The no-baby boom

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Catherine-Emmanuelle Delisle does not seem, at first glance, like a social firebrand. The 37-year-old schoolteacher in Saint-Bruno, a Montreal suburb, is a thoughtful, sensitive woman who exudes gamine charm. She enjoys jewellery making, design and cinema—and she really loves children, enough to devote her life to teaching drama and French in primary school. But Delisle knew as a teenager she couldn't have kids, a fact she was in denial about for years, she says. Grappling with never giving birth was painful, and required time to grieve. As she began to reframe her life as a childless woman, she observed a lack of role models or even discussion of the subject. "We are non-existent in the media, in cinema, in art, in magazines," she says. When childless women are depicted, it's characters like *Breaking Bad*'s Marie, who deals with the unhappiness of her domestic situation by going to open houses and making up elaborate stories about herself, many involving fictional children. And of course there's 45-year-old actress Jennifer Aniston, the mother of all non-mothers, whose uterus is a chronic subject of tabloid fretting. (Last week, *OK* continued the "sad, barren Jen" narrative: "Jen agrees to fertility treatment to have kids," it claimed.)

Delisle is hell-bent on reframing the way women like her are depicted. "We're seen as selfish, or treated as if our lives lack meaning or value," she says with a bemused laugh, knowing well it's imagery that can be insidiously absorbed by women themselves.

Delisle's blog, *FemmeSansEnfant.com*, launched in 2012, provides a counterpoint, a place for women to connect and support one another. Interviewees share stories on video: the journalist Pénélope McQuade explains she never felt the "visceral" need for children; singer Marie Denise Pelletier speaks of dreaming of being a singer, not a mother. "My goal is to get women without children, whether by choice or circumstance, known and valued," Delisle says.

The schoolteacher is part of a growing global movement that's giving voice to a misunderstood phenomenon whose repercussions are personal and societal. "We think there is a room called childlessness with two doors: 'didn't want' or 'can't have,' " says Jody Day, the writer and social entrepreneur behind *Gateway-Women.com*, a network based in London, England, for the "childless-by-circumstance" (dubbed "NoMos"). "But there are many ways to end up not being a mother."

That millions of women are discovering this is reflected in statistics: one out of five women in the U.K., Ireland, the U.S., Canada and Australia are reaching their mid-40s without having had children—twice as many as a generation ago. The 2010 U.S. census revealed 47.1 per cent of women of child-bearing age don't have children—up from 35 per cent in 1976.

To put those developments in historical context, Daly notes that the last time the childless rate was one in five, it was in a generation of so-called "surplus women" born at the turn of the 20th century. "The fact it took a war with unprecedented loss of life and global depression to cause such an increase in childlessness gives you some idea of the social change we're going through now," she says.

Yet discussion of childlessness remains mired in hand-wringing, pity and judgment—either concern over the consequences of a reduced tax base and diminishing social supports, as explored in Jonathan Last's *What to Expect When No One's Expecting: America's Coming Demographic Disaster*, or coverage of the militant "child-free" movement seen in books like Jen Kirkman's *I Can Barely Take Care of Myself: Tales from a Happy Life Without Kids*. Virtually ignored in the conversation is the impact of "social infertility"—Day's coinage for the growing number of women who don't have a partner or the right partner while they can have children. It's a big problem for women born in the '70s, says Day, who experienced social infertility herself: she married at 23 and tried to get pregnant in her late 20s; her 16-year marriage ended when she was 39 and considering IVF. "I couldn't find a suitable person to do IVF with," she says. "Now I know it was probably way too late by then anyway."

Social infertility is such a new concept that data is scarce. A 2013 study out of Australia's Deakin University published in the *Journal of Social Inclusion* reports there has been a "general failure to examine women's reasons for childlessness beyond [medical] infertility." It found that more than half of the surveyed women without children listed having never been in the "right" relationship, being in a relationship where the partner did not want to have children—what some bloggers call "infertility by marriage"—or never having wanted children as the reason.

The emerging topography of childlessness is also delineated in Melanie Notkin's new memoir, *Otherhood: Modern Women Finding a New Kind of Happiness*, an insightful, anecdotal account of the challenges facing professional Manhattan women who dream of finding the right partner and having children. (Think *Sex and the City* with IVF.) Notkin discusses the "dating Bermuda Triangle" faced by over-30 women and the fertility snatchers who end long-term relationships as a woman's reproductive life is ending.

The 44-year-old, Montreal-born, McGill-educated, New York City-based former marketing executive has made a career of focusing on childless women. In 2008, she launched the "multi-platform lifestyle brand" *SavvyAuntie.com* targeted at "PANKs" (her acronym for "professional aunt, no kids")—the 23 million childless American women who are invested both emotionally and financially in the children in their lives.
Savvy Auntie suggests gifts, details activities from making dough animals to "Skype dance-offs," and even confers the "Savvy Auntie Best Toy Award" on worthy merchandise. Childless women, invisible to marketers in the past, are now appearing on the radar, Notkin says. A 2012 Weber Shandwick/KRC survey of 2,000 women in U.S. and Canada, titled "The Power of the PANK," estimated total spending of $9 billion annually by PANKs on children in their lives, with an average of $387 per child. Thirty-four per cent were also contributing to a child's education—hence the emergence of the "aunt" demographic. A commercial for Huggies released this month depicts a loving aunt being flown to meet her sister's newborn on the diaper-maker's dime.

Notkin's focus may be on tapping a new market, but she also exposes something more profound underlying it. Most women start out expecting to have children, she says, citing a recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study that found 80 per cent of single women are childless, but that 81 per cent of *that* group said they hope or plan to have children. She rejects the "career woman" label used to describe childless women: "It implies we have chosen work over love, marriage, children. I know no woman who has done that." Social infertility—or "circumstantial infertility" to use

Notkin's term—forces women to recalibrate expectations in ways not discussed publicly, she says: "At 25, a woman expects to have children, at 35 she hopes to, and at 45 she says she's happy she doesn't."

Women don't broadcast wanting a child for fear of being lectured that they shouldn't wait, Notkin says. But they're well aware of the tick-tock, she says: "Every 28 days offers a reminder." The upshot is that women are being forced to make a tactical decision in their 30s: resort to solo motherhood, partner with someone simply to procreate, freeze their eggs or rely on IVF. All are "choices" that are not fully choices. How many women have the resources to keep working while paying child care on a single salary—or to not work at all? How many can afford to freeze their eggs, and then pay for IVF too? Advances in fertility technology have created false perceptions, says Notkin, who writes that people talk about freezing eggs as if it's picking up a carton of milk. "The assumption is that if you wanted a kid, you would have a kid and go it alone. But that's not viable for a lot of women." People see Halle Berry giving birth at 47 and think it's the new norm, she notes. IVF is misrepresented in the media, says Day. "All we hear is miracle stories, not that it usually doesn't work over age 40."

The fact that discussion about childlessness is framed in terms of personal choice, failure and medical infertility shuts down conversation, says Day. So do the cultural narratives of motherhood and womanhood, a spectacle Notkin calls "mom-opia"—"seeing motherhood as the only normal, natural way to be a woman." It's a fixation reflected in manic coverage of celebrity "baby bumps" and loss of pregnancy weight—as well as photos of stars with their kids. We see it too in Michelle Obama's transformation from accomplished professional and activist to supermom, not only to her own kids, but to the nation—overseeing how it eats and encouraging it to exercise.

Women outside the maternal matrix are suspect—former Australian PM Julia Gillard was termed "deliberately barren" and unfit for leadership by a political opponent. In 2012, Wildrose Party Leader Danielle Smith's childlessness was questioned on Twitter by a PC staffer, who later resigned. Actress Helen Mirren's declaration that she has"no maternal instinct" was viewed as a salvo in an unnamed war. "Childless women represent a threat to the status quo," says Day. "We're seen as a destabilizing influence. If one does well in her career—and doesn't have children—she can do as well as a man." Against this grain, women don't speak up for fear of sounding shrill or pathetic or desperate or being defined by one aspect of their lives—disappointment in not having children.

But that is changing, particularly over the past year, as childless women are increasingly vocal, says Lisa Manterfield, the Los Angeles-based author of *I'm Taking My Eggs and Going Home: How One Woman Dared to Say No to Motherhood*, her 2011 memoir that chronicles how she was 34 by the time she met the man she wanted to raise a family with, then wrestled with infertility before coming to the difficult decision that motherhood wasn't in her future. When Manterfield launched *LifeWithoutBaby.com* four years ago, she says, there were only a few voices—Pamela Tsigdinos at *SilentSorority.com* and Tracey Cleantis at *LaBeletteRouge.com*—telling their personal stories to a small audience. Now more women are willing to talk about a loss others can't see, she says, one that forced her to confront how much of female identity is tied to motherhood. "The loss isn't tangible, so most women feel alone, their grief compounded by the attitude that they 'should be over it,' " she says. Adding to the isolation is the feeling of being "locked out of the Mommy Clubhouse," as one blogger put it on *LifeWithoutBaby.com*. "Women without children not only lose a future family," says Day, "but can lose their peer group who have moved to a country called motherhood where we don't speak the language."

The fact that the archetype of the most pitied and shamed woman has, in one generation, gone from single mother to single woman over 40 without children reflects fundamental societal shifts, says Day, who thinks it's not a coincidence that the "fetishization of motherhood"—from pregnancy studio shots to the ideal birth (at home! in water! without meds!)—comes at a time of rising childlessness. "There's so much cultural anxiety around what it means; there's reflexive nostalgia for a simpler time: women at home and gender roles more clearly defined." This isn't only societal pressure; some of it comes from women recognizing the increasing precariousness of motherhood. Day likens it to propaganda used to lure women home from the workforce after the Second World War. It can be seductive, she says. "It seems such a solid identity, being a mother; being childless is fluid, nebulous: 'What are you?' "

Rising childlessness is often blamed on feminism selling women a "bill of goods" about "having it all." But Betty Friedan's 1963 manifesto *The Feminine Mystique* presumed that women would continue to marry and have children. "The

assumption of your own identity, equality and even political power does not mean you stop needing to love, and be loved by, a man, or that you stop caring for your kids," she wrote.

What no one could have predicted is that women born in the '60s and '70s would become what Day terms the "shock absorber" cohort, living through the most extraordinary changes in dating and mating in one generation. That's the result of a confluence of forces—the pill, women's access to higher education and professions—running headlong into a rigid corporate model that remains based on the husband-provider, male-fertility model—working hard in your 20s and 30s to establish a reputation, leaving kids to the stay-at-home wife. "But that doesn't work for women," says Day. "If you make it work, it's as much luck as good judgment."

Today's "surplus women" are not war widows but young professional women for whom there aren't enough suitable male partners—a phenomenon referred to in China derisively as "A1 women and D4 men." Yet the blame invariably falls on them for being "too choosy," a motif of the booming advice-to-female-professionals book genre, the latest being Susan Patton's new *Marry Smart: Advice for Finding THE ONE*, in which the "Princeton Mom" advises women to snag their "MRS" in university as they'll never have access to such an elite dating pool again.

But the issue is more structural: we're transitioning from an old social model in which women are expected to "marry up" socially or economically that runs parallel to an emerging one examined in Lisa Mundy's *The Richer Sex: How the New Majority of Female Breadwinners is Transforming Sex, Love and Family.* Mundy concludes that if successful millennial women want to marry and have children, they'll have to marry down. That's happening globally, but slowly, Mundy told *Maclean's*. Many women she spoke to admitted lying about what they did when they met a man, either fearing the truth would be intimidating or wanting to seem more feminine, she says. Notkin, too, chronicles how modern dating rituals can have one foot in traditional rom-com expectations: women want chivalry as well as a socially enlightened man. They have no problem "leaning in" at work, per Sheryl Sandberg's instruction, she says. "We lean in every day; we're almost falling over." Yet when dating, they want to lean back and let men do some of the heavy lifting. Notkin always envisioned "motherhood as part of the romantic wholeness of marriage and family," she writes, and was unwilling to settle for less.

Reconciling a new reality with the Vaseline-lens myth is the central theme of the childless-by-circumstance movement. Navigating unchartered waters requires a "plan B," Day writes in her 2013 book *Rocking the Life Unexpected.* Childless women feel pressure to have a big compensatory life, she says. "It's as though if you're not a mother, you have to become Mother Teresa. But you don't need a big life on the outside, just on the inside." Notkin describes her situation this way: "While it's not the life I expected, it's the life I directed."

But childlessness is not only a personal issue to be grappled with, it's a social one requiring new models, says Day—the most pressing being caregiving in old age. "It isn't just about childlessness," says Day. "The ratio of people around to take care of aging persons is changing, and daughters are not necessarily available to give that care because they're working." She'd like to see an intergenerational dialogue between older women without children, mothers in her generation and their daughters. "We need to discuss not just what we did wrong but what we've learned, so it doesn't take them by surprise."

Looking around, there's no shortage of role models, including Aniston, who is finally voicing her frustration with the childless stigma. When the actress interviewed the feminist activist Gloria Steinem at the Maker's Conference in California in February, Aniston noted that for women in the public eye, "our value and worth is dependent on our marital status and/or if we've procreated." Steinem, who is also childless, shot back, "Well, I guess we're in deep s–t!" The audience laughed uproariously—with them, not at them.