

Chapter One of the as-yet-unnamed baby journal book.  
(I don't even have a working title yet.)

by Leigh Shulman

I was never the sort of woman who wanted children. This bothered no one in my adolescence. Then, it was more a relief I wasn't out getting pregnant. By the time I graduated from college with a serious boyfriend of four years, the questions began.

The serious boyfriend, however, had no doubts about kids. Noah could soothe any baby. He was the jungle gym kids stood in line to climb. He wanted them, and it became clear we needed to have a serious talk. I was honest. I couldn't promise I'd ever want children. I knew only that at that moment, I did not. If that was a dealbreaker for him, we couldn't stay together.

We were only 21 years old then, perhaps too young to understand that people don't usually change. We also didn't have the crushing doubt of time running out and biological clocks ticking, and we wanted to be together. As long as I was open to the possibility of one day, Noah was willing to live in limbo with me.

21 years old became 23, and we got married. Year one of marriage folded into year eight. I turned thirty and felt no differently.

"What's wrong with you?" people asked with absolutely no shame. "You don't like kids?" I felt watched any time a child came near me or someone put a baby in my hands. "Look, the kid is crying. They know when someone isn't good with kids. What kind of woman doesn't love children?"

The answer to those questions invariably arrives as the following. Selfish, overly career driven women don't want children. They don't have natural instincts. They only think of themselves. Not that perhaps it's not necessary for every woman to have kids, or that creation, beauty and challenge come in other forms.

It's assumed even in our seemingly modern culture that women are incomplete without having a baby. A woman who can't have children is called infertile. She can't produce. It diminishes the role of women to one thing, ignoring building companies, being mentors, writing books.

I hated it. How terribly reductive to be defined by the assumptions people make about my reproductive desires. Thus, I begin this book at choice.

The choice to have children is a personal one. Each woman, each couple, must do what is right for them, and that decision belongs to no one else. How horrible to have a child because you feel you must and not because you want that child?

Yet, when it comes to babies, there's always someone to offer advice, apply pressure and wonder when will you have your first and then another.

Why didn't I want children? Many reasons. I didn't know if I could handle it. I have a temper that I didn't want to take out on a child. I didn't want to put all that time and energy into someone else when already I could barely keep up with myself. Would I be able to write with children?

I also couldn't help but wonder why-oh-why would I want to go through the experience of giving birth. The labor stories horrify. Giving birth is the woman's war story. We compare scars, share tales of who survived the worst, measure the pain. I've heard dehumanizing tales of women lying in the hospital in pain on a metal gurney while listening to other women scream. This to have a child that would deprive me of sleep, use up my resources and leave me unable to write? No thank you.

Why did I change my mind? I'm not entirely sure. In part because of 9/11. We lived across the river from the Twin Towers and watched them collapse from the roof of our Brooklyn building then endured weeks of gut wrenching sirens as two massive plumes of smoke billowed up from where the buildings had been.

Some looked at the destruction and decided this was no world for children. Chaos had the opposite effect on me. It kicked me out of indecision, and suddenly all the obstacles didn't loom as large. If I could survive a terrorist attack, surely I could learn to include kids in the balance of my life.

Was I scared? Yes. Future-with-baby spread out as a blank confusion ahead of me. Now that blank has a name. Lila, and somehow my past has been redrawn to include her in places and times I know she didn't yet exist.

We humans are funny that way.

Noahs' Grandma Ruth, a wonderful and incredibly strong willed woman who said things to me like "It's ok you aren't a good housekeeper, because you're accomplished in other ways," burst into tears when we told her I was pregnant. "I never in a million years believed it would happen," she cried.

"You should have more faith," I told her.

Faith. Belief. Those who can give the benefit of the doubt, not care too much when it really doesn't matter and ultimately choose what is best instead of what someone else thinks should be, those are the best parents anyway.

Because if pregnancy taught me anything, it taught me that being a parent is the constant and continual process of letting go. You cannot control a child. You cannot shape a future. You can

only put act in the way you deem most correct, do what you can with the knowledge you have and see what happens.