

Pregnant Pauses

Are women contemplating pregnancy immune to the national mania for thinness? Fat chance.

By Michelle Stacey

The bare outlines of the life of Rebecca Morrison (not her real name), like the outlines of her trim, athletic body, appear to be admirably, almost appallingly, under control. She rises at 5:45 and goes for a five- to six-mile run; showers and drinks some coffee; goes to her job as a graphic designer; nibbles on a lunch of pretzels, a banana, occasionally a yogurt. After work she either teaches an aerobics class or runs another five or six miles from her Boston office back to her apartment, cooks up a low-fat dinner, stays up a little later than she planned, and finally goes to bed by 11:30 or so. She's not a big fan of evenings out, because restaurant meals threaten her strict regimen of staying under 2,000 nearly fat-free calories per day.

A rogue element entered into this structured system a few months ago, however, an element that now threatens to explode its neat design into chaos. The anxiety of this impending destruction has driven Rebecca, at 28, into therapy for the first time. This rogue

element is, of course, a man. Rebecca thinks he may be *the* man, and they have begun to talk about marriage. It is not marriage that scares her but its natural corollary, children. Rebecca wants children, very much. But she is deathly afraid of bearing them.

"Just dealing with ordinary fluctuations in my weight is hard enough," she explains. "So thinking of getting pregnant and letting a baby take over my body for nine months is really difficult for me. I'm so paranoid about gaining weight. In fact, I'd like to lose some; I still feel about eight or ten pounds heavy." (She is five feet 6½ and weighs between 122 and 125.) "Right now," she goes on, "if I weigh myself and I'm just two pounds more than usual, it makes me miserable. I've been told that I'm probably not ovulating every month, and to start I should gain a few pounds and stop exercising so much, but I don't think I can get myself to do that. If I did get pregnant, I think my eating habits would be a danger to the fetus. I don't trust myself to eat more food, especially more fat,

and to cut down on running."

Perched at the peak of a new baby boom, when glowing pregnant women and smooth-skinned babies are the stars of bottled-water ads and fashion spreads, Rebecca Morrison sounds like something of a freak of nature—a creature devoid of the powerful inborn drives toward sexuality and its result, pregnancy and motherhood. Except that she is a little more ordinary than that: not a freak, because she is not an isolated case, but more accurately a distorted, exaggerated expression of body anxieties that are as much a part of our culture as the boomlet itself. Morrison's fear, even loathing, of the outward trappings of fertility—softness, weight gain, womanliness, all the things that form the opposite of how many women feel they should look—is like a fun-house-mirror image of the more garden-variety worries most women entertain. For most, the lure of conceiving a new life eventually outweighs these body concerns; for the extreme cases like Morrison, the physicality of pregnancy itself is a dreaded event.

Kids Are All Right

By Fay Weldon

The appearance of this pregnancy-phobia is not terribly surprising. We're in the age of the superachiever pregnancy—the logical end point of one too many hours spent chiseling the perfect abs and whittling our diets down to 11½ percent fat. We are surrounded by high-profile exemplars that would depress any normal exhausted new mother: Demi Moore gets designs painted on her naked (washboard) stomach for the cover of *Vanity Fair* ten months after the birth of her second child. Annette Bening slithers around in sheath dresses when barely recovered from the delivery bed. We come to believe that comments like “You don't even look like you had a baby!” are compliments. The antipregnancy message is powerful: Have the baby, it goes, but don't let it change you. And the natural result of such a contradictory demand is anxiety. For some women, that translates into a little self-torture along with pregnancy, but the truly phobic can't even let childbearing begin.

Singer Paula Abdul is the most high-profile example. New York's *Daily News* recently reported that she resisted having a child with her husband, Emilio Estevez, out of fear that the pregnancy would ruin her figure (a fear, the paper said, that she has now overcome). And the star's not alone.

I've heard a lot of women say they're afraid of childbearing's effect on their bodies,” says Bronwen Williams, a clinical psychologist in Rockville, Maryland, who specializes in infertility issues and eating disorders. “But most end up getting over that, at least enough to have children. Even the ability to talk about it means they have some self-awareness and will probably work through these issues.”

Not all, however, are so above-board. “Some women,” Williams says, “prevent themselves from having to deal with this issue by making themselves *unable* to get pregnant—through lack of eating, too much exercise, even avoiding good relationships, so that they don't have to deal with it.” It's relatively easy to drive yourself into infertility through diet and exercise, and even regular periods are no guarantee of ovulation. C. Wayne Callaway, an endocrinologist and eating disorders specialist at George Washington University, refutes the common belief

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good friend of yours is pregnant. That's wonderful. A smile comes to the lips, a lurch of joy to the heart. Anyone who's ever had a baby feels the same, and a lot who haven't, too. It's why nurses love midwifery, and surgeons (male) love deliveries. It is hope born eternal. It is the moment we live for: the first cry of gratified astonishment at the world, the uplifting of the heart. The moment before reality sets in.

It's a glimpse of what the psalmist talks about—at least I always thought he must be—when he speaks of the hills lifting up their voices, and the heavens rejoicing, and the whole world echoing with the praise of the Lord. The instant when we are suddenly conscious afresh of what it's so easy to forget—the extraordinary fact of creation itself—made evident in that moment of involuntary pleasure when you hear that someone you know is pregnant. It is a feeling so instinctive, so much a part of us, the Right to Choosers would do well to acknowledge it, not deny it. It would be convenient if it were not so—but there's nothing as strong as joy. “Love” as a concept has gotten a little downgraded. Once the force that moved mountains, it now gets classed as “neurotic dependency,” an emotion that tends to ruin female lives if they ever give in to it. But joy is, so far, permitted to exist in its natural form, as a feeling hard to come by and rather rare.

After the annunciation, after the moment of joy, comes actuality. Pregnancy! Blissful in parts: the drifting moment between sleeping and waking drawn out through the day; a velvety, woozy, softly changing state. The mind turns inward contentedly. Simply by existing you are earning your living; even while you sleep you are growing a child. All you have to do suddenly, even if you're accustomed to high-level achieving, is be. It's the submission of the will to the body, and you might as well give in to it, and eat. Oh, other kinds of joy. Your waist has gone away.

Pregnancy is falling asleep into your soup at the dinner party and others gently raising you and cleaning you up. It is, since you can no longer get between the table and the sink, giving up washing the dishes on that account rather than moving the table. It's your mother taking some notice of you at last and coming round to clean up. It's other people's approval—as if at last you'd found your proper function. It's the flooding of the system with estrogen: You are superfemale, cave woman; others acknowledge it. Pregnancy is looking at your face in the mirror and seeing a clear, bright complexion, shiny hair, lustrous eyes, and the beauty that comes from within, which costs a whole lot less money than the beauty that comes from without. It's being allowed to cover the body with some kind of tent, unless you have Demi Moore fantasies. Some have. Pregnancy is time out from real life.

Pregnancy—parts of it—is appalling. Pregnancy is total strangers at parties laying hands on your belly as if to take strength from what's inside. Pregnancy can be terrible sciatic pains down the legs, varicose veins, stretch marks. Pregnancy is people treating you as if you were a dog—that is, if you have anything to say for yourself they're astonished. What, this pregnant person has an idea?

Pregnancy is being made to sit down when you don't want to. It's giving a certain kind of uptight person the horrors. There's a sense in which—yes, even you feel it—you're a monster, brazenly acknowledging to the world you did it that night, that day on the beach, and everything is slowly ticking forward from that moment. Pregnancy is wishing you weren't, at least some of the time. Pregnancy is worrying about how you'll cope. Pregnancy is waking sometimes with a jolt: My God, what have I done? And indeed, what have you?

Pregnancy is worrying about how this thing is going to get out. Pregnancy is being trusting enough to believe what you're told by experts. Pregnancy, itself the triumph of magic over reality, makes the pregnant woman gullible enough to believe that magic—breathing, panting, meditation, the rubbing of the back by the loved one—will see her through the birth without pills and potions. Unreal.

The pregnant woman is everyone's property. Don't smoke, don't drink, don't do this, don't do that. Stop working, stay put. That's not your baby in there, that's a U.S. citizen! Then all of a sudden the drama's over. The birth's theater, pure theater, and you're the star. And then there you are, the curtain down—you're out of work, with a baby, and you're up all night. And it's don't smoke, don't drink, don't go out to work. Why have a baby if you don't look after it yourself? All babies are born happy, healthy, and good, and if yours is crying, has a diaper rash or a bad temper, you must be doing something wrong, mother. Since having a baby is so natural, mother, why can't you just be naturally happy? Why are you looking so cross-eyed?

that body fat alone controls menstruation. "Relatively fat girls who are eating so little they are in effect starving themselves can develop amenorrhea," he points out, "because the physical effects of starvation are related not to body weight but to energy balance. That balance is what matters, and if you're eating too little for the amount of exercise you're getting, you're out of balance and you'll stop ovulating." Callaway also sees amenorrhea in women who are eating enough food but very little fat. "From an evolutionary point of view," he says, "the last thing you need, if your system is starving, is to get pregnant."

At the extreme end of the continuum are a few women who find it so hard to resist the seduction of body control, they are more willing to undergo invasive fertility techniques like in vitro fertilization than to sit back and gain some prepregnancy weight. Says Williams, "I've had patients who are in denial that body weight or exercise might be the problem. Even though it's been suggested to some of them by doctors that they should gain weight, they just pick the medical advice they want to listen to. They say, 'This doctor wouldn't be suggesting IVF if it weren't necessary.'"

The good news is that the large majority of women don't go that far. Most who want children decide to go ahead and gain the weight, even while telling themselves that theirs will be the sveltest, most worked-out pregnancy in history. The bad news is that for some, conceiving isn't the end of the story—the obsessing simply becomes more specific and elaborate.

Shelley Martin (not her real name), 30, an articulate banking executive in New York, was prepared to cruise through her pregnancy with a mature body image. She'd been through several years of therapy in her early 20s for anorexia and bulimia and had come out cured and happy with herself—or so she thought. "If you have a thing about weight before you conceive," she said when she was six months pregnant,

"for instance, if you gain a pound and you feel like you've gained ten, then when your body *really* starts to distort with pregnancy—it's even more confusing. I'd been so comfortable with my body for several years, and now all these issues have come back. I'm constantly calculating my weight gain to see where I'm going to end up. Will it be 28 pounds? Thirty-five? That's the kind of obsessive calculating I used to do when I had an eating disorder."

"If I did get pregnant, my eating habits would be a danger to the fetus."



Cravings for the 90s: Low-sodium pickles and low-fat ice cream.

Martin has responded by upping the ante on exercise. She used to work out happily a few times a week; now she berates herself if she misses one day of stair climbing or aerobics.

Despite her background of eating disorders, Martin's feelings aren't that far off the curve of the body-anxious pregnancy. James Rosen, a professor of psychology at the University of Ver-

mont who runs a body-image therapy program, describes a study of stress in pregnant women in which the second most frequently reported stressor was "concerns about body-image changes—about gaining weight, losing the weight they had gained, getting back into shape. Clearly, women who feel this way aren't alone."

But what we call "body image" does not exist in a vacuum, and what it often stands in for is that overused term, *self-esteem*. How any person feels about weight gain, whether during pregnancy or not, is tied to underlying feelings of self-worth. One study found that women with low self-esteem who gained large amounts of weight during pregnancy were at risk for depression, while women who started out with a strong sense of self-esteem and gained equally large amounts of weight were not as likely to become depressed.

This result confirms not only what logic would suggest but also a lurking truth about the body fears of pregnancy, which is that much of the public hand-wringing about weight gain and loss of muscle tone is simply the first layer of deeper, more profound fears. Shelley Martin begins by talking about self-esteem. "When I weigh a lot more than I want to weigh," she says, "I don't feel confident in my job. I feel stupid and sloppy and unlovable and unworthy and certainly not sexy." But before long, she segues into something more complex: "People write you off when you get pregnant. As if you're no longer serious about your job, as if you're weak in some way. If you stay soft from pregnancy, you've given up your power. I don't know if that's true or not, but it's terrible that I think it's true. If you lose the weight, it says you're the same person you were before, that you can be trusted to do the same job you did before. That you haven't had to make a permanent sacrifice that's going to make the world write you off." (continued on page 223)

Pregnant Pauses

(continued from page 205) (Until this generation, sacrifice was what every parent knew was part of the child-rearing equation.)

For women who are susceptible to the particular body fears of pregnancy, those hot underlying issues—of control, of strength, of denial of the fundamental changes in one's life that childbearing brings—are, if anything, made hotter by the reality that sets in after birth. Perhaps, suggests Wendy Appleton (not her real name), the self-flogging to get back into shape that, for her, began almost immediately postpartum is partly a result of the place childbearing has at this precise moment in this society. Appleton, 35, has two children and has for the time being left her job as a corporate lawyer to stay home with them. Many women would be happy to have her six-months-postpartum figure at any time, but Appleton still feels that she is painfully out of shape. She has even gone so far as to eat Weight Watchers frozen entrées for dinner—all of 300 or so calories—even though she is still breast-feeding and should be eating more.

"The two major things that form your identity are your appearance and what you do for a living," says Appleton. "So all of a sudden, you're in quicksand on the career issue at the same moment that you're losing the body you've had, in a way that's so out of your control." Her ambivalence on the subject reveals itself in her language. Although her two children are loved and wanted, she describes their gestation in almost chilly terms. "There's this parasite growing in you," she says. "Then once the baby's born, you lose control over your life in so many ways. If you're prone to using food as a way of getting control, this seems like a prime breeding ground for eating disorders."

Amid all this talk of careers and identity and self-esteem, it's impossible not to wonder about the role of the men in these women's lives. Men whose wives or girlfriends represent status may add their own pressure, overtly or not, to stay slim and unchanged. The most public example of this is the sad tale, told in Faye D. Resnick's book about Nicole Simpson, of her friend's reportedly having had six abortions

because O.J. didn't want her to subject her aerobicized body to another pregnancy. Another woman described a stunning friend of hers who had one child, bounced right back, and a few years later decided not to have another because, as her husband explained, "We don't want to risk her figure." It's almost as if there were three in the marriage: him, her, and her figure.

In many cases, though, the pressure from men is less obvious and harder to distinguish from the ambient cultural pressure to be always thin, and from many women's internal drive to prove that they are unscathed by pregnancy. It's tempting to call this drive simply selfish. Katherine Halmi, director of an eating disorders program in Westchester County, New York, feels that women who are inordinately afraid of losing their figure with pregnancy shouldn't be having children anyway. "If a woman is not mature enough to relate the changes in body shape to pregnancy," says Halmi, "and instead gets that confused with fatness, it means she is too preoccupied with appearance. I would have concerns about how she's going to raise children. There's a selflessness to childbearing."

That selflessness, however, is up against some powerful forces. The softness of childbearing is almost a rebuke to the take-no-prisoners, greed-is-good ethic that late-twentieth-century Americans often connect with success, and such sedition does not go unpunished. Every woman knows this, at some unspoken level, knows that even as she takes on what has historically been an extremely powerful human role, she is being stripped of power in the larger world. Her body is a sign of that loss of power and standing, and the way to get the power back is to use that same body to deny that anything has changed. "At my health club," says Wendy Appleton, "there's this competition going on to look as unmaternal as possible. How soon after your pregnancy can you be in leotards and tights? The people who look that way always seem to be the ones who insist they're nursing their baby in addition to working. That's the figure we all shoot for: the person who's able to do all things at all times." She sighs. "We're supposed to be saying we can be anything we want, but we're only allowed to say that if we have a child *and* a career *and* we're thin." ●

Don't
take
the stairs
when
you can
take
an
elevator.