When Kasey Edwards discovers she'll be infertile within a year, she is forced to dig the baby issue out of the too-hard basket. She explores what motherhood would mean to her identity, her career, her body, her relationships and her mental health.

What would it be like to want a baby but be unable to have one? Or what would it be like to have a baby only to find that you preferred your life before? Would your life be ruined?

Kasey speaks to people who claim motherhood is the best thing they've ever done and people who say it's the worst. She discovers how the desire for a baby can drive people to the brink of insanity; the logistical challenges of ovulating and trying to conceive on a long-haul flight; the indignity and despair of IVF; and the price of sperm on the internet.

This irreverent and witty memoir will make you laugh, cry and ponder the joys and regrets of motherhood. Thirty-Something & the Clock is Ticking will inspire you to tackle the baby issue head-on and on your own terms, rather than letting time, denial and social pressures make the decision for you.
To my lovely Christopher. Without your boundless love, humour and support this story, and the telling of it, would not have been possible.
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INTRODUCTION

FACING THE BABY QUESTION

Have you ever seriously thought about whether or not you want to have a baby? Have you wondered what it would mean to you? To your career, your body, your relationships, your mental health? I’m not talking about when your period was late after that tipsy evening when you ended up in bed with Mr Oh-So-Right-But-Only-for-One-Night, or about those neurotic moments when you contemplated sticking holes in the condom when the love of your life (or so he seemed at the time) wouldn’t marry you. I’m not even referring to the fantasy of getting knocked up so you could legitimately quit your job and opt out of the workforce for a while. I’m talking about
that moment when your fertility train is chugging out of the station and you’ve got one foot aboard and one foot stubbornly planted on the platform.

I have.

For a long time my views on babies were firmly set. In my teens and twenties, I was anti-kids. I was one of those feminists who arrogantly believed I was meant for far greater things than ‘just’ being a breeder. I couldn’t reconcile the inequality of motherhood. Why should the woman have to carry the child for nine months? Why should she have to endure childbirth, get saggy boobs from breastfeeding and sacrifice her career, identity and pelvic floor muscles when all the man has to do is come? I didn’t consider motherhood as any sort of accomplishment because, after all, anybody could do it. It was the great leveller of all women. It didn’t matter how hard you studied, how hard you worked or what the title was on your business card. Anyone who could get a man to sleep with them could have a baby. And let’s face it, that’s hardly an achievement.

As my thirties approached, I softened my stance somewhat. Other people’s babies started to look quite cute – so long as I didn’t have to touch them. I used to hate it when people would thrust their baby into my lap. I’d sit there tensely, trying not to break it, wondering how long social etiquette dictated I should hold it before giving it back without causing offence. All the time I was secretly thinking that they should hold their own bloody baby. It frustrated me that babies were so useless. I mean, babies can’t do anything for themselves, and until they understand object permanence and the relationship between

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cause and effect, it’s impossible to relate to them. And then, the certainty that I never wanted a baby, which had been a landmark of my youth, began to erode – if ever so slightly.

I figured this was no big deal. I was only thirty-two years old which left plenty of time to make up my mind about the baby question. I decided I didn’t need to think about it until the day when the urge to have a baby was stronger than the urge not to. And if that urge to procreate never came, then so be it. I would be happily childless and embrace my independence, disposable income and a belly without stretch marks.

Imagine my surprise when one day I’m talking to my boyfriend Chris and the words ‘I want to have a baby’ vomited out of my mouth. It was almost like the words were sent directly from my ovaries to my mouth, bypassing my brain. (I’ll be sure to be less judgemental next time I accuse a man of thinking with his dick.) What was I thinking? I’d only known Chris for a year. Sure, we were serious and had recently begun living together, but that conversation was still far off in some distant future. And the timing was terrible. Our apartment was a shoebox, far too small to fit a baby and all the brightly coloured plastic stuff that babies seem to attract. Our savings were even tinier. I quickly retracted the statement and agreed with Chris that we would discuss the baby subject again in a year, and not a moment sooner.

Less than two weeks later, after a visit to my gynaecologist, we could talk of nothing else. My fertility train had started its engine and the conductor had shouted, ‘All aboard!’ I was too young to deal with this. Crunch time
had come, by my estimation, about ten years ahead of schedule.

In the months that followed, I was forced to contemplate all those baby questions that used to bore me to tears when I was trapped at the clucky end of the table at a dinner party. What would it mean to want a baby but be unable to have one? Would it leave a void that I could never fill with a couple of fluffy white mutts and designer handbags? Or what would it be like if I did have a baby only to discover that I didn't want it, that I preferred my life before? I'd be stuck with a baby forever, unable to give it back. Would my life be ruined?

Faced with the biggest decision of my life, I decided to do some research and some soul-searching to help me decide. I wanted to uncover the truth about motherhood, without the sugar coating. I wanted to know about all the things people don't talk about because it's socially awkward to do so or they'd just prefer to forget. I wanted to know definitively, and ahead of time, whether my life would be better or worse if I had a child. What would I be giving up, what would I be gaining and what would I regret? I spoke to people who had children, and to people who didn't; people who were infertile and never had the luxury of choosing; and people who had all the right plumbing but no ready access to sperm. Along the way I discovered how the desire for a baby can drive people to the brink of insanity, and perhaps over the edge; the logistical challenges presented when ovulating and trying to conceive on a long-haul flight (for the first time I appreciated what a huge achievement membership of the mile-high club really is, given the size of aeroplane
FACING THE BABY QUESTION

toilets); the indignity and despair of IVF; and the price of buying sperm on the internet.

Most of all, I found that at some point every woman has to confront the baby question. For some women, it's fleeting and the answer is obvious. For others, the question creeps up slowly and the answer is heart-wrenchingly painful. There is no single right answer, but what I did discover is that regardless of the answer, it's a lot better to face the question head-on and on our own terms rather than let time, ignorance and social pressures make the decision for us.

This is my story and the stories of other women about what we decided, what we were unable to decide and how we dealt with the consequences.
TICK-TOCK,  
YOUR EGGS ARE  
POX

She is coming towards me holding something that looks a lot like a vibrator and the business end is pointed at me. But it isn't a vibrator. For a start, where are the bunny ears and the multiple-speed setting, not to mention the glitter encased within pink silicone gel? (Every vibrator should be covered in glitter in my opinion.) Not only is this device not covered in glitter, it also doesn't look nearly as much fun.

No, this isn't an episode of lesbian experimentation. It is a visit to my gynaecologist Dr Lucy. There are few things in my life that I hate more than having a Pap smear. Surely there has to be an easier way than having a
TICK-TOCK, YOUR EGGS ARE POX

cold metallic duckbill smothered in KY stuck inside you. And it’s the only time in my life when I put up with being naked in a room with fluorescent lighting. Every year I am horrified by my dimply skin under the bright lights and resolve never to eat chocolate again.

I’m about to swing off the bed and reach for my underwear when Dr Lucy holds up her evil twin of the vibrator and issues those ten fateful words that will change my life. ‘While you’re here,’ she says, casual as you like, ‘I may as well check your ovaries.’

I’m about to decline. Why does she need to check my ovaries? I’ve got them – two of them, in fact, just as the owner’s manual says I should. I know this because without fail I get twinge pains every month when I ovulate. And I feel certain that ‘checking my ovaries’ is going to involve having something else shoved up me. Sensing my reluctance, Dr Lucy stands between me and my knickers. ‘This won’t hurt,’ she lies.

Dr Lucy has been my gynaecologist for years. She’s also one of the few female doctors to specialise in fertility. When the crusty old male gatekeepers of her profession refused to allow her to train under them, she wasn’t deterred. She relocated her family to the US for a few years so she could do her training there. I like her because she dared to break the mould of her profession. She’s fun, funky, feminine and doesn’t take shit from anyone. She also has a wardrobe to die for.

I reluctantly lie back on the bed and try to focus on Dr Lucy’s six-inch heels rather than the vibrator doppelganger she’s using for my internal ovary scan. Her feet must kill her at the end of each day. Dr Lucy starts
counting. ‘One, two, three, four . . .’ She stops when she gets to twenty.
‘Twenty what?’ I ask.
‘You have twenty follicles on your right ovary,’ she says.
‘How many am I supposed to have?’
‘About ten.’
For a moment I’m well pleased with myself. I love being an overachiever. Twenty has got to be better than ten, right? Then Dr Lucy explains the principle of quality over quantity. Every month your ovaries alternate in producing eggs. Each follicle in the ovary produces an egg and then, a few days before you ovulate, your body selects the best egg in the ovary to continue growing and ditches the rest. Rather than producing approximately ten decent eggs, my right ovary is producing twenty crappy, poor-quality eggs. My body is spreading its resources so thinly that when it selects the best egg out of the twenty, it’s still not very good. Most likely the quality will be too poor to make a baby.
‘Lucky I have another ovary,’ I say hopefully.
My optimism is short-lived. Dr Lucy scans my left ovary and finds the correct number of follicles. Yay for the left ovary! And then Dr Lucy tells me about the cyst.
‘It could be nothing,’ she says. ‘But it might be something, so I’d better go in and take a look. I can operate on you next week.’
‘Could it be cancer?’ I ask.
‘Unlikely.’
‘Well, I’ve got nothing to worry about then,’ I say in blissful ignorance.
TICK-TOCK, YOUR EGGS ARE POX

As soon as I leave Dr Lucy’s room, and having arranged to go in for surgery, I phone my best friend Emma. Emma and I went to the same high school. She was a year above me, but I met her when we were both cast in the school musical, *Bad Boys*. Emma had a lead role as Tallulah, a sexy little tramp with a feather boa, and I played a dumb gangster who said two lines and was then killed with a cream pie. I like to think that Garbo would have died to say those two lines as well as I did and that my Shakespearean death, which took longer than delivering the lines, was worthy of the Globe.

When I say I got to know Emma during the musical, what I actually mean is that I got to know of her during the musical. She was one of the cool, popular kids and I was a nerd. The laws and protocols of the schoolyard dictated that I keep my distance. It wasn’t until we found ourselves studying the same communications degree at university that I realised she wasn’t nearly as scary as I had thought at school, and we became friends. Since then our lives have progressed in parallel. We both climbed the corporate ladder at the same pace; she specialised in marketing and I went into public relations and then management consulting. We both deluded ourselves for the first ten years of our careers that we were indispensable at work and that what we were doing was terribly important. Then, about a year ago, we both realised we were over the corporate world and had lost our give-a-shit. This was where our paths diverged a little bit. I dealt with my existential crisis by getting a part-time job so I could have time to write about it, while Emma medicated her meaninglessness with vodka shots and repeat doses of
buff younger men. Then her party-girl lifestyle caught up with her and she was but a bee’s dick away from getting cervical cancer. Fortunately Emma didn’t get cancer. She had contracted a virus that had caused pre-cancer cells on her cervix. Dr Lucy found them and surgically removed them before they turned into cancer.

When I tell Emma about my ovaries and imminent surgery, she says exactly what I need to hear. Having been under Dr Lucy’s knife before, she assures me with authority that I’ll be fine. Then she says, ‘Far out, we’re all turning to shit. It’s depressing, isn’t it? It’s like we hit thirty and it’s all downhill.’

A week and a day surgery later (the surgery was a stunning success, thank you for asking), I’m back in Dr Lucy’s office to get the results from my operation. ‘You have severe endometriosis,’ she says. ‘It was all over your left ovary, and in your fallopian tubes. You must have been in a lot of pain each month from your period.’

I shake my head. I hardly have any pain at all, I tell her. I get moody and bloated, but I don’t get pain.

She shows me a picture of female reproductive organs covered in endometriosis. It looks disgusting, like an infestation of bloodsucking leeches. ‘I have that inside me?’ I say, horrified.

‘Not anymore,’ Dr Lucy says. ‘I cut it out. If it makes you feel better, it’s also known as chocolate cysts.’ Great. Just when I most need chocolate, Dr Lucy has to go and ruin it with horrible associations.

During the surgery Dr Lucy removed almost half of my left ovary. In a nutshell, my right ovary is producing rubbish eggs, my left ovary has been chopped up and my
fallopian tubes are blocked. ‘Does any of this matter if I’m not in pain?’ I ask.

‘It does if you want to have a baby,’ Dr Lucy says. ‘Your condition is very serious and it will only get worse. Are you planning on having a family?’

‘No . . . I mean yes . . . I mean no. I don’t know,’ I say. ‘I’m keeping my options open in case I want one sometime in the future.’

‘You don’t have any more time,’ Dr Lucy says in a tone that makes me shudder. ‘You may already be unable to have a baby, but in twelve months it will almost certainly be too late: you will be infertile.’

As an expert in infertility treatment, she gives me a speech about how she sees women every day who are unable to have children because they waited too long and are simply too old to conceive.

‘But I’m only thirty-two,’ I say. ‘Surely that’s not old.’

‘It is in fertility years.’

Who knew that fertility years were like dog years?

She recommends that I go straight onto IVF because I don’t have time to waste trying to conceive naturally. Given my blocked tubes and dud eggs, it’s unlikely I’ll be able to conceive the old-fashioned way. Dr Lucy also tells me to start taking folate tablets, and instructs me to go away and have a hard think and come back when I decide to try for a baby.

‘That would be “if” rather than “when”,’ I say.

Dr Lucy gives me a half-smile as if to say, ‘Want to bet on it?’

I leave Dr Lucy’s office in a foul mood. How could nature insult me like this? How dare my ovaries box me
in like this and tell me that as far as fertility is concerned, I'm pushing a Zimmer frame? I'm scandalised and outraged that my body is forcing me to make a decision before my brain is ready. Who do my ageing ovaries think they are to interfere with my life’s plan like this?

It’s not until I’m on the second-last square of my family-sized block of Cadbury’s – I’ve repressed Dr Lucy’s comparison with the endometriosis and who cares about dimply skin at times like this? – that I realise my life has changed forever. Well, at least my perspective on my life has changed.

Until this moment, I wholeheartedly believed that my life was filled with endless possibilities. I could do anything or be anyone I wanted – or so I thought. I tried not to worry too much about the decisions I made because if things didn’t work out or if I changed my mind I could always do a U-turn and pick a new path to follow. I’ve lived a lot of my life like this. I’ve worked on five continents, lived in more homes than I can remember and had more lovers than I’d want my mother to read about in this book. Up until this point, I’ve always been pretty much in control of the timeline. Other than a couple of broken hearts and being retrenched from a job, I’ve been the one to decide what I want in my life and when I want to do it. But now my ovaries are waving their walking frame at me and taking delight in the fact that one of those ‘cocky young people today who think they know everything’ has fallen on her face.

I don’t want to change my life just yet. I live in a tiny-yet-cosy apartment with my partner Chris and my neurotic poodle Toffee. I work part-time as a management
consultant, flattering large companies into thinking that they actually control their employees, while spending the other part of my time pursuing my passion for writing. I have a handful of friends who mean the world to me, a pair of red tap shoes that come a close second and an agreement with Chris that we will discuss the baby question in twelve months’ time and not a moment sooner.

Looks like I’m about to break that agreement.