

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 loungeroom 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.

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