

# In her forties, single and desperate for a child – Jan Heaven, a generation ago, would never have been allowed to adopt.

## *But that's all changed...*

**Roya Nikkhah** reports on the brave – and controversial – new world of adoption today

Photograph by Steve Schofield

At 45 Jan Heaven found herself single, childless and desperate to be a mother. Her 22-year marriage had ended in a messy divorce, and years of trying for a child, including several attempts at IVF treatment, had failed. 'I had always wanted children and thought about adoption, but by that stage I assumed I was far too old and far too single to be considered. After the divorce I was living in rented accommodation, so on paper I hardly fitted the bill of the perfect family.'

Jan's friends and family urged her against adoption, certain that any enquiries would automatically end in rejection and disappointment. 'To be honest, I was pretty sure I didn't stand

a chance and that any adoption agency would laugh in my face, but I plucked up the courage and called Barnardo's.'

Within weeks Jan was on her way to Cornwall to meet the foster parents caring for Portia, a six-month-old baby girl with an uncertain future. Portia had been born with hydrocephalus (water on the brain) and cerebral palsy, and her young mother, unable to cope, had given her up for adoption. 'As soon as I saw her, I fell in love,' says Jan. 'That feeling of emptiness I had carried for years disappeared in an instant and I didn't care if I was to be a mother to a disabled child or an able-bodied one. I was just so relieved that the fact I was a single,

middle-aged woman didn't stop my chance of becoming a mother.'

Portia, now six, has exceeded all doctors' expectations and leads an almost normal life, except that she has one-to-one tutoring at school. She loves nothing more than cooking, colouring and planting flowers with her mother in their big, rambling garden in Blaenau Ffestiniog, north Wales. Having a single, older mother has benefited Portia, says Jan. 'If I was in my twenties or thirties, I would want to have relationships and go out all the time, but I don't need any of that now – I've done it all. I can give her my complete attention, which she needs. I won't pretend it's not hard work,

but I was prepared for anything to be a mother and motherhood is everything I dreamt it would be.'

While the majority of those who adopt are still heterosexual couples, there are signs that that is changing. Last year 500 of the 3,300 children adopted from care were adopted by people who weren't married. 'So one-sixth of adoptions are by people who don't fit into the married box,' says David Holmes, the chief executive of the British Association for Adoption and Fostering. 'Thirty or 40 years ago babies were being relinquished because of the social worries of being a single parent. Adoption now is about looking at what people can offer a child rather than categorising anyone for their eligibility. At our peril do we automatically discount anyone because of their age or set-up.'

Harriet and Simon Fortescue had always longed for a daughter. Shortly after Harriet gave birth to their son, Henry, she discovered that she was unable to have any more children. When Henry turned 18, the couple decided to look into adoption. 'We held out little hope, to be honest, because I was 51,

Simon was 48 and we both had full-time jobs,' says Harriet, a primary school teacher. 'Simon was a prison officer for young offenders and often worked nights, so we just assumed we would be deemed too old and too busy to adopt.'

The first social worker they approached was 'not hugely encouraging', says Harriet, but then the couple contacted Parents for Children, an adoption and fostering charity, which had an eight-year-old girl, Sarah, in need of a home. 'They saw our age and occupations as positive elements we could bring to Sarah's life,' says Harriet. 'She had a very difficult, chaotic time with her birth family and had experienced a great deal of neglect and emotional abuse. But our age, the fact we had both worked with young people and brought up a son of our own worked in our favour.'

'We had to be very strict with Sarah when she first came to us because she

had no idea of boundaries, and I think a younger couple with less experience might have found that harder to do and worried about the child not liking them. But we knew, from previous experience, it was what she needed.'

Sarah, now 13, is a happy, sociable, horse-mad girl who goes to pony club every weekend. 'People can't believe she's adopted because she's so like us,' says Harriet. 'Yes, we've had to work through a number of issues, but to be able to give her opportunities in life and see her develop her self-esteem and become this grounded young woman has been incredible.'

Bridget Betts, an independent social worker specialising in adoption, says that one of the biggest barriers in adoption is the perception that 'you need to be

**'People can't believe Sarah is adopted because she's so like us. To see her become a grounded young woman has been incredible'**

a monochrome family that ticks all the boxes. There are still so many negative associations with single parents, unmarried or same-sex couples - the idea that somehow you're not quite the gold standard of parenting - and people in those situations who come to me are so surprised when I tell them they have so much they can offer a child.

'It is still not all roses for unmarried couples and single adopters,' continues Betts, 'and they can sometimes be marginalised because there are social workers out there who are very conservative with a small c about who they will place children with. But they are being challenged to think again about who can meet a child's needs.'

Eileen Bower, the operations manager for Adoption 22, an organisation that links 22 adoption agencies in the North West, recalls one recent incident that reflects the all too common

misconception about who can and cannot adopt. 'We held an open day and a woman in her thirties tentatively approached me,' she says. 'She told me she was single and lived in council accommodation, which she assumed precluded her from adopting. People rule themselves out without knowing the facts - we want to rule them in.'

Single women, says Bower, can sometimes provide a better home for a child than a married couple. 'Some children will do very well in a "traditional" family, but the diversity of several family relationships is too complex for those who have experienced abuse or neglect in their birth family. They need that one-to-one care, so a single woman can actually often provide

a very safe, nurturing environment for a child.'

Rebecca Manning is a case in point. At 18 she discovered she would never be able to have children of her own, a fact her partner could not accept. Now 32 and single, she has recently adopted Katie and Sophie, twins who were three when they were taken into care. 'I was

passionate about having children and I knew I could do it on my own,' she says. 'So I called Cumbria social services and said, "I'm single and I want to adopt - is that a problem?" I was thrilled, if a little surprised, when they said, "Not at all."

Katie and Sophie, now five, had an 'horrible few years' before being adopted (their birth mother had been imprisoned and, after six paternity tests, still didn't know who their father was) but they now have all the security they need. 'We have such a strong bond and they know no one will come between us,' says Rebecca.

'Being a mother has been the most rewarding experience in the world. I am proof that you don't need to be married or in a relationship to give a home and love to a child. I love them to bits and I can't imagine life without them.' ●

*The British Association for Adoption and Fostering (www.baaf.org.uk)*