

# 'Mothers assume we have loads of money, white sofas and lots of sex'

One in four women won't have had a child by the age of 45. For some, that's a choice; others go through hell. It's time we ended the taboo, the founder of a support group tells Stefanie Marsh

It's a Sunday lunchtime and a woman — 40-odd, attractive in a newsreader-on-her-day-off way — arrives hesitantly at a restaurant in London. She's alone because all her friends are spending the weekend at home with their children, as they usually do. Because this woman does not have any, nor necessarily wants to be reminded of this fact by seeing her friends with theirs, she has, once again, found herself at a loose end.

Scanning the room, and recognising nobody, she suppresses the impulse to run away. But they're expecting her, this group of, in her mind's eye, "weeping weirdos"; a tribe, she's ashamed to admit, she belongs to. It was a huge step, she tells me later, making contact at all.

She had found Gateway Women one evening after typing "childless" into Google. The site was full of stories of women such as her and she read them with astonished relief. Eventually she arranged to join a meet-up. On the dreaded morning they sent her a text: "We'll be sitting at the back on the left." She remembers thinking: "This is worse than internet dating." Then, after a deep breath, she marched in.

There are 66 Gateway meet-up groups in Britain, hundreds around the world, set up for women such as the founder, Jody Day — childless, but not through choice. There has been, she says, a lot written about that new concept, "childfree" — women who've never wanted children. But what about women such as Day, who had always assumed she'd be a mother? Hardly a word. Rather suddenly, in her mid-forties, she realised that motherhood



wasn't going to happen. Coming to terms with this took four years of "hell". "I think there is still a large social taboo about talking about it," she says. "About the experience of not being a mum when you had hoped to be, how hard it is to deal with, and how other people perceive you — pushing back

**Jody Day, who founded a support network for childless women.**  
**Right: Helen Mirren, Renée Zellweger, Cameron Diaz, Angela Merkel, Debbie Harry and Kim Cattrall**

against all of that." She crowdfunded her first book on the subject; her second, *Living the Life Unexpected*, comes out this week, this time with a big international publisher behind it. "Twelve weeks to your Plan B for a meaningful and fulfilling life without children," reads the strapline.

A sunny, vital Cambridge graduate with a knockout wardrobe, Day has two master's degrees, a gentle voice that probably goes better with her new job as a psychotherapist than it did with her previous one as a business consultant, and a natural glow rarely seen on a 51-year-old.

Married in her twenties, Day divorced in her thirties. She met a new man, but there were fertility problems. The couple discussed IVF and adoption while ignoring some glaring problems in their relationship. "I'll be honest, I was trying to make a bad relationship work." She was 44, "middle-aged", when they broke up. "And I knew that even if I were to meet someone the next day, my time had completely run out."

Day lives in a family-friendly, villagey part of west London. On the way to her flat from the Tube station, I passed maternity-wear shops, a primary school, yummy mummies, shock-resistant designer buggies and cutesy children's clothes stores — a nightmare if your dreams of having children have collapsed.

"As a childless woman, you become sort of invisible," she says. "And you internalise all the stereotypes. You think, 'That's what I've got to look forward to. I'm going to be miserable, shapeless, unsexy, on my own, lonely, probably wearing very thick glasses, shapeless tweed skirts and smelling slightly of cat pee.'"

She shows me a page on her website. A roll call of childless women, dead and alive, it includes Angela Merkel, Cameron Diaz, Dolly Parton, Tracey Emin, Iris Murdoch, Charlotte Brontë, Anjelica Houston, Maxine Peake,

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## The no-kids club

Frida Kahlo, Maria Callas, PJ Harvey, Helen Mirren, Clare Balding, Theresa May, Nicola Sturgeon, Kathy Burke, Debbie Harry and Kim Cattrall. "I think women are really looking for a solid identity," she says. "And if you're not a mother, there isn't any alternative that has the same kind of status."

Day's articles examine some of the often hard-to-pin-down shadow sides of childlessness in articulate and compassionate detail. "Still Hopeful — But The Hope Is Killing Me," reads one headline. "Grieving For The Life Unlived" says another. "I probably wouldn't have started the website if I had someone to talk to." Day grins and says: "I felt like the only f\*\*\*ing childless woman in the world."

Her situation, rarely portrayed in books, films or the media, isn't uncommon. About 25 per cent of the population is ageing without children, that figure split equally between men and women. The stereotypes surrounding childlessness vary according to gender, she says. "Men's identity is not so wrapped up with fatherhood but then childless men have that additional thing that they must be paedophiles."

The post titled "50 Ways Not To Be A Mother" on Day's blog has the most comments. Number three is "Not meeting a suitable partner until we're past our childbearing years"; 11 is: "Not making motherhood a priority and expecting it just to 'happen' one day";

No 5 is: "Thinking that we don't want children because of our own difficult childhoods before realising too late that we were not condemned to repeat this with our own children." The list goes on.

Day remembers clearly writing her first post in April 2011. "I wrote about something called 'the tunnel' — it's when your life is narrowing down and down and you feel like you're stuck in this tunnel. And you can't move forward and you can't move back and behind you is every bad or failed decision, every relationship that's gone wrong. And ahead of you is darkness."

"I felt that in some way I was a failed woman. That's what a lot of people assume and that's what a lot of childless women internalise. There is a sense of deficit, of weirdness. Either she's happy and selfish and living an amazing life or she's bitter and twisted, and going home and mainlining antidepressants. Which is extraordinary; as if those are the only two options."

Friendships suffered, mostly with those who had "collapsed their identity into being a mother". It's not a criticism. "I would have been one of them: little 'so and so' as my Facebook profile picture; Mini Boden; boring for Britain about my children."

Day goes on. "There's this idea that female friendships can survive anything, but it's not possible to be really honest — about the fact that I'm envious of you, that it's so f\*\*\*ing unfair that you met someone and got

married and I didn't. There's this idea that life would have been perfect if only I'd have been a mum. But motherhood isn't a free ticket to a life of happiness and perfection. It's not our life plus children. It's motherhood and all the guilt and worry that comes with it, and you become 'little Hugo's mummy'.

There's resentment on both sides. "Mothers often assume that we have this amazing life and loads of money, white sofas and lots of sex. Some mums can feel quite insecure that their childless friends seem quite interesting and intellectual. If a mother doesn't work, there will be people who infer: 'All you've done is raise three kids?'"

She tells me a bit more of her story: "Seven years ago, I was pretty much on the floor. And I couldn't talk about it. People would say, 'You're so young, you'll meet someone.' Or, 'Don't be sad. Think of all the advantages.' But what's wrong with being sad? You are sad. What you need is empathy. If you had a family and they died and people said 'Don't be sad', you'd really be crossing a line. But it's not acceptable to be sad about not ever having had that family. Which is why I didn't know I was grieving for a very long time."

About an hour into the Sunday meet-up the newsreedy woman is relaxing into it. There are all sorts of women here: a landscape gardener

whose husband had a vasectomy without telling her; a married civil servant whose baby died; a single accountant who inadvertently left it too late and now buries herself in work to try to blot it out.

"In my thirties," one says, "I had friends getting 'accidentally on purpose' pregnant. I disapproved of that. But in retrospect? I should have been the woman who put the hole in the condom." There are women soliciting advice on how to deal with being expected to take up the slack for mothers at work; half-laughing about the newspaper clippings their mothers send them, "about this woman who's 90 and has had triplets".

A social worker explains the disappointment that her Asian family can't help but show about her failure to reproduce.

Many of them bear out one of Day's theories: "More women than men are going into higher education, so there's a mismatch as there's still the old paradigm that women have to marry someone of the same status or up. Meanwhile, you have this thing: 'Go out, be independent, have fun, don't depend on anyone — but then get married and have kids.' That leaves a very small window."

Day continues: "My personality had completely changed. I felt purposeless. I was completely passionless, erratic, exhausted, confused, directionless — I didn't know how to live the rest of my life. I withdrew from my relationships with friends and family members. I saw doctors, therapists — nobody knew what was the matter with me."

Then, aged 46, a coincidence. Reading a book on grief, Day thought: "Strange, this all feels very familiar. It was such a relief: I'm not going mad. I'm grieving."

Is childlessness really still viewed so negatively? "Yes, because of the anonymous comments I get at the bottom of every article and because of what other childless women have told me. Family members saying, 'What would you know? You've never been able to keep a man. You're not a mother. You're not a proper grown-up.' Childless women get left out of really important family discussions. I get some quite aggressive men on the Gateway forum saying, 'It's your fault, it's feminism's fault. Serve you right, you stupid, selfish cow.'"

This incenses her. "Childless women pay taxes towards hospitals, schools, all the facilities for parents and yet when we talk about ageing without children it's, 'You didn't have children, so tough luck.' And if you ask people why they had children, it's because they wanted them. It's a perfectly selfish reason. It wasn't because they wanted to repopulate the world. And have you never met a selfish parent?"

Day suggests that childless women in "the tunnel" allow themselves time to grieve and perhaps rethink how they organise their lives. She's sad that her grief absorbed so much of her life. "But now I have a life I love. I'm a school counsellor two days a week. Seven years ago it would've been too traumatic to spend time in a primary school. It has been lovely to be able to open that path without it hurting. "Childlessness was an irrevocable loss. I think of it like an open wound and now it's a scar. It's a scar on my heart and I can live with a scar."

*Living The Life Unexpected* by Jody Day is published by Bluebird, £12.99



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