

Fertility: The hardest border I've ever tried to cross

A globetrotting correspondent comes to terms with maternal yearnings that may have arrived too late



PETER POWER / TORONTO STAR FILE PHOTO

Michelle Shephard on the job in 2006, interviewing Somali refugees in the Hagadera Camp near Dadaab, Kenya.

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The appointment is Thursday. I have rescheduled it twice, which should probably tell me something but, hey, a journalist's life is unpredictable.

It is Sunday, and I am already dreading Thursday.

First a little background. I'm a 41-year-old [Toronto Star reporter](#) covering national security, things like drone warfare, Al Qaeda, waterboarding. As Prissy famously said in *Gone with the Wind*, "I don't know nothin' 'bout birthin' babies!" Yet for the past few years that has occupied more of my thoughts than I'd like to admit.

I don't feel comfortable talking about this. Here's the problem, though: no one does, and with silence comes shame.

The struggle women face balancing careers and motherhood is often discussed — which is wonderful. But talking about the struggle to become a mother remains largely taboo. I understand why.

It's hard to admit you wanted something you thought you wouldn't. Hard to admit failure and all the other crappy emotions people tell you not to feel, but you do.

It's just difficult to explain why you dread going to a doctor's appointment Thursday to decide if you'll spend thousands of dollars and turn your body into a medical experiment just to, quite likely, deal with the disappointment again when the test comes back negative.

First, a word of advice: don't say there's time, even if you're talking to a woman who is 31, let alone 41. Don't tell us about Laura Linney, who just had a baby at 49, or Halle Berry, or any other celebrity. There's a pretty good chance that didn't happen without Herculean medical efforts, including an egg donated from a younger woman. Don't say we have a great career, even if we are fortunate and do. Don't tell us to relax or do yoga, even if both would likely help. And whatever you do, don't offer one of your children. We don't want your child, and even if we did, you're not really ready to part with him or her, are you?

I write that as advice, not condemnation. I get it. I never say the right thing when someone gets divorced or is diagnosed with cancer or loses a loved one. Not that I'm comparing this with a death. You can't mourn something you've never had, not really.

Children were not something we thought of after marriage, as most of our friends jumped into parenthood. We married early, a month after my 25th birthday, my husband just starting his 30s; both journalists (met at the Star), both love travel. We had a lot of fun.

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No one can know what it's like to have a newborn — the shock, I hear, is overwhelming. But with three older sisters and as a dedicated aunt, I had some inkling of just how emotional it could be. My eldest nephew, the coolest and smartest 19-year-old I know, was diagnosed as a toddler with muscular dystrophy and Asperger's. Soon after, my eldest niece, now a successful Carleton University student, was diagnosed with leukemia. She was 2. I'll never forget lying with her on her hospital bed as we played with a stuffed Cookie Monster. Pieces of her fine, curly, blond locks came out in my hand as I stroked her head.

Five more nieces and nephews would follow — each wonderful in their own way — and for years they fulfilled the maternal instincts. I liked spoiling them and giving them back to my sisters. I sent them postcards from my travels.

By 2006, when I was 33, I was thinking about Mogadishu and Peshawar, not babies. People would often say, "Ah, I was selfish at your age too," which I would reply to with a tight smile, making me more determined not to apply for membership in the parenthood club. Strollers in the coffee shop where I liked to write annoyed me, even if I did usually try to make the kids laugh. I liked the babies. Just didn't like the moms who complained endlessly about how tired they were. I wanted to tell them about the woman I met in Somalia who had to chew off the umbilical cord after giving birth on the side of a road — the child's father was a soldier who raped her.

But I bet I would complain too. I suffer from insomnia sometimes and not sleeping really makes you crazy. So I would just put on my earphones and play something loud.

I do remember pondering children during my "hostile environment training," a course for journalists taught by British ex-Marines. During the kidnapping session — in which they teach you how to be a good hostage through a surprise kidnapping that feels very real — you learn the importance of creating a bond with your kidnappers. Don't let them dehumanize you, which will make it easier to kill you.

They advised us to stay away from topics like politics or religion, and focus on fundamental issues. Kids. I wondered if I should pretend the school photos in my wallet of my nieces were my girls?

Was my life more expendable?

Children became a touchy subject as I travelled the world for work to countries where being “childless” was grounds for divorce, or public shame. I am lucky I do not live in those countries.

I would at first explain that, yes, I was married but that we didn’t have children because we were still uncertain if we wanted them. My husband had always been ambivalent — happy and supportive either way, he said. I was undecided. I was busy.

But over the years these answers tended to turn people off, so eventually I just began hinting that I wasn’t able to. This made people feel sorry for you, rather than confused or, worse, repulsed.

Little did I know this would one day be true.

By the spring of 2009, it was time to really think about this. It wasn’t the tick-tock, gong-gong, smack over the head longing some women felt, but rather a fear of nearing 40 and *not* having children. It was funny, even though I always said I was uncertain, I just assumed we would, somehow. I love children. I actually like them more than adults.

But we were on our way to Rwanda, taking a short leave from work to teach journalism. There was malaria and we decided to take medication. Not a good time to try to get pregnant.

When we returned and the drugs were out of my system, I stopped taking the birth control pill I had been on for years. As any woman who has experienced difficulty getting pregnant will tell you, you marvel at the years when you took every precaution to *not* get pregnant. Who knew the window each month was actually pretty small?

It didn’t happen right away. There was more travel, another book to write, and somehow it was 2011 when I finally asked my doctor if I should get some tests.

I was 38, which just like “dog years” you must multiply for fertility years. A woman over 35 trying to get pregnant is considered “geriatric.”

I will not name the fertility doctor to whom I was referred, as I’ve read online comments from others who praise him. It was perhaps just a personality clash, but the bedside manner left me in tears.

Do you exercise?

Yes.

What do you do and how much?

I spin, run and do weights, four to six times a week.

You must stop all that right away.

But it helps with stress.

Take up yoga.

I don't like yoga.

Do you want a baby or to exercise?

Yes, doctor.

He turned to my husband and asked if he smoked. He admitted he liked cigars. The doctor asked if he liked his erection. My husband did. Then he said if he didn't stop cigars he would lose it. Just in case we didn't understand, he then illustrated a flaccid penis by bending his index finger.

When the doctor turned his back to us, I made a face and gave him the finger (fully erect). Then I stole the pen he was using. I don't know why. I felt better taking it.

After undergoing a battery of tests — most of which are not covered by OHIP and expensive — I embarked on “cycle monitoring,” which means you go into the clinic every morning and have your insides probed and blood taken so you know exactly when you ovulate. Then you get the call so you can have scheduled sexy time. All tests came back positive, no big problems with our plumbing, except my *geriatric* age of course, which means the egg supply I once enjoyed was lower-quality and fast-dwindling.

When I called for the results of a pregnancy test, a curt nurse told me I had to come back for another one. I was excited. “Don't get your hopes up,” she snapped. In the end it was what is called a “chemical pregnancy,” which basically tricks your body into thinking you're pregnant when you're not. It's a very early miscarriage of sorts when an egg is fertilized but does not implant on the uterine wall.

We were advised to not mess around. Go directly to in vitro fertilization, IVF. Basically you take a lot of drugs, they take some eggs out, you spin some sperm so the strongest survive, you put them together in a petri dish, then you put them back inside and hope for the best. Twins and triplets are a possibility.

We had an appointment, which I cancelled. I couldn't face that doctor again or what seemed to be his message: *It's all your fault.*

Months later, I was talking to a good friend who had gone through the horrors of IVF with his wife. He had two beautiful babies, but he didn't sugar-coat the experience, which made his otherwise sane and accomplished wife go a bit mad. I told him more than I had told any of my friends or family, once I began, realizing how good it felt to finally confess to someone who had been to that surreal place, even if he only knew it from a male perspective. He recommended his doctor. I asked my GP for a referral, saying I couldn't face Doctor No. 1. I still had his pen.

I think the first time I met Dr. Tom Hannam I had a crush on him. Rebound doctor love. He spoke to us as adults, explained the reality. I was now 39. I told him I had no regrets. I wasn't upset we hadn't tried earlier. We weren't ready, neither of us would have given up the experiences we had — the places we had visited, the people we met. Women can't have it all, as they say, and I may not have travelled to conflict zones or written books if I had been pregnant or had a toddler at home. He didn't need any of this information, but I told him anyway. I felt I had to explain.

He assured us that while age was a big factor, we could have experienced problems at 29, too. No way

to know. Fertility is a bit of a mystery.

And so began the routine again, the testing, the cost — unlike in Quebec, fertility treatments are not covered in Ontario. I would wake at 5:30, drive to the clinic to be at the door when the first nurse arrived, not wanting to face the packed waiting room full of similarly despondent women.

One day, an eager couple beat me. They sat on little camping chairs in the hallway whispering and drinking from a thermos. Normally I never spoke to anyone, keeping my head buried in a book, or my iPhone, tweeting the latest from Yemen.

“Wow, you came prepared,” I ventured.

The husband looked down at me hunched on the carpeted hallway in my gym clothes (Hannam let me exercise) and told me that cold was bad for the ovaries, thus the stools. I can't remember what I said, something brilliant and passive like, “Cool.” I wanted to rip the smirk off his face. I didn't even know how to treat my ovaries, apparently. I just wanted out of there.

Infertility is hard on anyone, but really tough if you're ambitious, and competitive. I'd been blessed with a pretty great life. Set your mind to something, work at it, and it'll happen. If not, find another way.

Dr. Hannam didn't think the only route was IVF, especially if age was a factor, and suggested trying IUI first, a less invasive and less costly procedure (still some hormone injections and monitoring but unlike IVF, the sperm is injected directly into the uterus rather than having the egg removed to be fertilized). In terms of hard cold cash, it was about \$3,000 compared to upward of \$11,000.

I tried it twice, and each time I became insanely competitive as they tracked my follicle development and estrogen levels, waiting for the perfect hour to inject the super-spun-superman-sperm. The nurses called you every day to let you know the results of your pre-dawn ultrasound and blood tests. They were so pleased with everything on the second cycle last fall that as I hung up I felt like high-fiving my seatmates, two lovely interns in their 20s who, like almost everyone else in the newsroom had no idea. “Three follicles over 2.5, bitches! Estrogen level off-the-charts!” I started to worry about twins. I was terrified of twins. I felt like a *real* woman.

Neither procedure worked. No way to pinpoint definitively why. I had given up coffee, wine, spinning, running and weights. I even went to yoga — OK just once, but still.

All that was left was to try IVF or purchase a donated egg from the U.S., or to give up. Hannam kindly called it “readjusting our expectations.”

First I had to go to Guantanamo. Then there were the December holidays, when the clinic closed. Maybe 2014 was the year.

Perspective. It's a great thing and journalists tend to have it, or acquire it when it's shoved down our throats. You travel, you witness tragedy and poverty and the cruelty — and beauty — of the world up close. You become frustrated with first world gripes and then you try hard to not become one of those people who gets frustrated with first world gripes. You laugh a lot and make inappropriate jokes.

There are women who have wanted nothing but children and have endured such grief with multiple miscarriages and stillbirths, or spent tens of thousands of dollars for multiple IVFs that fail.

There are children who need adopting, and we may. Certainly I always thought this would be our fate if pregnancy didn't happen naturally — never would I be one of those women sucked into the fertility treatment world. Oops.

And then of course there is a fulfilling and happy life without children of our own. Many of our friends don't have kids. I know some parents, very few mind you, but some, who admit that as much as they love their offspring, if they could go back they would think seriously of a life without them. For all the wonders and love, there is heartache and struggle too. I have interviewed many mothers over the years who have suddenly lost their children through murders, accidents or disease. They say it is better to have loved and lost. I can still picture so many of their faces. I am not sure.

Not being able to have a child is not one of the world's great tragedies. Being able to even contemplate going through fertility procedures considering the cost is a luxury.

I know all that.

It is Thursday, 7:30 a.m. It is frigid, as Toronto has stubbornly decided this is our winter. The light at this hour is stunning, the skyline awash in pinks and orange, the sun rising in the rearview mirror. Our mayor and our No. 1 celebrity, both cozy with drugs and booze, are both accused in front page stories today of beating people up. On A2 is a story about a team of Al Jazeera journalists — one of whom I got to know and respect while working in Mogadishu last year — who are detained in Egypt and accused of supporting terrorism.

Hannam's office is warm. Bottles of hand sanitizer, boxes of Kleenex and bowls of Werther's candies are strategically placed around the office.

He is kind, as usual, but direct. The nice thing about fertility procedures is that there are charts of success rates unlike say, cancer treatment, where doctors avoid statistics. The numbers are cruel but not surprising: You're 41. You've done two IUI's. IVF with all the drugs will cost about \$15,000. There is a three to 10 per cent chance of success.

So the decision is basically can you handle the disappointment when there is a 90 per cent chance the procedure won't work. More important, can you live without the 10 per cent chance it could.

Thursday brought surprising closure. It is good to know the information, although I wonder if it would have helped to know this earlier in life? I have a hunch my path would have been the same.

The randomness of life never fails to amaze me. It's a global world with individual problems. People stress to their circumstances. Tragedies. Heroes. Bad things happen to good people. Good people do bad things. People will judge and there is nothing you can do about that.

Life has taught me there is really no black and white, and I've always loved exploring the shades of grey. I can live without the three to 10 per cent gamble. There is relief in moving on.

There are no regrets. And maybe perspective will dissolve any lingering shame.

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