

Mothering Come Lately

By Jane Springer



Louise Z. Francke, *Marie*, litho, 19" x 12.5"

When I was thirty-two, I interviewed a prominent Toronto doctor on the subject of “older” mothers. I was shocked then by this progressive feminist’s pessimism about how women over thirty managed childbirth in comparison to their younger sisters. In addition to the statistics that showed greater likelihood of abnormality in babies born to mothers over thirty-five, older women’s contractions were often weaker, and they generally experienced many more problems than younger women, she maintained. I questioned whether being physically fit would not counteract some of these problems. She said it was possible, but there were some things that were just programmed — there was a time clock factor that could not be affected by exercise or good health, she thought.

I was shocked, yet then ten years later, just three weeks short of my forty-second birthday, I gave birth to my first (and most likely my only) child, Carl.

I didn’t choose to be an older mother — like many other women of my generation, I suppose it just happened that way. There were simply so many things that seemed more important when I was younger — and in spite of the added risks for older women, having a child was something I could always do later.

I grew up with a brother four years older than I, so I had very little contact with babies when I was young. I remember as a little

girl being disdainful of my friends who played with dolls, though I did finally go through a phase of it myself when I was about seven or eight. (Perhaps I could have foreseen my own delayed mothering from this late attraction to dolls!)

When, as a teenager, I wanted to babysit to make extra pocket money, my mother responded strongly: “You don’t want to be sitting around for several hours doing nothing in someone else’s house. Go out and do something interesting, and I’ll give you the money.”

I appreciated her support, but I also wondered whether she wasn’t somehow against babies and children. She had managed to have two children and become successful in her profession as a pharmacist — but did she regret the constraints that having us had on her mobility? During those unhappy periods in the late teens and early twenties when you think you’ve been wronged by your mother, I couldn’t help but wonder if she’d wished she’d never had me — otherwise why did she never want me to babysit?

That doubt disappeared, or at least changed as I got older — I realized that of course she had wanted my brother and me, but she had wanted a lot of other things too — and that it was a struggle to try and make them all compatible. Maybe she didn’t do it all exactly as she’d have liked; I don’t know. But I can tell that it was hard for her.

Once on a visit home when I was about thirty-four, my mother and I were doing the dishes and talking (how many important conversations have taken place while doing dishes!). I mentioned that someday I'd like to have a baby. My mother quickly hardened. "Oh, you'll never have one!" she snorted. "You're always jaunting around too much!" I was hurt by her violent response and burst into tears. There are few other moments in my life that I remember with such pain. But I could also see that I'd given her a lot to feel sad about: an early marriage and divorce, several two or three-year relationships and now this idea, with no potential father in sight.

About a year later, I experienced the same reaction from a woman friend who'd had her two children in her twenties and been left alone when they were still toddlers. We were on a women's canoe trip, sitting around the campfire after dinner, when I expressed the same desire. I don't remember her exact words, but they were similar to my mother's. My face fell and the five other women sat stunned. (Luckily for our friendship, we were counselled back into understanding by two of the other women.)

What I learned from these incidents was that my seeming carefreeness and my lack of interest in children in general made my desire to have a child seem naive, or at best surprising.

So, changing diapers and even holding a new baby were skills I thought I'd never have. Unlike most of my friends, I had never been pregnant. Therefore I'd been lucky enough never to have had to make a decision about whether to actually go through with an unplanned pregnancy or face the unhappy solution of an abortion. I even began to wonder if I were infertile, because though I was careful about birth control, so had been my friends who had become pregnant.

When it comes right down to it, I guess I only got around to seriously considering having a baby once I felt I'd stopped being a child myself. I realized that once I could stand to be alone, to miss a dinner, a party or a political talk, once I could accept not being able to do exactly what I wanted to do — then I could have a child. (I could add that once, as a thirty-five-plus woman, you realize that your breasts are going to droop and you're going to have a belly in

any case, you decide you may as well have a baby! But that would be cynical.)

By the time I was about thirty-six, I'd decided I could handle it, and was even beginning to trust my desire for a child. But it was clear I wasn't one of those strong women who was willing to step out boldly and do it on her own.

I began living with a wonderful man when I was almost thirty-eight, and a year later, began to talk with him about wanting a child. He was considerably younger than I and adamant: he was not ready and did not even want to discuss it. Our relationship continued successfully, in spite of this ongoing contention, but we finally found no choice but to separate three years later when we still could not agree. It was only after he'd gone back to work in Mozambique, where we'd met, leaving me in Toronto, that I found out I was pregnant.

When I phoned to tell him, I expected him to be warm, but still firm: "Gee, Jane, I'm sorry, but" Instead, he said, "Oh, I've missed you so much the last few weeks. Couldn't you come here and we'll have the baby?"

We compromised — he on having the baby, me on returning to Mozambique. I never had to think seriously about what I would have done if he hadn't wanted to be involved. Somehow, for him, once faced with my pregnancy, there was no longer any debate: "How could you not have the baby when you've wanted it for so long?" Of course, underneath that was the other thought he was nice enough not to say out loud — "and when it may be your last chance!" Once the decision was made, he never turned back, awaited our baby with the same expectations and greeted him with the same joy as I did.

At forty-one I ran the 1-in-50 risk of having a baby with Downs Syndrome. I decided to have a cvs (chorionic villus sampling) at ten weeks so that I could abort if there were severe abnormalities. I held my breath and did the test, then held my breath again and waited the three weeks for the results. That was the worst part of my pregnancy.

Once I got the news that the baby (a boy) was fine, all was well with the world.

I wasn't worried after that. I was nervous about how I'd behave during labour, I speculated about what this baby would look like and how he'd act, I wondered if

I'd ever be able to travel again — but all these concerns had nothing to do with my age.

A doctor friend had warned me that there was a 1-in-3 chance that as an older mother, I'd need a Caesarean section (the North American statistics are 1-in-4 for women under thirty-five). Believing myself to be perfectly healthy and fit, I didn't think that would apply to me. However, after a long labour I had only dilated three or four centimeters (instead of the magical ten), so my GP, with the advice of an obstetrician, suggested a Caesarean. I agreed easily.

I later pondered the meaning of the fact that Carl was, like McDuff, "not of woman born," but it still didn't make me feel bad. After all, women are more than just a vagina, Mr. Shakespeare! I certainly felt I'd given birth to Carl, even if we skipped that last hard run through the birth canal. What was important was that he was out, he was big and healthy and he was gorgeous.

I don't know if it's because I waited for so long, and it was a surprise to everyone, or what — but the support I got from my mother and father and friends amazed me. Scarcely anyone questioned my decision — there was just joy at the thought of it. There did seem to be a delight on the part of my friends who were already mothers that I'd joined the collectivity — all of a sudden I was interested in what they'd been experiencing for years. But it was more than that — they were just plain thrilled to have a baby in their lives. The full-fledged support of a bunch of productive, confident and loving women on this venture made it a truly joyful moment for me, and this may be where I'm different and luckier than younger women. Their friends may be more threatened or more indifferent to their mothering — mine, mothers or not, had had time to decide what they wanted for themselves and were, for the most part, secure and settled in their decisions.

Most important of all for me, perhaps, was my own mother's delight in her new grandson. (Her only other had already turned twenty-five!) I was amazed at her knowledge of child-rearing and gratified by her sensitive communication of it to me. Seeing her with Carl helped me begin the lifelong task of rewriting my own childhood.