forties—and if not most, then certainly a great many—simply want to find the right,

loving relationship before making the lifetime commitment to have kids. Once upon a time, love and marriage had to happen first, as far as societal values were concerned; now, for the modern woman, that same desire for a romantic union as a necessary precursor to having children gets deemed an unacceptable life choice.

How did we get here? How did so many of us—all of whom wanted and still want love, marriage, and children—not reach our goals? How did *I* get here? Was it, in fact, specific choices I made, knowingly or unknowingly, that led me to this fate? Or could it simply be fate itself; was I somehow destined to be single and childless? Whether by pop culture, our families, or our peers, why are we midthirties-and-older, single, childless women scrutinized so unsympathetically, harassed for sticking by our convictions and invalidated as just plain less than everyone else? How has our status shaped our lives and the choices now available to us, and moving forward, just how attractive are our options for love, dating, marriage, and children? How are we coping, and do we have proper personal and societal mechanisms for support? And, it bears repeating: How did we get here?

We weren't prepared for this situation. Most girls growing up in the 1970s and '80s were often encouraged by both parents to aspire to a higher education and more professional opportunities than our mothers were offered. We believed that we'd have the husband and children mom had and the earning potential she didn't.

A woman in our mothers' generation was stationed in society by her husband, her children, her wealth, and her traditional family lifestyle: The '50s generation had married younger and had children earlier than even their parents had. As men came home from war, women left their wartime jobs to focus on family. It was not uncommon for a woman to leave college for marriage. Careers were

out of fashion while housewifery was in vogue. But by the early 1960s, things had changed dramatically. Women pressed for more than a family life. They aspired to higher education and better jobs with equal pay. The new heroine/archetype looked more like Gloria Steinem than June Cleaver.

But still, modern feminism was never about forsaking love, marriage, and children for a career outside the home. It was driven by a need of those who suffered the ennui of being homebound, not just because of family ties but because of social, political, and economic inequality with men. The prefeminist woman was unable to live life to her potential. But as Betty Friedan stated in the epilogue to her seminal 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*:

*“The more I’ve become myself—and the more strength, support, and love I’ve somehow managed to take from, and give to, other women in the movement—the more joyous and real I feel loving a man. I’ve seen great relief in women this year as I’ve spelled out my personal truth: that the assumption of your own identity, equality, and even political power does not mean you stop needing to love, and be loved by, a man, or that you stop caring for your kids.”*

And yet today, the one thing a woman cannot do without scrutiny, without being made to feel *less than*, is to aspire to have a family while waiting for love. Instead, she is branded a “career woman,” perhaps a more politically correct version of “spinster” or “old maid.” She’s “picky.” She’s “too independent.” She’s “cold-hearted.” She’s “not mother material.” The latest studies show that even as progressive lifestyle choices gain acceptance, nearly 40 percent of Americans still

think childlessness is fundamentally bad. The independent, childless woman does not feel like a qualified member of the social order, but rather is made to feel hopeless, hapless, and just plain old *less than* everyone else.

For many women, *Sex and the City* remains the dominant pop cultural portrait of our supposed lifestyle. One, if not *the*, important difference between Candace Bushnell's world and the women of Generation X is that women are no longer primarily concerned with expressing our freedom, sexual and otherwise. Today's struggle is about our desire to know there's something more to life, something deeper. Unlike the women of the generation that precedes us, we are not engaged in a battle of the sexes. Our battle is within. It's existential.

Until now, the never-ending national conversation on "having it all" has applied only to married mothers who also have or aspire to have careers. Just as there's no definitive answer as to whether or not those married mothers can have it all, there is also no easy solution for us women of the Otherhood, single and approaching the end of our fertility, when we find ourselves at a different crossroads. Indeed, it's our opportunity costs—giving up on one thing to pursue another—that weigh on the women of the Otherhood the most: Do we continue to wait for love, even if it comes too late for a biological family? Do we try to have a baby on our own? Should we stay with men we love who do not want children? Should we partner up with men we *don't* love but who *do* want children? Do we walk away from the very career opportunities and higher incomes feminism afforded us in an attempt to prove we are not prioritizing career over family? Or should we focus our energies on other parts of our lives—starting businesses, pursuing artistic or creative passions, or starting over in new places? As the eleventh hour approaches, how do we decide?

I know well the burden of this crossroads. As I began nearing forty and the end of my fertility, I questioned my life's meaning.

For empathy and support, I turned to a group of female friends who shared my circumstances. Our collective situation was an inevitable and invariable topic of discussion. Like our peers, coworkers, family members (and, yes, some complete strangers), we also wondered why we—dynamic, accomplished ladies—were without promising romantic prospects, prospects with whom we could start a family, and what we could do about it. The same universal questions emerged at just about every gathering: “Where are the men?” “Would you date a guy who doesn't want children?” “Would you have a baby on your own?” “Did you freeze your eggs?” And so on. We bemoaned the pressure we felt from loved ones “concerned” with our inability to get married and have kids. We considered some newly ripening alternatives, like single motherhood. And we spoke of our nieces and nephews with proprietary love and affection, pouring our maternal instincts into those children we were fortunate enough to have in our lives.

Our conversations were so consistent that I became certain my friends and I couldn't be the only ones having them. Mustn't there be other brunch tables, other cocktail lounges around the country where women were sharing similar concerns?

When I began to investigate, the answer was a clear and resounding yes. Being a part of this tribe, I had to ask myself: How did I not know this? How did we not know of each other?

From this epiphany, in 2007 I founded Savvy Auntie, a lifestyle brand that celebrates modern aunthood and embraces the nearly 50 percent of American women who are not mothers, specifically the one in five American women I've dubbed PANKs, or Professional Aunts No Kids, who have a special bond with the children—nieces,

nephews, godchildren—in their lives. This overlooked segment of women deserved a meeting place, a tribe all their own.

Through my website, as well as my columns on *The Huffington Post* and PsychologyToday.com, I came to know the women of this tribe and engage in pointed, lively, and penetrating conversations with them, and I began to better understand our common experience in all its layers and vulnerabilities. And I was overcome by the universal lack of sympathy for my childless cohorts, whether they are aunts or not. We are so often perceived as cold, selfish, unfulfilled, feckless, sad, blasé about our fertility, and too choosy for our own good. On an even more profound level, we are made to feel unnatural, unwomanly, discredited, and devalued. Even the term “childless” is (literally) so belittling that, research has shown, it undermines the very health and well-being of the women it was coined to describe.

While on SavvyAuntie.com I focus on being *childfull* (because we aunts and godmothers choose to fill our lives with the children we love), it has become clear that in order to be completely authentic about our modern experience, I must discuss the other side of the coin as well. We are indeed also *childless*. The diminutive is, at the very least, honest. And it is time to acknowledge its truth and its effects.

In the summer of 2011, I wrote a piece for *The Huffington Post* entitled “The Truth About Childless Women.” In it, I described dealing with my own “circumstantial infertility,” the term I use to describe women who cannot have children because of circumstance rather than biology. Often the circumstance is that they’re single with no partner with whom to have children. I wanted to give a name to my situation and offer a voice for women who feel “less than” because of their inability to become mothers despite their desire:

*The grief over not only not being a mother, but now also suffering from feeling 'less than' simply because I hadn't found love (or mutual love), was at times overwhelming. And as I saw couples younger than I getting sympathy for their biological infertility, I wondered why all I got were accusations of not doing enough, not trying hard enough . . .*

*. . . The assumption that's out there is that all women who don't have children simply don't want children, but there is a place between motherhood and choosing not to be a mother. And tens of millions of American women are there... My circumstances have left me infertile but they have not left me non-maternal. I love the children in my life with boundless adoration. If I was not meant to be a mother to 2.1 kids, then perhaps I was meant to be motherly to many more . . .*

Although it's been over two years since that column first appeared online, I still receive countless, self-described "tear-stained" emails from women who feel their perspective has finally been represented, that their voice has finally been heard, in this and other posts I've published.

Among the daily letters, comments, Tweets, and emails I receive from women, some are heartwarming and convince me of the value of the community we're building. "There is such power and peace in knowing you're not alone," they tell me. Others share happy discoveries of the joy and satisfaction they've found in other kinds of relationships and "mothering." Many simply gleefully type, "That's me!" in response to an online discussion or under a digital poster that celebrates Auntie's Day, the day I founded in 2009



to celebrate and honor aunts and godmothers, much like Mother's Day honors mothers.

But many of the private notes I receive—most, if I'm being truthful—are heartbreaking. "I don't know what I did wrong" and "I can't believe this is my life" are frequent sentiments. Others recount agonizing dilemmas. "The man I love has two kids and doesn't want more," one commenter told me recently. "I had no idea how much my biological clock would take over . . . now I cry myself to sleep." She concluded with, "At this point of desperation, I am thinking it would be better to be on my own raising a family than to stay begrudgingly, blaming my partner for not 'allowing' me to have children." Another reader confessed just the opposite: "I feel like denying my child a father I loved would make me miserable . . . I choose to keep hoping for love."

If not a mother and/or a wife, who are we? What will be our legacy? And what do we do now?

No matter how we got here and no matter where we want to go from here, we all converge in this place and time, this *Zeitgeist*, with one story. Our story. The story of the Otherhood.