



THE OVERRATED JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD AFTER 30

by Johanna Garfield

There is a lot suddenly being written by and about women who are experiencing motherhood for the first time at 30-plus, even 40-plus. They are, they say, ecstatic. They have strewn their wild oats far and wide, have carved out careers to which they can easily return, and have had enough time alone with their husbands to iron out all the wrinkles in their relationships. Enough, in fact, to make them as smooth and uncreased as the proverbial babies' bottoms with which they are as yet unacquainted. Now they're ready for the Big One: Being a Parent.

And to join the swelling chorus in favor of Mid-Life Motherhood, I am also hearing, in melancholy counterpoint, groans of regret from younger friends who followed—blithely but blindly, they now feel—the lockstep of marriage and kids in their 20s, only to face the "Now what do I do? I never had a chance to find myself" syndrome by 40.

To the latter group, a glass of champagne and some words of cheer; to the former, a double Scotch and some words of caution. I, and some other '60s pioneers of Late Motherhood should know. We have been there for the long haul. And I'm here to tell you that, though motherhood can be a great experience at any age, it doesn't get any easier as time goes by. In fact, in some ways the opposite is true.

Sure, having waited, one can enjoy a young baby enormously. In no time, however, that lightweight, easily lifted bundle of (mostly) joy has metamorphosed into a hefty package that has, nonetheless, acquired the speed, dexterity and curiosity of a young chimpanzee.

Essential now are lots of energy and very quick reflexes—needed, for example, for reacting speedily when, like the chicken, Junior decides to cross the road. And like it or

not, by her mid-30s or early 40s, a woman has often lost some of her spring and bounce. Personally, I can vouch for this, having had all the spring and bounce of an old mattress coil even in my salad days.

Biological realities being what they are, if you want more than one child, you may feel yourself under considerable time pressure to complete your family quickly. Avoid this trap, or you may find yourselves, as we did, the proud but punchy parents of two babies born a year apart. Very cute, if your children enjoy being mistaken for twins.

But for me, in some ways, having two infants so close together made it easier to decide to quit my job. Finding someone with wit, verve and a warm, loving nature—who also didn't mind reading *The Bingity-Bangity School Bus* out loud three times in a row, and would cheerfully change two sets of diapers at regular intervals—would have been harder than do-it-yourself parenting, sluggish and lazy or not. So much for an uninterrupted career.

But my friend Ellen, who zipped up the corporate ladder in her childless 20s and stayed there right up to, and after, two more fortunately spaced confinements than mine, tells me that ongoing success also takes its toll. Last year's major board meeting conflicted with her daughter's starring role as a loaf of home-baked bread in the school pageant. "Sometimes I wish I'd had Jody before I was so established," she muttered glumly.

Let's say, though, that slightly weathered but still afloat, you negotiate infancy and toddlerhood (single, double or whatever). Do not be deceived. Rough seas await you around the bend. The 40- (and by now possibly 50-) plus ear is simply not attuned to decibel counts once thought to be heard only by dogs, or

to casual chitchat between 15-year-olds about contraception, or to language issuing from one's offspring that makes Henry Miller sound like Mother Goose.

But even assuming that, through some happy combination of genetics and/or environment, you have raised a genteel and cultivated brood, there are problems. Your economic calendar is out of sync with theirs. Let's say you want to travel. According to the traditional, younger-parenting schedule, your major child-rearing expenses would be paid and you would be home free—or, I should say, free from home. Instead, looming on the horizon in place of Singapore or Venice are whopping college-tuition fees.

All very well, you say. But what about the wistful plaints of my decade-younger friends who, as their kids depart, bemoan their too-early bondage to *Kinder und Küche*, their lack of special training, their incomplete educations? Well, in no time at all most are either back in college getting straight A's or starting fascinating new careers. And it has occurred to me, uneasily, that it is far easier for them to start a new life at 40 than it will be for someone approaching 50. Someone, for instance, like me.

Certainly, a woman's right to choose when—or whether—to have children has been a long time coming. And in no way am I advocating a return to the depressing predictability of such childhood ditties as: "First comes love, then comes marriage/Then comes [your name] with a baby carriage." On the other hand, I feel strongly that—due at least in part to the idyllic accounts of a new band of highly inexperienced mid-life mothers who don't yet know what's in store—the pendulum (or should I say the cradle?) has swung too far the other way. ■