

WOMEN
with

 out

 KIDS

THE REVOLUTIONARY RISE OF
AN UNSUNG SISTERHOOD

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 sounds true
BOULDER, COLORADO

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INTRODUCTION

Sisterhood of the Selfish Cunts

THERE'S A GAME I like to play sometimes when my mind is picking at the scabs of my self-esteem, looking for ways to prove what a loser I am. I call it *Does She Have Kids?* Okay, “game” is maybe stretching it. The only skill required is the ability to type the name of the woman in question into Wikipedia. “She” is invariably somebody who has impressed me with her talent, her vision, her moxie. I’ll have been watching one of her movies, reading one of her books, or tracing a finger over her picture—smart, self-possessed, celebrated—in a magazine. She is around the same age as me—swimming somewhere in the shallows of midlife, sometimes older—and something about her demeanor, or the quality of her achievements, or how she looks at the camera like she owns the place, makes me question whether she is also a mother. *All this, and kids too?*

From the depths of my sofa, where my husband, my cat, and I bathe nightly in the hypnotic blue light of the TV, I reach for my phone, type in her name, and wait for Wikipedia to do its thing.

Maybe this time she'll surprise me. As soon as the page loads, my eyes scan the pale blue box that contains her basic biographical info. Birth date, Nationality, Occupation . . . Children. A single digit (usually it's a "1" or a "2," but in the case of Nancy Pelosi, a "5"!) confirms what the culture at large has led me to believe is true: that as a woman without kids, my life is incomplete. That as a female-bodied individual who has chosen not to reproduce, my own list of achievements will always come up short. That as a girl who never dreamed of baby names, or wondered who the dad would be, maybe there is even *something wrong with me*. I place my phone back on the coffee table, retrain my gaze on the TV. Yep, I lose. My game has reinforced the message once again: that as a woman without kids I am less-than, a failure, a freak.

But me not being a mother feels as fundamentally a part of me as the freckles on my face; not something I would ever have thought to question had it not become apparent that someday, being somebody's mom would be expected of me. An existence that revolved around the changing of diapers, the sleepless nights, and the frantic, awkward *school run*, my predetermined destiny, based on the double X chromosomes at the center of my being. Hours, days, and eventually years of my own freedom and deep thinking, put on hold while tending to the shaping and nurturing of young minds.

Is this how Wikipedia woman sees her life? When I picture her with her kids, the scene looks nothing like my own childhood. Instead, I see an idealized version of motherhood that I, as with all women, am supposed to want to aspire to. They are gathered in a spacious kitchen, the light from large windows (a skylight?) spilling over crayon drawings and unfinished homework, cold chewy bits of half-eaten toast. They are laughing, and then someone is crying, and there are hugs and kisses to make it all feel better. She is responding to emails on her phone with one hand, balancing a small, warm, wriggling body on her hip with the other, absorbing

the oxytocin from her child's embrace like it's just another supplement she takes with her morning coffee. Flash-forward. The kids, fully grown, are home for the holidays. Tall, strong, and full of tales, helping themselves to beers from the fridge, they occupy the kitchen with opinions she realizes she has helped to shape. I grew you, she thinks to herself, held snug as heavy cashmere by the satisfaction of a job well done. What fulfillment. What private *riches*. Whatever accolades she has amassed, whatever other *stuff* she's done with her life, it has all been for this, for *them*.

THUD-a-duh-da-THUD-a-duh-da. The sound of helicopter blades swiping at the night sky filling the windows of my Brooklyn apartment breaks my reverie. Outside, the streets thrum with the restless energy of a million dreams destined never to come true; but in here, for now, all is peaceful, quiet, safe. One wall lined with rows of color-coordinated books, each having taught me something profound about the world and my place in it. Every framed photograph and piece of artwork telling its own story about the adventures I have lived. The laptop on the table behind me, a portable office, portfolio, and artist's studio all in one, an entire career encased in scratched matte silver aluminum. Another device, my phone, a mystical technological amulet teeming with connections to family, friends, and colleagues, connecting me to the world around me with a steady drip of headlines, information, and ideas. And beside me on the sofa, S, my husband and best friend of twenty-three years, a person I never expected or tried to find, and who has wound up being both my biggest cheerleader and my most honest mirror for more than half my life.

Taking it all in soothes me. Nothing is missing; everything is in its place. A life designed to fit me like a second skin. A life that is full to the brim. I shift position on the sofa, sitting up straight and bending one tracksuit-panted leg into half-lotus. Deep breath. Once the wave of insecurity has washed through me, I reconsider why I need to know—*all this, and a mother, too?*

The truth revealing itself with each discrete, internal fist-pump when I find another one of me, *of us*. What I'm really looking for is other *women without kids*.

* * *

Because we're everywhere, aren't we? Amid the cacophony of our chaotic arrival in the new millennium, motherhood is still upheld as every woman's rightful, natural role, the path to her ultimate fulfillment. And yet, more and more of us are either questioning whether the vocation of childrearing is for us, or opting out full stop. As it stands, almost half of all women in the United States do not have kids, while fertility issues, the cost of raising a kid, and concerns about the environment are other factors contributing to the birthrate having hit a historic low in the summer of 2020.¹ Meanwhile, the world population is forecasted to peak in 2064, with twenty-three countries seeing populations shrink *by more than 50 percent by 2100*.² For some of us, non-motherhood is a conscious choice; for others, it just hasn't happened. But regardless of our reasons, the writing is smeared across the wall in brick red menstrual blood: within this stealth withdrawal from our reproductive duties lies the makings of a movement. And if you're reading this, you're already part of it.

But where are we? Not only are women without kids underrepresented in the mainstream media, we are still seen as the anomaly. At best, a woman who is not also a mother is a strange bird, faulty goods. If she *can't* have kids she is often portrayed as sad and damaged ("Such a shame"); if she simply *won't* (rarely is it that straightforward) she is either deluded, destined to regret it, or written off as cold-hearted, narcissistic, and career-obsessed. What a *selfish cunt*.

Please don't be offended by my salty language there! *Selfish Cunt* was going to be the title of this book; it filled my frontal cortex with vibrating neon letters the instant I considered writing on this subject. The notion that it is *selfish* not to dedicate one's life to the birthing, nurturing, and raising of one's children being the ultimate indictment against women without kids. But realistically, with the word *cunt* being practically unprintable, as a title it was never going to fly. Which is the other reason I like it; both "selfish" and "cunt" are ripe for reclamation when it comes to matters of women's self-sovereignty and bodily autonomy. Which hints at some of the core themes we will be discussing here.

Honestly? It's always pissed me off that the *worst word* you can call a person is also a name for the most sacred, most violated, most politicized, and most policed part of the female body. After all, it is only relatively recently, in the grand and grisly scheme of things, that women have even had the option not to bear children, our cunts not been regarded as the property of either our husbands or the state. An option that remains off-limits, still, for millions; women for whom there exists, in the words of British advice columnist Mariella Frostrup, "a straight line between puberty, marriage, sex and motherhood that continues on a loop until you die of exhaustion or reach menopause and breathe a sigh of relief."³

In developed, democratic nations, we like to think that we have come a long way in terms of women's rights to autonomy and self-authorship. Undoubtedly, this is the case. So why is it then that being a woman without kids is still so taboo? Why is the path to non-motherhood still subject to so much stigma, shame, and othering? Why are so many women still corralled into motherhood against their will (literally, with the 2022 overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the United States)? And why are so many others struggling to afford to have kids, experiencing fertility issues that mean they can't get pregnant, or leaving it until "too late"? Above all,

why is there so little discussion or understanding of the personal and societal factors that inform our procreative outcomes—factors that unite what I have come to see as the *unsung sisterhood* of women without kids?

The question—*Why don't you want to be a mom?*—used to annoy the hell out of me, the implication being that I definitely *should*. Most of the time, one answer had always been enough for me: *I just don't*. But on darker days, my lack of a discernable maternal instinct manifested in murky feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. *Surely, there must be something wrong with me*. A creeping suspicion that spiked during my thirties, while I was working as a magazine journalist in London. I was asked by several editors to write about my “unorthodox” stance. Behind my back (it not being considered polite to ask outright), my best friend also had to field the question: *Why, oh WHY, does she not want kids?* In response, I jotted off articles explaining that, for now, I wanted to focus on my career, and that my life already felt complete.

But eventually, the intense scrutiny made me question whether there wasn't more to this story. After all, it was sort of *odd* not to want a child; wasn't the procreation of the species the reason we were here? But the really odd thing, it began to seem to me, was that all women were expected to revel in the role of mother, despite major discrepancies in our personalities, our ambitions, our material resources, and our mental and emotional well-being. And why was it that my other desires for my life were not seen as equally valid? Why *was* the cost of raising a child so steep? Why was the love I felt for my husband and my friends not the same as the “real” love I was told I would feel for my child? And if my choice *did* make me selfish and neurotic, then what was the root of these neuroses?

In many ways, this book began as a deep dive into my experience of making peace with all of this. In the first instance, I hope that reading it will help to do the same for you. As I began to join

the dots, I had come to see that me being a woman without kids did not make me a freak: it made a lot of sense. That in some ways, it was also the natural outcome of a confluence of factors that have shaped all of our lives, for better and for worse, over the course of centuries. For so long, motherhood has been synonymous with womanhood—but in reality, there are many, many very valid reasons not to be a mom. And it was as I began to consider how I might present these findings that the scope of my new project began to widen.

I had always felt like I was the only one who didn't want to be a mom. But as I got deeper into my research, it became clear that I was no longer the anomaly. If the drop-off in the birthrate was due to the fact that the vast majority of women were having fewer kids, increasingly, it was because more of us were having none at all. If the question had always been "Why don't you want kids?" now I needed to know: *Why have WE stopped having kids?* Given that motherhood has long been considered the biological imperative of every person who is born a woman, something profound was evidently occurring in the evolution of womankind.

I began working on my hypothesis for what this might be against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was the summer when used pizza boxes emblazoned with the words "Black Lives Matter" adorned the windows of luxury Williamsburg condos and trans activists canceled Harry Potter. Thousands of miles to the north, as we all hunkered down and girded ourselves against apocalypse, the last intact ice shelf in the Canadian arctic, a slab of frigid gray ecology larger than Manhattan, finally broke free and shattered.⁴ From where my research was taking me, it was as if the social justice and environmentalist movements, coupled with the social and economic fallout from centuries of extractive capitalism, had created the perfect storm. Almost overnight, not having kids was no longer being seen as a crime against humanity; it was beginning to emerge as its own kind of destiny.

* * *

But before we go there, a few words on who this book is for. Given that the story of my development from girl, to woman, to non-mother forms the backbone of this text, it is likely that those readers who have either chosen not to become a mom or who are still grappling with that choice will find themselves reflected most clearly in these pages. But in the writing of it, I have uncovered common threads that I believe will be relatable for anybody who identifies as a woman without kids.

As such, I am speaking to the ones who've never wanted to be mothers, the ones who are teetering on the fence, the ones who've tried and failed to become parents, and the ones for whom it just never happened. This book is for the ones who don't have wombs and who feel anything but barren. It is for those for whom health issues or other disabilities have blocked the path to parenthood. It is for anybody whose sexual orientation or gender expression has written them out of the heteronormative story about what it means to "start a family." And it is even for those moms who may have found themselves, in the flat, scooped-out quiet of the 3 am feed, questioning where the fuck their minds, their identities, their *lives* have gone. The ones who sometimes—whisper it—*wish they didn't have kids*.

We selfish cunts come in all shapes and sizes. If you really want to know *What's the story there?* you will find our narratives to be as diverse and as richly textured as the undergrowth that carpets an ancient, forgotten forest. We all have our reasons for being (or wanting to be) nobody's mom; some dark and spiky, others green and luscious. But popular terminology for women without kids neatly sorts the ones who *can't* from the ones who *won't*. Within this binary, we are either sadly "childless" or defiantly "childfree," the latter often seen as selfish and deviant, and the former as

deserving of our utmost sympathy. When in reality, our stories are awash with nuance.

But I also acknowledge that not everything I have to say will be for everyone. I cannot know how it feels to grieve lost dreams of becoming a mom—even if completing this manuscript has found me grieving other things. In addition, I realize that me not wanting to have kids is its own form of privilege; it is far easier to opt out of motherhood than to want to have a child when this is not an option for you. This in addition to me having been born with all the benefits that accrue to a white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, able-bodied, college-educated, British woman. If anything, not having kids has made it even easier for me to partake of the opportunities therein—not least because not being a mother makes me *more like a man*. A definite advantage in a world built by men, for men.

On the subject of privilege, please let it also be clear that every one of the structural issues impacting women's reproductive outcomes that I cover here disproportionately impacts women of color.⁵ From a history of forced sterilizations, to the Black maternal health crisis, to a simple lack of access to resources, race adds another layer of complexity to the question of whether or not to become a mom.⁶

And yet every woman without kids, regardless of our circumstances, will have been subject to similar stigmas and prejudices about the fact we are not mothers. Will have grappled with similar feelings of shame, otherness, and self-doubt. Will have mopped up the pity, envy, disappointment, and judgment that is often projected onto us from family, friends, colleagues, and the wider culture, about this most intensely personal of circumstances.

Like, where does *that* shit come from? This is seriously toxic stuff—and it prevents us from having honest, vulnerable, and multifaceted conversations about the forces that have shaped the women that we are. According to Jody Day, founder of Gateway

Women, an organization for the involuntarily childless, it all has the same rotten root: pronatalism. The ideology, that is, that says “parents are more important than non-parents, and that families are more respectable and more valid than single people.”

You have felt the influence of this, right? One of the cornerstones of heteropatriarchy, pronatalism insists that the *reason we are here* is to couple-up and procreate. This belief is so embedded in societies across the globe that it operates like a microchip in our brains, coding feelings, thoughts, and beliefs before we have a chance to question them. Pronatalism is what tells us that it is selfish and narcissistic not to have kids. Pronatalism is what makes women feel like they have “failed” when they can’t get pregnant. Pronatalism is what denounces queer sex, and all non-procreative sex, as “perverse.” Pronatalism is what turns up the volume on our biological clocks; what gives other people permission to nose into our private business; and what gives politicians a say about what we do with our wombs.

Pronatalism is also the reason there is still no specific, widely used terminology that validates the life-path of women without kids: we are *non-mothers*, women *without* kids, either *child-less* or *child-free*, all of which emphasize the absence of a child. Even “nullipara,” the medical term for a person who has never carried a live birth to term, has its root in the Latin *nullus*, “none,” and *para*, from *parere*, “bear children.”

And pronatalism is behind what I have termed the Mommy Binary. That is, the false divide that exists between moms and non-moms, the childless and the childfree—forever pitting us against each other in toxic cycles of compare and despair. Two things I want us to take as universal? First, the fact that every woman, and every human being, is entitled to self-determine when it comes to our procreative potential. And second, that if being women without kids marks us as different, then good—because womankind needs *different*.