

WONDER WOMAN

The myth of 'having it all'

VIRGINIA HAUSSEGER

Allen & Unwin

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Author's Notes

During the course of writing this book I've often hoped that no-one ever reads it. Well, no-one that knows me. Not because I don't think it's worth reading. I do. But because there is a lot of me in it. And despite my public profile as a journalist and TV news presenter, I hate this kind of exposure. I really hate it.

There, I've said it.

So why am I writing this at all? For two reasons. Firstly, I couldn't *not* write it. I had to get this monkey off my back. It was driving me crazy. And secondly, when I found myself struggling to climb up the sides of a murky pit of despair, during my mid to late thirties, I searched desperately for books by Australian women that would somehow reflect my own experience. I couldn't find any. Not one. Which got me wondering why the hell not? Why aren't we talking about the issues that are central to the lives of women in their twenties, thirties and forties? Issues of fertility and procrastination; of choice and chance; ambition and career; of finding love in seemingly loveless times; of weighing up the merits of motherhood against unencumbered freedom; of copping a gob full of patriarchy in the workplace and being forced to swallow it; of coming to terms with childlessness, while grappling with the divide between mothers and non-mothers; of questioning feminism and its unintended outcomes, and of contemplating our failure in the quest to 'have it all'.

When I first committed pen to paper and voiced some of my own pain and frustration, the public response was, well, considerable, as you will see in chapter 2. Clearly I wasn't the only woman trying to climb out of that pit. Opinionated, angry, lonely, frustrated women's voices began to shout from everywhere. It was as if suddenly something had been unleashed, and everyone had something to say about it. Not all of it was nice. But in the rush of noise, one thing became alarmingly clear: women's voices had been quiet for too long. We needed to talk, and were ready to listen.

While I remain uncomfortable about revealing some pretty raw stuff about my own life in the early chapters of this book, I knew it would be disingenuous and unacceptable not to. To try and make sense of the growing unease I have about the way we are living our lives, I have prevailed upon a number of women to tell me their stories; and in some cases to share their own pain. They have all done so with exceptional generosity—something I found deeply humbling, particularly in the knowledge that some of the women I interviewed do not agree with my take on what's going on. In fact a couple stand quite opposed to various aspects of what I have to say. Kate, who you'll meet in chapter 8, bellowed at me down the phone line a couple of years ago when she read the

original article that kick-started this book. ‘What the hell are you doing, Virginia?’ was her incredulous cry. Nevertheless, in the spirit of furthering fulsome discourse, Kate agreed to talk and share her story here.

This book is my attempt to investigate, penetrate and unravel what I see as the key issues in the lives of many women around me right now, but it is by no means comprehensive. It is unashamedly selective. I am not an academic, and I do not purport to speak for, or about, women whose lives are vastly different from mine, and about which I have no real experience. My focus is the lives of women from a similar class, background and education to myself. To protect their privacy, and to avoid any career backlash, I have changed the names of some of the women. Others have been upfront and frank about who they are.

If I don’t want those who know me to read this book, then who *do* I want to read it? That has always been clear to me. It’s for the woman who finds herself up against it and wonders if she’s alone. I wrote this book to tell you, ‘No, you are not alone’.

Wonder

noun & verb: n. **1.** an emotion excited by what is unexpected, unfamiliar, or inexplicable, esp. surprise mingled with admiration or curiosity etc. **2.** a strange or remarkable person or thing. *v.* **1.** to be filled with wonder or great surprise etc. **2.** desire or be curious to know etc. **3.** ask oneself with puzzlement or doubt about; to question.

Woman

1949

For a long time I have hesitated to write a book on women. The subject is irritating, especially to women; and it is not new . . . the voluminous nonsense uttered during the last century seems to have done little to illuminate the problem. After all, is there a problem? And if so, what is it?

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

1963

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years . . . a problem that has no name.

Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*

1970

The time has come when some women are ready to listen, and their number is growing; it is time also for those women to speak, however uncertainly, however haltingly, and for the world to listen.

Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*

1994

Did we pay a price? Most of us did . . . there is still so much unfinished business.

What will your issues be? You will have to decide, but I think it is likely that, as happened with us, you won't choose them—they will choose you.

Anne Summers, 'Letter to the Next Generation'

1999

The contradictions women face have never been more bruising than they are now. The career woman doesn't know if she is to do her job like a man or like herself . . . Is motherhood a privilege or a punishment? . . .

The rhetoric of equality is being used in the name of political correctness to mask the hammering that women are taking.

Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman*

2003

In many cases, women wonder just what it is that was won.

Anne Summers, *The End of Equality*

Chapter 1

Wondering what's so bloody wonderful

It's not like I woke up one day and found myself childless. That was a progressive thing. But I did wake up one day to find myself angry. That was a sudden thing. I was angry about being childless. Angry that at the age of 38 I was suddenly 'too old', and my fertility bits were—in the carefully chosen words of my gynaecologist—'probably bugged'. I was angry that while I had a dream job—the job I had set my sights on a decade earlier—I felt unfulfilled. Angry that all I had to show for the past fifteen years, or more, were a few journalism awards and a household of expensive clutter. Angry that many around me believed I had a perfect life, and I knew I didn't. Angry that while I had always considered myself independent and unconventional, I was suddenly mourning my lack of convention and wishing I had a little weatherboard house with a garden and a picket fence. Most of all, I was angry that I seemed to be out of control of my emotions, and possibly out of my mind.

All in all—it was a rotten morning.

It's now been some time since that black awakening and there has been plenty of head banging in the interim. If this was a quaint tale, I'd add 'and a lot of water has passed under the bridge'. But there is nothing charming or quaint about what I have to say. However, it's true, rivers and torrents have gushed under the proverbial bridge.

My anger isn't over, although I'm managing it better. The journey of coming to terms with my own childlessness, though, has forced me to examine deeply my situation and how I came to be in it. It's not just an issue of being childless, it's also about being in a position that is not conducive to having a child—even if I could. It's about not being where I thought I would be in my late thirties. It's about owning up to the choices I've made—both knowingly and unknowingly. It's about being honest with myself about how much my childlessness is a result of 'chance', how much is conscious 'choice', and how much is due to the career woman's syndrome of 'creeping non-choice'. It's also about examining what role feminism has played in encouraging and supporting the paths I've taken.

But it's not all about me.

In my search for clarity, while I felt like a walking, talking contradiction, I've found myself picking the brains of women around me. Women I know well, some not so well, and some not at all. Some women I've deliberately sought out, driven by a vague hunch that I might learn something from them. In an unexpected but delightful way, others have sought me out. And some are dear friends, both old and new. Regardless of how I've come upon these women, whose stories, musings and private preoccupations have been included in this book, there has been one recurring and overwhelming theme in all our lives: the quest to 'have it all'; and none of us have nailed it.

Like an infuriating radio jingle that won't let up, the 'have it all' mantra has been sung with tedious repetition over the past couple of decades. But it's morphed from being a pesky gimmick, to take on the weight and significance of a precious holy grail. To 'have it all' has not only become a life quest, it has become a birthright promise to all women born post-1960, generation X, Y and beyond. Which is downright tragic, when you consider what a load of crap it really is.

The humourless feminist . . .

It was enough to make any woman want to throw rotten eggs, but we don't do that these days—certainly not in Parliament House. The occasion was International Women's Day, 2004. The National Party's Senator Julian McGauran strode into the senate chamber full of bonhomie for his fellow female colleagues. They probably weren't feeling the same for him. No sooner had one of the minority gender raised the issue of family planning and women's health, than Senator McGauran was throwing his eyes and his arms skyward. 'On International Women's Day,' he boomed with dramatic emphasis, 'you would think they would come into this parliament and celebrate the occasion with a bit more generosity. But, no . . .' And on he went.

No doubt, the few women in the chamber squirmed in their seats, as they so often are forced to do in Australia's patriarchal place of politics. One of them, Senator Natasha Stott Despoja, once the youngest woman in federal parliament, was bristling. For as long as she could stand it, she let Senator McGauran rave on about why women have tremendous cause to celebrate, and why they 'should not come in here with negative beat-ups just to take a political opportunity on such a day'. After ten minutes she could stand it no more—Senator Stott Despoja got to her feet. Yes, International Women's Day was indeed a day to celebrate, she told the chamber, but it was also a day to reflect. And from where she stood, along with all the other women in that place, and outside it, the view was pretty lousy. She told the chamber she was sick of it. 'Today, whether it annoys Senator McGauran or not, I feel like a humourless feminist.' And from there she detailed a litany of failed policy and government inaction that added to the already heavy burden in women's lives.¹

No doubt the speech would have made Senator McGauran smirk at the predictability of the complaint, and he probably wished the pesky senator would learn to shut up. Thankfully she never has. The moment highlights, yet again, the ‘Oliver Twist’ syndrome women face. In theory, and on paper (not mine), the World for Women must be Wonderful. People like Senator McGauran can’t understand why women continue to bleat. Which is how women are made to feel like Oliver—a puny, grubby little beggar—if we ask for more. ‘I think the fact that we do have so many visible rights now as women,’ argues Nicola Roxon, Labor’s thirty-something Shadow Attorney-General, ‘many people have been made to feel like it’s unfair to ask for more. I think we’ve got a much harder job ahead of us now.’ And she’s right. Senator Stott Despoja cites the ‘one step forward and two steps backward’ theory: ‘Maybe it is harder to move forwards when not only are you constantly protecting the gains that you have made but you’re also battling this assumption that you have got nothing to complain about, that of course, it is all fine.’

Like the Senator, I too feel like a humourless feminist. No doubt it will come as a surprise to some that I call myself a feminist at all. But I do and always have. The fact that I’ve raised questions about the role feminism has played in over-cooking the ‘have it all’ quest has led some media commentators to infer I’ve somehow defected. I haven’t. I’ve just strengthened my membership by holding up some of feminism’s unintended outcomes for inspection. But perhaps it’s the humourlessness in my anger that most proves my feminist credentials.

Frankly, I see little to celebrate and plenty to commiserate with in the lives of women around me—the women you will meet in this book. We are not women who show any outward signs of suffering or pain; on the surface we are the success stories our feminist foremothers should be proud of. As their daughters, the beneficiaries of their hard-fought battles, we are the ones for whom the gender walls were ripped down. Unlike many of our pre-war or baby boomer mothers, we could ‘have it all’: a solid education; tertiary degrees; an impressive career path; a great job; a top salary; an equal and loving partnership; happy, well-adjusted children and a balanced family life. Yes, all that was ours for the taking, the doing, the making. We just had to work out how the hell to fit it all in, and make it all work. For the most part, we can’t, but that doesn’t stop us trying. After all, we’re trained to be ‘achievers and succeeders’, ‘doers’, not ‘quitters’.

We’re part of a privileged social class whose first taste of that privilege came with a serious focus on our education, through high school and beyond into universities and colleges. We have been encouraged to seize every opportunity and we’ve been supported every step of the way—until we fall over. Until we find that yes, we do want to have children but we’ve left it too late, or don’t have a mate. Or until we tell our boss that we’re pregnant and need time off, and then watch our carefully constructed career path take a dive. Or until we try to return to work, after unpaid maternity leave, and find our position has been demoted, our confidence battered, and we’re forced to hide the fact of our motherhood and juggle quietly on our own. When all the ‘have it all’ elements collide and the pieces lie like an impossible jigsaw puzzle before us, that’s when we find we are

on our own. That's when some unenlightened pain-in-the-ass will cock a disapproving eyebrow and tell us, 'Ah, but it is *your* choice!'

That loaded word: choice

Overused and at times infuriating, the word 'choice' is by no means the exclusive domain of women. Men have choice too. Rarely, though, is a man's choice used to scorn and abuse him in the same way it is used against women.

Choice is more than a word when hurled at women—and hurled it is. The phrase, 'It was your choice', is thrust at women like a metaphorical punctuation point to end all discussion when the going gets tough. Where can you go from the finality of that conversational gem? After all, it's true isn't it? You had a choice; you made it; now you wear it. It's not like there's much mileage in shouting back, 'Yes I know it was my choice, but I may have made a mistake.' How plausible is, 'Yes I know I *had* a choice, but I didn't realise it at the time?' or, even worse, 'Actually I didn't understand that I had a choice at all, I was too busy to notice?'

The problem is that 'choice' has become a double-edged, dirty word. All women want it, even demand it, but when we've used it, exercised it, sucked it for all it's worth, choice inevitably comes back to bite you. In laying out the smorgasbord of so-called 'choice' for women, telling them to gorge themselves on the buffet of exotic fruits that older women, and less privileged women, never had the chance to sniff, are we setting a trap? Are we urging women to stuff themselves and then buckle over with the belly ache of too much choice?

In theory, the women of my generation are 'the lucky' ones. We have been grudgingly given access to all corridors of power— if we want to walk them. We can run for prime minister, lead corporate boards, be a CEO of a multinational, run hospitals, be a police commissioner, sit on the High Court bench, even host our own late-night TV variety show—not that many of us really get to do these things. But the point is—we *can*. It's *our choice!* The equal opportunity for full participation in our society is there for the taking. Or so we're told. What we're not told is the high price we will have to pay for it, nor are we warned about the burdensome and often irreversible consequences of our choices.

As women, we carry the lion's share of responsibility for our relationships, the birth of our progeny, the care and raising of our children, the feeding and nurturing of our families, the well-being of our spouses, the connection with our friends and the care of our communities. So while prohibitive barriers have been torn down, and once closed doors thrown open, and we're urged to feed from an expansive menu of choice and opportunity, we have nevertheless still got a whole stack of stuff piling up on the 'to do list'. Eventually, the cracks begin to show, and the 'have it all—do it all' plan begins to crumble. Sometimes the pieces crash in spectacular fashion; sometimes it's just a quiet, private, but nevertheless painful, concession to failure.

Grasping at choice is one thing, understanding its consequences is another. Then there's the 'process' of choice. Or lack of it. Telling a woman, 'It was your choice', suggests some logical, rational and well-plotted pathway to adulthood, with each step methodically followed until you arrive at '*your choice*'. But life isn't always like that. Over a period of years, plotlines get blurred, some of the steps are bypassed, or forgotten, pathways get messy, and in the end the grand destination 'choice' is often arrived at in the clumsiest of ways. Sure, there are the savvy ones, who manage to stick to the long-term game plan, with just minor deviations along the way, but, overall, there is a lot more chance in choice than we're inclined to own up to. That's why hurling the barb, 'It was *your choice*' at women carrying too big a load and not coping, women wracked with guilt and a sense of failure or women battling with a lonely sense of emptiness is cruel and unfair. More importantly, it's missing the point.

The ultimate choice

Women are judged and defined by the choices we make. Who we are, what we have become, and how the rest of the world sees and values us is dependent on these life choices. On one level we can label ourselves much the same as men do; by stating our profession, our job rank or our seniority; or by our partnership status—single, married, divorced, or 'in a relationship' etc. These labels, though, are just titles, hats, badges. We can wear a number of them at the one time; even drop a few or pick up some new ones as we go along. There is, however, one exclusive domain reserved for the definition of women only. It is a definition that is, by its very mention, burdened with baggage, and it also divides women into two distinctly different camps: 'mother' or 'not'.

Ultimately, every one of us will be defined as either a woman who has given birth to new life and mothered a child—or a woman who has not. This is why the choices we make surrounding our fertility are so heavily weighted with consequences. It is these consequences—how we get there, and how we are grappling with them—that is the focus of this book. It is an attempt to unpeel the truth about how, for many of us, our fertility choices are made with only a vague tilt towards fully comprehending the costs involved. Most of us have little, if any, real idea of how we will manage the complex and ever-competing demands on our lives in an age where we feel compelled to 'have it all'—lest we let the sisterhood down. As one of the women you will meet later remarked, consolidating a career while putting relationships and children on hold is 'like a huge gamble, with high stakes in a game I didn't even know I was playing'.

This book, though, is not only about childlessness. Indeed far from it. It is also an attempt to highlight the glaring inequalities women who *do* have children face as they try to maintain their rightful and hard-won place in the workforce, while keeping a grip on themselves. The stories of these women are a reminder too as to why so many younger women, those now in their twenties, will shun motherhood, or at least seriously delay it, when they see the struggle involved, and the high price some women are forced to pay

for doing so. Another group of women are so disenchanted with the cost of motherhood, they are going to extreme lengths to avoid it. Their stories are included here too.

Of course, central to all women's lives when the question arises of to-be or not-to-be a mother is the issue of partnership. Some of the stories here are sad tales of the impossibility of modern-day coupling. Others are about the simple, albeit awkward, search for a jar of sperm and the right to be a single parent. In closing, I grapple with the growing divide between women: the status of mother versus non-mother. This, in many respects, is where it all started for me: how do I make sense of my life and my future as a woman apparently destined to remain childless?

Catching sight of myself . . .

Childlessness has become a major theme in my personal story, and one that has, much to my discomfort, taken prominence in recent years. At the same time, for all three of my sisters, both of my brothers and several close friends, their theme has been coping *with* children. They are blighted by a lack of childlessness.

'See, see what I have to live with Virginia!' my best friend Anne Marie bellows down the phone line, as her three-year-old screeches, 'Mumeeeeeee I'm not eating that!!' Anne Marie barks to little Lucinda, 'Look I'm the mummy so I'm the boss, not you!' She then groans down the phone at me, 'See, see what it's like? Bloody Nora, is it time for a wine yet?'

For years that's been our antidote to most of life's pressures: a good woody chardonnay. And there's been plenty of call for it. Anne Marie and I should have invested in a vineyard. We've certainly kept a few in business. We've drunk our way through my first marriage, travels, various career wins, divorce, new job offers, loneliness, the wild search for a lover, the purchase and sale of my homes, several affairs, my neurosis about commitment, the arrival of my new partner, and my sickness. We haven't quite drunk ourselves through my childlessness. Not yet. But we're working on it. It seems to me that childlessness is the hardest monster I've had to battle. Perhaps no amount of booze will drown it.

Anne Marie had just left after a weekend visit and I stood transfixed in front of my lounge room heater, gobsmacked, as I read the comments of a woman well known and highly regarded in literary circles. She had revealed in a newspaper article how she felt about her childlessness. I read the quote out loud to my partner, Mark, prefacing it with, 'This is me—now. I could have written this.' Here's what she said:

The most depressed I have ever been is when I longed for a child in my early thirties . . . the experience was intense beyond imagining and I would gasp in pain or cry whenever I saw a baby. The prosaic term biological clock was totally inadequate to describe what I was going through. I wanted a child so much, and felt such anger that I did not have one that I was in some ways, quite mad.²

I finished reading and Mark and I fell silent. I couldn't look at him. In fact I couldn't take my eyes off the page. Those last few words hung heavily around me: '*. . . I was in some ways, quite mad.*'

Mark was understandably taken aback and when he spoke, he was somewhat defensive. We had never discussed this before. Not in such raw terms. I'd never peeled back the emotion to reveal the naked core of this pain. He was hurt. And I'd opened a floodgate.

Chapter 2

Triggering a brawl: I said, you said, she said . . .

Yes Virginia, there is such a thing as personal responsibility.

Herald Sun, 20 April 2003

No Virginia, feminism is not to blame for your solitary pain.

The Age, 30 July 2002

Yes, Virginia, there is a way to have a career and kids.

The Sunday Age, 18 August 2002

You can swap with me Virginia.

The Age, 25 July 2002

With the face of an angel

A little girl called Alex occasionally approaches me at my local café as I'm poring over the morning newspapers. She's perhaps five, maybe six, with exquisite red curls and baby freckles on pale skin. Sometimes she appears out of nowhere and utters something

to get my attention. At other times I happen to glance up and there she is, just staring. Each time we go through the same little routine.

‘Hello, Alex!’

‘Hello, Virginia.’

‘Don’t you look lovely in those boots.’

‘Yes.’

‘So what’s for breakfast today?’

‘Sausages.’

‘Sausages! I thought toast and jam was your favourite.’

‘Sometimes. I saw you on the news last night.’

‘Oh did you? Did I do a good job reading the news?’

‘Yes. I like your hair.’

And so it goes on. We exchange a few daily pleasantries. Me asking the questions. Little Alex giving her staccato short answers. Before long, her embarrassed dad retrieves her, always with an apology.

The thing is, Alex just kills me. I can handle any amount of public inquisitiveness, but little Alex, sweet little Alex is simply too much. I find myself scanning the place some mornings hoping she’s not there.

You know the advertisements with the bare-bottomed babies, or the strong arm of a father holding afloat the fragile body of a newborn, or the young pre-schoolers trying to spell out the incomprehensible words of a product—all of it has me turning away. I know not to linger in that space. I know the speed with which a rotten cocktail of envy, disgust and pity will surge through me in those moments. I’ve learnt to clamp down the ‘off’ switch, before the toxic current travels too far.

The worst of it is the envy. No amount of self-flagellation will rid me of the disgust I feel following those stolen seconds of envy. Envy for what others around me, including my dearest friends and family, have—and I don’t. Maybe that’s why I did it. Maybe that’s why I outed myself as childless, barren and frustrated. This thing was thrashing around in my heart and my head, at times sending me off balance. I needed the people closest to me, the people I love, to understand the magnitude of this pain. I needed to express it. So I did. Out loud in a major metropolitan newspaper. One thousand words of my misery.

And the result—a public king hit!

The sins of our feminist mothers

If success means a career and no children, women have been duped, writes Virginia Haussegger.

A few years ago, in my mid-thirties, had I heard Malcolm Turnbull pontificate about the need to encourage Australians to marry younger and have more children ('The crisis is fertility, not ageing'), I would have thumped him, kned him in the groin, and bawled him out.

How dare he—a rich father of two, with a perfect wife and perfect life—presume for a moment to tell women, thriving at the peak of our careers, that we should stop, marry and procreate. The sheer audacity of it.

Yet another male conspiracy, a conservative attempt to dump women out of the workplace and back into the home. A neat male arrangement: a good woman to run the household, and a workplace less cluttered with female competition.

A win-win for patriarchy. And precisely the kind of society I was schooled against.

As we worked our way through high school and university in the '70s and early '80s, girls like me listened to our mothers, our trailblazing feminist teachers, and the outspoken women who demanded a better deal for all women. They paved the way for us to have rich careers.

They anointed us and encouraged us to take it all. We had the right to be editors, paediatricians, engineers, premiers, executive producers, High Court judges, CEOs etc. We were brought up to believe that the world was ours. We could be and do whatever we pleased.

Feminism's hard-fought battles had borne fruit. And it was ours for the taking.

Or so we thought—until the lie of super 'you-can-have-it-all' feminism hits home, in a very personal and emotional way.

We are the ones, now in our late thirties and early forties, who are suddenly sitting before a sheepish doctor listening to the words, 'Well, I'm sorry, but you may have left your run too late. Women at your age find it very difficult to get pregnant naturally, and unfortunately the success rate of IVF for a 39-year-old is around one in five—and dropping. In another twelve months you'll only have a six per cent chance of having a baby. So given all the effort and expense, do you really want to go through with this? Why don't you go home and think it through? But don't leave it too long—your clock is ticking.' Then he adds for comic value, 'And don't forget, the battery is running low!'

For those of us who listened to our feminist foremothers' encouragement; waved the purple scarves at their rallies; read about and applauded the likes of Anne Summers, Kate Jennings, Wendy McCarthy, Jocelyn Scutt, Morag Fraser, Joan Kirner, Elizabeth Proust etc. (all strong examples of successful working women); for those of us who took all that on board and forged ahead, crashed through barriers and carved out good, successful and even some brilliant careers; we're now left—many of us at least—as premature 'empty careers; we're now left—many of us at least—as premature 'empty nesters'.

We're alone, childless, many of us partnerless, or drifting along in 'permanent temporariness', as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman so aptly put it in a recent *Age* article by Anne Manne to describe the somewhat ambiguous, uncommitted type of relationship that seems to dominate among childless, professional couples in their thirties and forties.

The point is that while encouraging women in the '70s and '80s to reach for the sky, none of our purple-clad, feminist mothers thought to tell us the truth about the biological clock. Our biological clock. The one that would eventually reach exploding point inside us.

Maybe they didn't think to tell us, because they never heard the clock's screaming chime. They were all married and knocked-up by their mid-twenties. They so desperately didn't want the same for us.

And none of our mothers thought to warn us that we would need to stop, take time out and learn to nurture our partnerships and relationships. Or if they did, we were running too fast to hear it.

For those of us who did marry, marriage was perhaps akin to an accessory. And in our high-disposable-income lives, accessories pass their use-by date, and are thoughtlessly tossed aside. Frankly, the dominant message was to not let our man, or any man for that matter, get in the way of career and our own personal progress.

The end result: here we are, supposedly 'having it all' as we edge forty; excellent education; good qualifications; great jobs; fast-moving careers; good incomes; and many of us own the trendy little inner-city pad we live in. It's a nice caffelatte kind of life, really.

But the truth is—for me at least—the career is no longer a challenge, the lifestyle trappings are joyless (the latest Collette Dinnigan frock looks pretty silly on a near-forty year old), and the point of it all frock looks pretty silly on a near-forty year old), and the point of it all seems, well, pointless.

I am childless and I am angry. Angry that I was so foolish to take the word of my feminist mothers as gospel. Angry that I was daft enough to believe female fulfilment came with a leather briefcase.

It was wrong. It was crap. And Malcolm Turnbull has a point. God forbid!

(Virginia Haussegger is an ABC TV news presenter in the ACT. She has been a television journalist for fifteen years, hosting the 7.30 Report in various states and reporting for Channel 7's Witness and Channel 9's A Current Affair.)

The Age, 23 July 2002

Now cop it sweet!

Picture this: you're sitting propped up in bed on a glorious sunny Saturday morning with a few favourite luxuries—coffee, croissant and the weekend newspapers—spread out around you. A lazy day is stretched out in front of you. Perfect. So far.

You flip open Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper and there you are. In dramatic black and white, a rather large photo of yourself, looking pathetically sad and lonely. And the headline screams, '*Meet Virginia, the woman many love to loathe*'.

Funny, huh? Well I thought so the moment this happened to me. Frankly, it *was* funny. The woman in the photo looked ridiculously miserable. It was a sort of studied *faux* misery, like she had just pulled her best 'poor me' face on cue as the cameraman

said 'cheese'. And this woman—surely it couldn't be me—sat at the bottom of a tall staircase in an empty television studio; her back leaning against the wall, head staring down the barrel of the camera, a heavy slash of light creating a chiaroscuro effect with

ominous shadows lurking behind her. All that, coupled with the killer headline—well, it just made me laugh.

Then the phone rang. It was my Dad.

‘Darling, don’t you take any notice of that nonsense. Those people don’t know what they’re talking about. I can’t believe they’d print such rubbish.’

Dad did what he always does when the situation is too confronting; he handed the phone to Mum.

‘Virginia, I wish you’d stop writing these things.’

‘Mum, I didn’t write it. Someone has written it about me.’

‘But if you would just stop writing . . .’

‘Mum, *I* didn’t write it. The *journalist* wrote it, after she spoke to me.’

‘Well darling, I wish you’d stop talking to people.’

Shut that girl up!

What began as an angry article, written in haste, and dashed off—unsolicited—to the opinion page of *The Age* newspaper, had unleashed a Pandora’s box of emotion. Suddenly, my childless state and the choices I’d made in my life were the subject of talkback radio, letters to the editors, daily newspaper commentary, nasty columns in national magazines and, from what I’m told, heated office and classroom debates. People who didn’t know me at all were suddenly instant experts on my life, my views and, importantly, my mistakes. Everyone who wrote, spoke or bellowed, took issue with some aspect of what I had said. Many took issue with what I *hadn’t* said. And many more simply made up what they *thought* I had said. Several commentators who engaged in lengthy critiques of my position purported to *know* me well. They didn’t.

My right to feel miserable was howled down. How dare I? I had a great job on television, supposedly a glamorous life and rich trappings. How dare I bemoan my lack of family. What’s more, how dare I suggest that my feminist foremothers wrongly encouraged women of my generation to focus on career at the expense of child-bearing.

‘Shame on you Virginia’, screeched one of the first of several dozen emails I received over the next few days—the start of a steady stream that would continue over the following weeks and months. ‘I am incensed by your article’, railed another. Women—and the critics were all women—were furious at a blatant display of free speech and were quick to exercise theirs. By the week’s end my email ‘inbox’ was clogged:

How dare you blame any woman for your anger at being childless . . . What a perverse perspective, and how very petulant of you. I would expect as much from my fifteen year old.

I feel dreadfully sorry for your mother and I am so pleased that you are not my daughter!

Stop acting like a spoiled, immature brat and start aiming your darts where they belong . . . Show a bit of backbone and own responsibility for the consequences of your choices.

I was frequently reminded of my 'responsibilities', both as a woman, and as a journalist, to acknowledge my 'errors of judgment'; accept the choices I'd made, and shut up about the consequences: Every step of the way YOU have made choices in YOUR journey in life . . . You chose not to take [the motherhood] path, no one else did it for you . . . I detect a bit of selfishness in your regretful words.

For several weeks after publication of 'The sins of our feminist mothers' (a racy headline which, by the way, was not written by me) I was hounded daily by a hungry media clearly looking for a feminist catfight. I was determined not to give them one. Eventually they got it anyway.

Frustrated women harbouring anger, sorrow, fury, impatience and occasionally pity, had suddenly found their voice. A stream of opinion let fly. Initially much of the anger was aimed at me, as I was interpreted by some women to be laying full blame for my busted biological clock and my barren state on my 'feminist foremothers'. 'No bub? It's not our fault' (*Herald Sun*) was one of the nastier headlines that shot back. But perhaps what shocked and disappointed me most was how quickly the 'kill the messenger' mantra went into overdrive.

I have not reached for my box of tissues while reading the bleating of some high-profile childless woman blaming her elders, her horoscope, the zeitgeist, anything, anyone but herself for the empty cradle in the middle of her wretched empty life.

Dorothy Porter, *HQ* magazine, Oct/Nov 2002

I have three responses to Virginia Haussegger: 1. Stop bleating. 2. Acknowledge you've been lucky enough to have choices, and have been free to make them. 3. Get some psychotherapy to work on your inner life.

Letter to the Editor, *The Age*, 24 July 2004

Apparently my life wasn't just 'wretched', it was brainlessly ignorant too. On the thorny issue of the biological clock, I was quickly reminded 'that concept didn't suddenly just drop out of the sky in 2002' (Letter to the Editor, *The Age*, 25 July). One woman wrote and told me she'd learnt all about her ticking clock in high school: 'Yes, I knew that at seventeen. Where the hell were you?' Well as a matter of fact, I was busy pashing boys, slugging tequila and dragging on Marlboro reds. I certainly wasn't thinking about my biological clock, or hearing any messages about its use-by date.

It wasn't all bleak and vitriolic. Some of the private calls, letters and emails I received were overwhelming in their compassion. Embarrassed, I didn't know what to make of these kind and loving words from strangers. Some people, both men and women, took the time to write reams of personal anecdotes and stories that were touching in their shared intimacy. A few even confessed details of their own journeys never before shared with anyone. 'I don't know why I'm telling you this', one faceless young woman said down the phone line to me, both of us sniffing away as she poured out her battle with infertility.

I guess it's the comfort of strangers who can share a sorrow.

In the public arena the loud and demanding voices of anger and frustration, which I hoped would just fade away, were getting louder. This wasn't about me. And I knew it. So for some time I kept quiet and went about the private business of getting on with my public job as a news presenter. But those voices didn't go away. When yet *another* pile of mail was dumped on my desk, many weeks later, it became starkly apparent that something was going on. And women desperately wanted to talk about it.

I set about trying to reply to all the people who had written to me. Months later I wrote a couple more articles, sending them to the *Sydney Morning Herald* as well as *The Age*. This time I turned my attention to a wider field of inquiry: modern-day relationships, lack of commitment, the dirty secrets of working mothers, the family unfriendliness of our workplaces and the questionable success rate of feminism in Australia. They were all given a guernsey. Then the so-called 'media catfight' turned up a notch.

Had I really, as one columnist put it, 'driven a red-hot stake through the heart of the sisterhood'? It would seem I had. And just in case I hadn't noticed, some male acquaintances, obviously energised by the whiff of a feminist fight, were quick to remind me. As I sat down to a business lunch one brilliant autumn day in Canberra, one of my companions leaned over and said, 'I've been reading your columns and boy you've set the cat among the pigeons!'

'Or,' his mate chipped in, 'the cat among the cats!'

Ho, ho, ho! Boy that was a blast. There were belly laughs aplenty.

While it was the fury in women's voices that reverberated loudest in the public domain, I knew that something much more important had been unleashed. By now the words, 'this isn't about me', had become my daily mantra. Once my 'wretched' life was dissected and chewed over, something much more interesting emerged. It was as if a little finger had wriggled out of the dyke, and the trickle had given way to a furious and gushing stream of women's pain. Suddenly every woman I came across wanted to talk. They wanted to share *their* story, and vent *their* spleen. It was as if my name had become synonymous with

their spleen. It was as if my name had become synonymous with lifting the lid on a modern-day Australian version of Betty Friedan's 'problem with no name'. And in all of this, some very private and personal frustration found a voice:

It feels blasphemous to think this, let alone write it for publication, but here goes:

Some days I wish I'd never had children . . . some days motherhood feels more like

grief and anger than fulfilment . . . I love my three boys overwhelmingly . . . (but) the frustration is intense. I can barely think clearly to write . . . I have had to abandon my PhD as an impossibility. The only play I've seen in years stars Bob the Builder.

Lucy Hamilton, Opinion Page, *The Age*, 25 July 2002

When I became a mother, aged 35, I too felt I had been duped. Suddenly and dramatically, I was no longer independent; worse, I was not equal. Not just angry. I was furious. Instead of waves of contentment and joy, I was experiencing waves of boredom, frustration and loneliness. I was delirious with exhaustion and felt on the edge of madness most of the time. Motherhood impoverished me, both financially and socially. My life seemed reduced to endless rounds of menial chores, and the isolation was terrifying. The reward? Well, my baby was happy. But I was miserable and angry.

Zelda Grimshaw, Opinion Page, *The Age*, 1 August 2002

You can swap with me, Virginia. I'm only too happy to admit I thought babies were enchanting; I was silly enough to have three . . . I feel unappreciated and devalued . . . I would have been slimmer and richer with a good job and superannuation (and all that great stuff you've got, Virginia) if I hadn't had children . . . To have kids in your mid-twenties is akin to children . . . To have kids in your mid-twenties is akin to financial and career suicide. I'm angry too Virginia.

Letter to the Editor, *The Age*, 25 July 2002

Virginia is rightly angry with the feminist mothers . . . But, by way of consolation, those who refused the feminist gospel have not had an easy time of it either. To put relationships with husband and children ahead of a career has been regarded as heresy. Women who made this choice with the cooperation and support of their partners have been subjected to a virtually endless torrent of scorn and derision. They have been told that they are 'letting down the side' . . . that they are a burden on society, that they do 'nothing', or that their work as mothers is worse than useless.

Jennifer Sinclair, Opinion Page, *The Age*, 25 July 2002

I'm 42 and have four kids. As I was growing up I found girls were often presented with a polarised view of available choices: either you can be an articulate, suited Jenna Jetset, who isn't weighed down by kids . . . or you can be Darlene Dagface, the overweight, soapie-watching, floral-dressed vegetable brain, who stays home with her kids, has a vocab of wee wee and poo poo and uses herself to mop the floor.

Email, 16 October 2000

While for some mothers the choice open to them felt as miserable as a dirty, old kitchen mop, for others, the flipside—childlessness—was even worse. No mystique here, just mistake.

I too feel that I was sucked into thinking that life—long partnership and procreation wasn't as important as defining who I was as a career woman. What a crock!

Email, 29 July 2002

That sense of being sold ‘a crock’ was a common theme among the outpourings. What fascinated me about many of these letters, emails and commentaries was that it seemed no matter where a woman stood, be she mother, mother-to-be or non-mother, something was wrong. It was as if a scabby old scar had been ripped off a festering wound. Now that the murky mess was exposed, we were all going to hear about it.

And, thankfully, once women are emboldened, we won’t be silenced.

While a number of young women contacted me, perhaps the saddest message came from a 19-year-old Queensland university student who wrote: ‘I always saw women’s lib as *choice* so why do I feel like I don’t have one?’ She went on to say that at the private girls’ school she attended she was ‘indoctrinated’ with the ‘late-millennium mantra of “career”’. Then she revealed her ‘disgust’ at seeing women drop children off at child care early in the morning, not to see them until they pick them up some eight hours later. Somewhere in all this, even before this teenager has reached twenty, she is lamenting a perceived contradiction in the choices open to her. She ended her letter with, ‘Feminism needs reform, too many women feel cheated by the promises’.

It was a sign-off that left me feeling flat and frustrated; then pretty quickly, just downright furious. What is going on here, when even young women—barely out of their teens—view their choices as bleak when they look at women five or ten years older than them and cringe, thinking, ‘I don’t ever want to live like that’? How have we got it so wrong that some young women, or indeed any women, think they have been ‘cheated’ by the promises of feminism?

It’s high time to *re-think* feminism’s messages and the ‘have it all’ mantra that’s been thumped into the brains and parlance of post-feminist women. I’ve long believed this. Clearly, I’m far from alone. A number of women who responded to my outpourings revealed they not only shared the belief that we need to review, re-think and, perhaps, re-group, but they’ve been stewing on it for some time:

I have long tried to argue that as feminists we need to be honest about the issues feminism might have got wrong, even if it was unintended. While there were plenty of feminists who championed motherhood in the 1970s and 1980s, those who championed career (and often disregarded motherhood) certainly had the loudest voices.

Email, 16 Aug 2002

It’s been my pet theory for some time now that our generation of women (35–45) are the ripped-off generation . . . We are part of a massive social experiment that’s worked for some and not for others. Heaven forbid we go back to the bad old days when we had such limited choices—but if we’re to make life better for the women (and the men) coming after us we have to be honest about the pain as well as the gain.

Email, 25 July 2002

I feel so strongly that we need a new way to look at life—a new feminism if you like that doesn't force us to buy into the whole male 'I am defined by my career' mentality.

Email, 23 July 2002

The freedom was an illusion . . . Certainly, the feminist movement opened up alternative choices to traditional women's roles, and as such it has been successful, but its intolerance to views other than its own has brought about some darker consequences.

Letter to the Editor, *The Age*, 26 July 2002

It seems weird that a lifelong feminist such as myself should be so strongly arguing for the joys of motherhood, when I was brought up to believe that children were the tools of women's oppression!

Email, 21 August 2002

There was no cultural space available for questioning whether the pleasures of a career could be adequately compared with those of raising children. Nor was there space to question whether career and material success were actually sufficient to sustain a meaningful life. Women who stood against the feminist 'one suit fits all' model have been beleaguered and belittled . . . Feminism's heart was in the right place . . . Feminism saved women from the 'biology as destiny' argument . . . But we still have more thinking to do . . .

Jennifer Sinclair, Opinion Page, *The Age*, 25 July 2002

There is no question that we have plenty of 'more thinking to do'. Thinking, questioning, debating and acting—the need is urgent. Nevertheless, some women with whom I've discussed this at length, and others who have written about it, believe the argument about feminism is misplaced. For them, the issue is broader, as Erina Reddan explained in her article, 'No Virginia, feminism is not to blame for your pain':

Where we have got it wrong is in thinking we can have it all—both the high-powered and sustaining public life as well as the intimacy and depth of a well-nurtured family life. But the misconception is not feminism's fault; feminism never said it was possible to pack all of that into the one moment . . . What is marked about our generation is that it is much harder to make long-term commitments to love and respect one another enough in order to make it possible to have children together . . . The explanation is a much bigger social shift . . . Yet too many women are now blaming themselves, and looking for answers in the wrong places.

The Age, 30 July 2002

On the subject of blame, commentator Virginia Trioli agrees that women of our generation have swallowed a bitter pill—but that we should all shut up and suffer in

silence. In her article addressed to ‘Childless and Angry’ (*Bulletin*, 6 August 2002) she suggests the complaint should not be with feminism, but rather the ‘assumption—the one we made for ourselves—that the best part of our lives would be our careers’. She goes on to suggest that ‘*that* was the delusion’. But whether it was a private delusion we created for ourselves, or one imbued by our social conditioning and education, Trioli fails to explore. Nevertheless, her conclusion—although useless—is quaint: ‘Some of us are now seriously considering staying home and growing roses or working on a croc farm. And our biggest fantasy is being a kept woman.’ Nice, maybe, but being a ‘kept woman’ isn’t an answer. If anything, such a fantasy feeds a backlash. Many of those who spoke up, did so with two key purposes: the hope of being heard, and to add their voice to a call for change.

Women will not move further until they join forces with all women and men to fight in a ‘humanist’ revolution that meets *all* our needs. Interested in starting such a revolution?

Letter, 24 April 2003

In a way, our generation forms a mass social experiment . . . One of the few benefits to come out of all this pain will be if we can join together to re-infuse parenting with its value. We need to design models for mothering that enable most women to do it with the least pain and anger.

Lucy Hamilton, Opinion Page, *The Age*, 25 July 2002

It’s the lack of those so-called ‘models’, or support structures, that would appear to be failing women. Structures that even our feminist foremothers would have to concede have never been put in place: leaving young women to race forward hopeful of achieving career success, lasting partnership and motherhood, with no idea, no plan, no pathway, map or guide as to how to make it all happen, and how to make it work. Yet it came as no surprise to me that Morag Frazer, one of the most gracious and heroic of all the feminist trailblazers I know, was quick to concede this in her article, ‘Yes, Virginia, there is a way to have a career and kids’:

We have still not worked out the balance and distribution of labour between men and women, even in prosperous egalitarian Australia. We have still not made space in our daily lives for children, and for what makes life rich (Virginia is right—a briefcase and the Collette Dinnigan frock just don’t rate).

We have still not established structures that enable women and men to be fully themselves, to contribute their knowledge and skill to their communities and still find fulfilment and happiness, whether as partners, parents, or as single men and women. Worse, we have dismantled some of the structures that made fulfilled equality halfway

possible 20 years ago . . . Feminism has always had to be opportunistic, but opportunism does not found structures.

Sunday Age, 18 August 2002

How to build those structures and why we don't already have them in place, remain the illusive, slippery, awkward questions. Morag is typically sharp in her conclusion:

Have it all? Male or female, none of us can. It's the wrong ambition. 'Have' is the wrong verb. The 'must have' imperative makes us all miserable, eventually.

If 'misery' is the measure, obviously too many of us have been chanting the 'must have' mantra. While the disturbing noise of frustration, disappointment, even anger is perhaps what's come through loudest in many of these outpourings, there is also a dose of sisterhood solidarity. So much so, that I couldn't help but laugh when writers such as Clare Boyd-Macrae, (Opinion Page, *The Age*, 2 August 2002), boxed the field! 'I feel equally for the bitter career women, the bitter mothers, and those in between'. While plenty of people have had plenty to say, in public, about the issues surrounding my childlessness, no-one has addressed childlessness itself. No-one has laid a hand on the grief. No-one has asked how this might feel. All of which caused a female PhD student who interviewed me, after studying the media fallout, to ask 'Don't you think they all missed the point?'

Expressing this sadness and inherent frustration, is not about a search for sympathy. I find that both embarrassing and disempowering. Nor is it about being a victim. That horrifies me. Despite an overexcited male shock-jock yelling to his audience that 'Virginia is a victim of Nazi feminism!', I have never felt a victim of anything, least of all feminism. I'm clearly a beneficiary of that. Nevertheless, it strikes me as odd that the actual thing at the very heart of my pain—the reason I wrote out loud in the first place—sort of slipped under the radar.

However, there *were* a few private exceptions. One of those came by way of a carefully hand-written letter from a man who had himself made a personal discovery that caused him to deeply question his career, and his purpose. It was one of the most beautiful letters I have ever received.

I just wanted to say how much I appreciated the piece you wrote and how I heard what you were saying—I heard some of the pain and I thought it would be dreadful to write such a thing and not at least have that acknowledged.

These are painful discoveries.

A short while after reading these words of enormous compassion, I read the words of another man whose long letter filled me with sadness. The writer was a single father with three kids, aged between ten and sixteen. He spoke of his confusion over the role of

women, and the value of being 'just a mother'. His question was quite simple: 'My dilemma is what do I teach my children?'

How could I respond to that: Tell your daughter it's *'her choice'*?

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