

Like one in five women, MANDY APPLEYARD has missed out on motherhood. Here, with unsparing honesty, she lays bare her regrets over ...

# The love I'll never know

**T**HE WORLD'S worst party was in full swing, and there I was, standing in a roomful of 40 people wishing I were anywhere but there. The music was bad, the food worse, and all the guests were married with children and engaged in conversation about family life.

Since I am neither married nor a mother, I had little to offer the conversation. 'So, I hear you're a *career* woman.' What sounded like an accusation was being made by a corpulent guest I'd never met before – a plain woman in beige who looked like she badly needed a holiday. I replied that yes, I was a journalist. 'Don't take this the wrong way,' she continued, 'but I can't understand why a woman would ever choose work over family life.'

'It must be such a lonely life without

children. What's the reason to get up every day? I don't want to sound rude, but you must become so selfish when you've only yourself to think of.'

I resisted the urge to soak the ghastly woman in Rioja and instead left the party, hurt, and astounded by just how vicious people can be. I don't need others to make cruel comments about my not having children, I have spent the past ten years conjuring up enough agony of my own on the subject.

I know, for example, that not being a mother means there is a part of me which remains unused, a love that will be forever unexpressed. I know that what any mother describes as the most profound love she has ever known is, to me, a locked door – there is so much love I will never be able to give, wisdom and understanding I cannot share, shelter and solace I cannot provide.

I never expected to find myself in

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# I feel less of a woman for not being a mother. There is a vast realm of experience and growth that I will never share

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agreement with Ann Widdecombe on anything, yet I realised when she said last week that her most profound regret is never having had children, that we have something very important in common.

Like her, I didn't plan it this way; I made no choice to be childless. Like so many other women of my generation, born in the Sixties when the fashionable wisdom was that women should postpone marriage and motherhood to forge careers, I left it too late to have a family. I always assumed it would happen at some stage, but I never gave it the focus it needed.

As a 20-something woman with the world at her feet, I chose to interpret feminism's gift as the right to education and a career. Were I offering advice now to the young woman I was then, I would say: 'If you want to marry and have children in your 20s, that is just as valid a choice as building a career. Don't be afraid to make up your own mind.'

You see, I never envisaged life without a family. I had three significant relationships in my 20s and 30s, each of which I assumed would lead to marriage and children. My first relationship, with a fellow university student, ended after five years. We were 25, and he wasn't ready to settle down, so we parted.

At 27, I started seeing the man who was to become my second major boyfriend. We had been together for 18 months when I found out he had been seeing someone else, so I was left with no choice but to end it.

I became involved with a man I was sure would be The One when I was 30. Right partner, right life-stage; what could go wrong? Three years down the line, he announced that he had fallen in love with someone else, and that it was over between us.

AND so, at the age of 33, I suddenly became single.

The years that followed were some of the most difficult of my life, as close friends married and started families. I watched their lives changing as they swelled with happy pregnancies and welcomed beautiful babies into the world.

I was deeply envious, and hated myself for feeling that way. As they entered a mature and exciting new chapter as parents, I seemed to be flailing around in dating hell, impatient with expectation but nowhere close to finding the man with whom I could settle down and start a family of my own.

By contrast, my career as a journalist was flourishing. I was busy, and relished the variety and challenge of my work. And still, somehow, as the years passed and 40 loomed ever larger, I remained hopeful that I would be a mother one day.

Then a long-lost boyfriend invited me to California for a holiday when I was 38. We had been friends for many years after a brief relationship a decade earlier, and, to our mutual surprise, we rekindled things when we met again. He proposed, and at the age of 39 I resigned from my job in Scotland and moved to San Diego to be with him.

It was all so whirlwind. Within three months I was preg-



nant; we were surprised, thrilled, and terrified in roughly equal measure. We told the world our happy news, and as the weeks passed and I became aware of subtle changes in my body, it seemed like a miracle that this was happening to me.

In the 12th week of my pregnancy, I miscarried. It was an unthinkable tragedy, and tests could determine no reason why I had lost our baby.

A year later I fell pregnant again, but miscarried at 11 weeks. I had been nervous throughout that pregnancy,

and its failure was a grim confirmation of my worst fears.

Both miscarriages were 'unexpected', both devastating, and a year later, pushed to the limit by what we had been through, my partner and I separated.

So I arrived back in Britain at 41, alone and realising that my hope of becoming a mother had probably died with that second thwarted pregnancy. A period of depression ensued, in part a response to my loss, but also to what looked like an empty and cruel future.

And so began a personal battle to forge a life in which children would not figure, where I would stand alone in that unfashionable but increasing minority of women who do not have a family.

It seems I am part of a growing phenomenon: one in five women in Britain is childless by the age of 45, with fertility rates at a 44-year low. The proportion of women without children has almost doubled since the Nineties, and it's the same story in most other developed nations, including America. Finances play a part in the falling birth rate: many couples now decide against a family, or

have only one child, because of the costs involved.

Focusing on a career is the key reason most women don't have children, but a sociological shift away from the traditional role of mother is another.

In the past, motherhood was inevitable: now it has become a lifestyle choice — and one increasing numbers of women decide against, particularly, statistics reveal, if they are educated. The higher a woman's income, the less likely she is to have children.

PEOPLE who don't know me usually assume, because I have a career and no children, that I chose one over the other, and they therefore feel entitled to make harsh judgments on that basis.

A friend, worried about her young son's bad behaviour, once said: 'You wouldn't understand, you're not a mother.' Someone close to me once said I couldn't have wanted children that much, or I wouldn't have left it so late. 'You've only yourself to blame,' she added.

I used to wonder what my children would have looked like, who they would have taken after. Would they have inherited my mother's beautiful Irish eyes? My father's dry wit? I dared to think I would have been a good mother, especially when I see the slipshod way many parents raise their children. I like to think I would have been fun but

firm, dependable but adventurous, and I hope I would have raised happy children who would have made the world a better place.

I would have taught a son to bake cakes and encouraged him to express his feelings; I would have raised a daughter to be confident and assertive. Idealised notions, perhaps, but those were my dreams.

Dreams that I can't help replaying in my mind.

We would have gone camping and sailing, I would have hoped to bequeath to my children my love of books, and of the natural world. There would be no television sets in bedrooms nor texting at the dining table, but plenty of time shared with grandparents — my parents, who would have been the best grandmother and grandfather in the world, and for whom my loss is also their loss.

They are tactful on the subject of having no grandchildren because they know it is a source of sadness for me, but I know they feel that gap in their lives very acutely.

I do, however, have two godsons, one 18, one 20, whose lives I have been a significant part of, and who have brought me much joy.

I recently spent an evening with Nicky, the 18-year-old, helping him to write a personal statement for his university application, and felt so proud to be able to help a lovely young man prepare for the next exciting stage of his life.

For a while I contemplated adoption, but as a 40-something single woman who works as a freelance, with all the financial vagaries that entails, I didn't feel I was in a stable enough



position to proceed. I consulted an agency dealing in the adoption of children from overseas, but decided that age and circumstances were against me.

If miscarriage hadn't stolen my dreams, I would be the mother of a ten-year-old and an 11-year-old, my days and nights moulded by my responsibilities to my children. My life would be mapped out for at least the next seven years; instead, I live a life without maps.

As the years have passed, I have come to terms with my fate and learned to relish its compensations. I have witnessed, albeit third-hand, the long, relentless slog of parenthood, and how thankless it can be.

One friend confides in me, with breath-taking honesty (and in total secrecy) that she wishes she'd never had children, has felt trapped since the day they were born, and envies me my life.

'Tell me who you've interviewed this week!' 'Show me your photographs of Patagonia. And what about your plans for that B&B in the Yorkshire Moors?' she inquires, hungry for tales from the wider world after another day of the domestic drudgery necessitated by her having five children.

I have seen the rigours of raising a family take many couples to the brink, some into the divorce courts. My friends no longer have beautiful babies and entertaining toddlers; they now have truculent teenagers.

**M**ANY of them are struggling, financially, to put their children through university or to help them buy their first home, worrying themselves sick about whether their children will find work in these straitened times.

I used to fret about the prospect of a lonely old age when no children or grandchildren will come round to visit, but I have seen enough of other people's family fall-outs to know that being a parent is no guarantee of companionship in old age.

I don't want anyone to feel sorry for me. I count my blessings, not least that I have a career I enjoy, and am able to travel widely and often. Not being a mother means I can take on assignments that would otherwise be impossible.

It means I am a free agent. So when I'm invited on a last-minute hiking trip to the Highlands, I can say yes. When a friend says: 'Let's climb Kilimanjaro for charity,' I can say yes.

Some people, like that dreadful woman at the party, will make harsh assumptions about what that means:

that I am selfish because I have not known the sacrifices of motherhood. In fact, I use my time wisely and productively, through the voluntary work to which I am committed, the teaching I do, and the love I share with those in my life.

In any case, I don't believe that having children is an act of selflessness: quite the opposite. Some of the most myopic, self-concerned people I know are parents who cannot see beyond the narrow boundaries of their nuclear family, and who care nothing for those outside their self-begotten world.

My regrets will always linger. My life is a poorer place for not having children, and I am less of a woman for not being a mother. There is a vast realm of experience and growth I will never know.

But I am old enough to have learned that life doesn't always give us what we want, nor what we might feel we are entitled to. I made some bad choices for which I take full responsibility, but in place of parenthood I have another precious gift, and one I do not underestimate. I have the gift of freedom.

## Who knew?

**There were  
1.9 million childless  
women aged 40  
to 44 in 2008,  
compared with  
just 580,000  
in 1976**





**Full of hope:  
Mandy in her 20s**

