Mother Inferior

Why dolls are all you'll find under her cabbage patch

September 1, 1999 By River Huston

I just turned 39. *Tick tick tick*. What's that? Either the suspicious-looking guy who helped me with my luggage at the airport has planted an ill-timed surprise, or my biological clock is going haywire. Happy birthday to me.

Over the past eight years I've given countless AIDS lectures, and in those meetings of the minds two questions are repeatedly, inevitably, asked of me and my fellow *femme* speakers: "Do you have children?" and "Did you want to have children?" I always answer, "No, I don't have children," and "Yes, I did want to have children."

Liar, liar.

The reality is, I don't want to be a mom. But I never admit that to an audience. In our culture it is often assumed that any woman who is childless by choice is a serial-killing, Satan-worshipping bitch—certainly not someone you would want to bring home to your *own* mother.

But I've been given the perfect excuse for being kid-free: HIV. For years this stopped the curious in their tracks. And then, when AZT was found to radically lower the risk of mom-to-child transmission, I found another excuse—my blood-clotting disorder, acute ITP (immune thrombocytopenic purpura). If I had a child, I'd explain, I would likely sacrifice my life and, AZT or not, the risk of transmission is still very high for us bleeders. So, no little babies for me.

Is this nature's plan? Am I so selfish, self-involved and generally unfit for motherhood that evolution has made me not miss toting around a tot?

Maybe it's cynical to suspect that parents are made to sign some kind of secret contract demanding that they swear child-rearing is the most important thing they've done with their lives. Funny, they never seem to look me in the eye when they say it.

To be honest, once upon a time I did want a child very badly. And I almost had one. I was 19, married and pregnant. But my then-husband nearly hog-tied me and dragged me to the abortion clinic.

That baby would be 20 now. I sometimes think of all the trouble I would have put the kid through: my depression, the troupe of horrendous boyfriends, my diagnosis with HIV, my nomadic, impoverished life. And that's *after* I got sober! Forget about life before 1985. My child would most likely be in jail (for matricide, no doubt) or a lost soul. Face it, as a mother, my amends list would be longer than *War and Peace*.

I recently saw a bumper sticker that read, "Aren't you glad your mother was pro-life?" I had to laugh because if safe and legal abortions were available when my mother was pregnant with me, I almost surely would never have happened. When I was in college trying to figure out my career path, I told my mother that I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher, and she told me, "That makes sense—you were always good with children. But you know me, I can't stand little kids!" Believe me, Mom, I could tell.

She was right about one thing: I *do* love children. They have a worldview that I respect. They make me laugh, and when in my company, they too seem to have a good time. I'm happy to help them in whatever small way I can along the rocky road of life and maybe give advice in a seen-it-all-but-life-is-still-a-banquet Auntie River way. I can love them in the moment, but I truly have no desire to procreate.

It's not the idea of being pregnant that I mind. It is amazing that when you're pregnant people so admire your balloon belly that they come up and ask if they can touch it. I wish I could get that much praise for my fat ass. I even like the prospect of the birthing process. One of my girlfriends went through it and had an epidural plus whatever drugs they'd give her. The mom-to-be was so stoned that she asked the doctor if he had brought a date with him.

No, the reason I don't want to give birth is that even though my home life was less than sterling, I came to the party with things to work out—and I'm working as fast as I can. I'd be a bad TV movie parent with whom some other suffering soul would be compelled to create karmic friction. So, I'll enjoy the time I spend with my friends' kids—and, above all, my dog, Buddy—but at the end of the day I want to go home to myself. And that, as we say, is my choice.

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