The Baby Blues

With an aging biological clock working her last nerve, Emily Carter realizes that the only surprise Ms. Stork is delivering is the present-and that's a gift enough.

January 1, 2001 By Emily Carter

There's no escaping the fact of children. They're everywhere. Mystical imps stare out from the TV screen uttering impenetrable koans in the service of digital networks, seeming to herald a new world order. Moonface tykes bounce happily up and down in the back of sports utility vehicles on their way to soccer games and ballet practice. Curly-locked prepubescents pitch everything from Juicy-Juice to Merrill Lynch -- and that's just during the commercial break. Let's not even get into the entire industries devoted to the well-being of the affluent American toddler: magazines, websites, books on parenting, toy catalogs, learning aids -- the list seems endless. The catalyst for all this copy seems to be the bedrock idea that kiddies are not just small human beings whom we must care for and comfort. They are the Ultimate Accessory

Thank God for TV! Given my confusion about my own feelings about children -- I want and can't have them -- watching all that nonsense lets me tell myself that my longing for a child is no different from my longing for that pair of Via Spiga square-toed boots I can't afford, either.

Of course, the odds of me mothering get smaller with each passing day. I'm nearing 40, I have AIDS, and my fallopian tubes are scarred (one is severed from an ectopic pregnancy in my mid-20s). None of this is insurmountable; it would take only an all-consuming focus and determination to rectify. Yet the fact is, I made certain choices in my youth, and while they may not have been well informed (I expected to die young and beautiful at 29, leaving behind a huge body of heartbreaking poems, and gave no thought to how living to 40 might feel), they had consequences. One is, I don't have the money to raise a child the way I was raised -- with two working parents, a good education and a sense of safety and love.

Another is that crazy little thing called HIV and its fatigue, anxiety and other attendant issues. Having a kid to cook for, clean up after and worry about would put me over the edge. I don't ever want to have to look up at my kid and say, "Sorry, Mommy can't get off the couch." The sheer number of pills I would have to Keep Out of Reach of Children is mind-boggling.

So I may not know much about Pokemon, PlayStation or pee-wee soccer leagues, but I do know this: The bond between parent and child is intense, tender and profound, and the media version may be an abominable trivialization -- but I'm glad it's there. It's easier to reject than the real

thing.

Sometimes I baby-sit for friends. I get along OK with the kids: We play games, bake cookies, maybe I read to them. Just as I'm thinking the tot really likes me, the parents return. Her face is suddenly ablaze with fierce joy, and she makes an instinctive beeline toward them, chirping madly about what she did when they were gone. Her parents kneel down and pick her up, not caring that her nose is snot-encrusted and her teeth begrimed with garlands of raw cookie dough. They all start talking in a private language. I feel, suddenly, a loneliness whose depth is hard to put into words. Gaping hole, yawning abyss...call it regret.

I do my best to fill that hole with love, with friendships that can be as intense as the parent-child tie. but it's hard -- most of my friends, with whom I once formed an ad-hoc family, now have families of their own. When I do find other childless souls, our connections are deep. We've got one another's backs, as they say. We are free to call at any hour, talk for as long as we wish about whatever we want, and care for one another with the kind of vigor a parent rightly reserves for the kids. Besides, most moms and dads are too tired and frazzled at the end of the day to communicate from their world to mine. Their dinner conversation tends toward "Zenobia got a splinter today in her pinky toe, and the school nurse told me she was very brave!"

At certain times, however, I am still struck helpless with longing. Seeing my neighbor carry his kids out of the car -- the little one flung over a shoulder like a sack of potatoes, face flushed with sleep, and the older girl looking up at him as if he were the earth and sky around her -- I often run into the house and holler at my partner: "Get me a baby!" We laugh, acknowledging at once the reality of the desire and the impracticality of its manifestation on the physical plane.

It's a sadness, certainly. But it's only that. I completely reject the notion that a woman's life is not valid without children or that a woman with HIV shouldn't become a mother. For me, however, and for a lot of other HIVers, the present is sufficient in and of itself. The connection with the future that children offer doesn't concern me. I'm into the now with every fiber of my being, and, for today, today is abundantly enough. Even if it doesn't include any cherubs bouncing up and down in the back of my Range Rover.

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