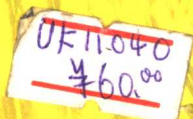
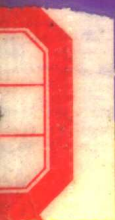


Men may be chicken...
but we need the eggs

dating big bird

Laura Zigman

bestselling author of *Animal Husbandry*



HATING BIG BIRD

Laura Zigman

Published in the United Kingdom in 2000 by
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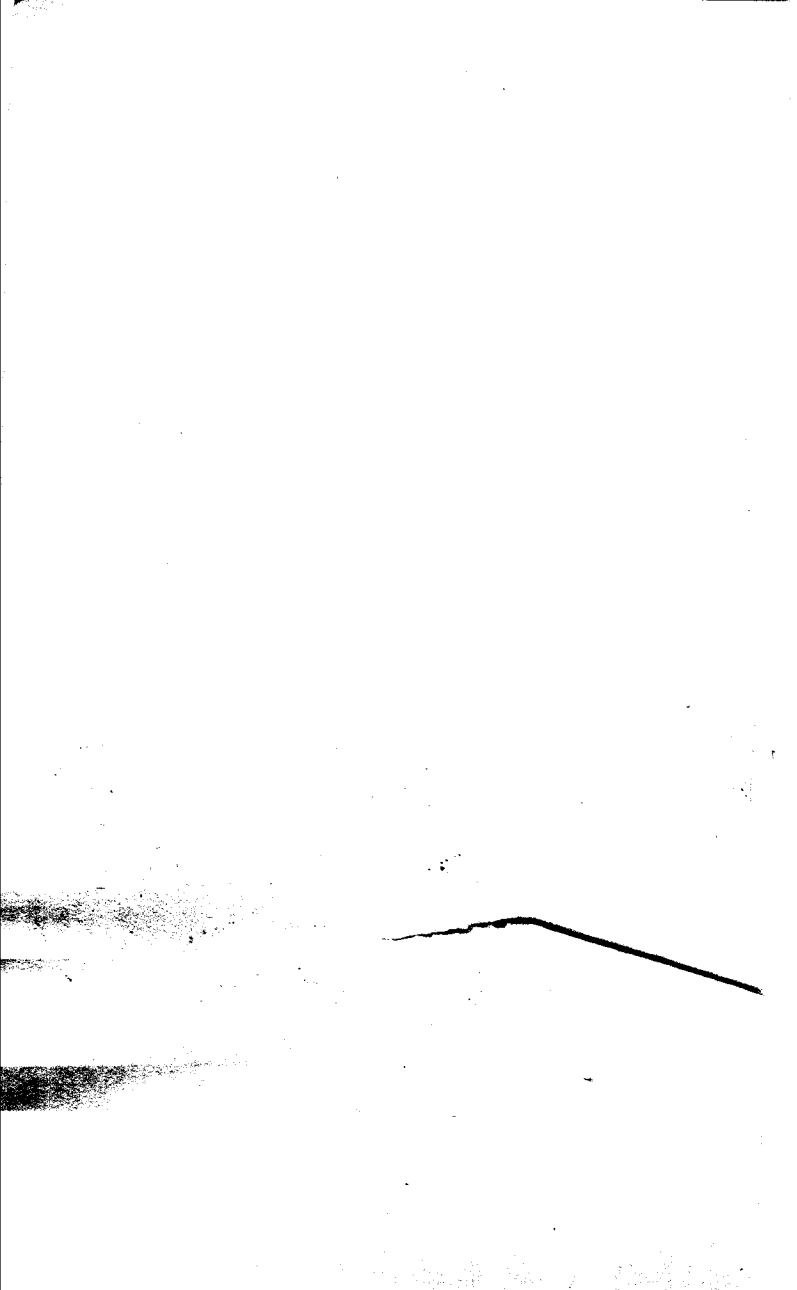
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THE FIRST TRIMESTER



1

IT'S NOT THAT I found Big Bird particularly attractive, it's just that I thought he would make a good parent.

I mean *father*.

Parent implied an extended relationship I wasn't necessarily banking on.

Not that I wouldn't have wanted an extended relationship. It's just that I was trying to be realistic. I was thirty-five, after all, and by then I knew the difference between expectation and desire; between love and lust; between boyfriends and fathers.

At least, I was supposed to know.

Contemplating impregnation by an eight-foot yellow bird is just one example of how carried away you can get when you want a child as much as I did.

You have to admit, though, that except for the feathers – and the horizontally striped tights, and the bulging eyes, and that stupid pointy beak – Big Bird would be the ideal parent:

He's warm.

He's affectionate.

He's had a stable job for almost as long as I can remember.

And you'd always know where to find him in case you needed anything later on.

Giving birth to a baby covered in a fuzzy down of yellow feathers would be a small price to pay for such exemplary paternal qualities.

My friend Amy, though, preferred Barney. She would cite his trademark song as evidence of his superior genes:

♪ *I love you. You love me. We're a happy family . . .* ♪ ♪

But when I'd point out how a happy family might be beyond our reach but a child wasn't – she'd reluctantly agree.

Then she'd confess the true reason for her preference:

She liked purple better than yellow.

TELLING PEOPLE YOU want to have kids when you're not married doesn't exactly go over like *The Red Balloon*. It's not like everyone you know – parents, married friends, single friends, boyfriends – will be waiting in your own personal receiving line after some wedding or baby shower to congratulate you on having a few too many vodka martinis and transforming yourself into their vision of the living breathing female cliché.

But for once, you're not feeling like a cliché.

For once, you're not bemoaning your unmarried barren state.

Despite the fact that you are, quite obviously, drunk, you're in surprisingly good spirits.

In fact, you're feeling rather empowered.

Publicly expressing your desire to have a child is the first step to achieving it.

OBVIOUSLY I UNDERSTOOD that I would need to prepare for such a radical addition to my life – to feather my nest, as it were.

First, I would need a bigger apartment to make room for a crib.

And a changing table.

And a Diaper Genie.

Two, I would need the crib.

And the changing table.

And the Diaper Genie.

Three, I would need more money.

So I could afford the bigger apartment.

And the nursery equipment.

Not to mention the nanny, since I'd have to keep working to pay for it all.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Amy would ask.

I'd stare at her blankly.

Crib.

Changing table.

Diaper Genie.

Bigger apartment.

Nanny.

More money.

And then it would dawn on me.

"A stroller."

"I see," she'd say, doubling over and slapping her leg.
"So you're still planning on reproducing asexually."

FOR A WHILE, I wasn't planning on reproducing at all. I thought I might just kidnap my niece and spare myself all the trouble and aggravation:

Why risk having a child you might not like when

there's already an existing child you adore?

At first, my older sister, Lynn, was entertained by such displays of my passionate aunthood. Then, as the first year passed and moved into the second, and Nicole – “the Pickle” – became more and more of an animal, Lynn began to really latch on to the idea.

“You can have her,” she’d say, staring at the floor where the screeching wailing flailing fit-throwing beast-in-a-diaper had thrown herself down in protest over an enforced nap.

But each display of histrionics only made me covet her more.

She’s an animal, I’d swoon. But she’s my animal.

NOT THAT I really considered stealing her. I just liked to borrow her sometimes. Take the baby-idea out for a little reality test-drive when I went to visit her.

Pushing the stroller through the park, taking her for a ride in the family Jeep, dragging her kicking and screaming through the supermarket when she should have been eating or napping, I’d beam at passersby with the pride and bliss of a new mother.

“She’s got her father’s temperament,” I’d say, and shrug blamelessly.

Which was true.

My brother-in-law always gets cranky when he’s hungry and tired.

IT WAS THE Pickle who first opened the door to the possibilities of Big Bird as a husband and father and made me wonder whether I should, in my next relation-

ship (if I ever had a next relationship), consider going against type (tall, dark, and withholding) in favor of something new and different (yellow, feathered, and friendly).

She and Lynn and my brother-in-law Paul had driven down from Maine to New York that Labor Day weekend for a wedding at the Waldorf, and the Saturday afternoon before the ceremony they brought her downtown to my apartment on West Thirteenth Street for her sleepover. I'd spent weeks preparing for our big night together, and before they all arrived, I checked my weekend inventory one last time.

M&M's.

Waffles.

Library books.

Barney, *Blue's Clues*, and *Teletubbies* videotapes.

A pair of platform sneakers and a pair of fuzzy *Cat in the Hat* slippers wrapped inside their Payless boxes.

And three dresses from Baby Gap.

Lynn came up first while Paul parked the car with Nicole.

"I have to pee this minute or I'm going to explode," she said, the desperation rising in her voice. "I'm starting to think I should wear those adult diapers because I never get to go." She gave me a quick peck on the cheek before dropping the pile of bedding and clothing and Barbie dolls and teddy bears that she'd brought up from the car on the couch in the living room. She headed toward the foyer, stopped short, then turned back to me in confusion. "Where's the—?"

"The potty?" I pointed behind her to the little

hallway on the opposite end of the little foyer. "It's that way."

I followed her – forever the younger sister, trailing behind – to the bathroom door, which she left partially open. I heard the seat cover go up, then a sigh of relief.

"You can come in," she said through the open door. "Everyone else does. I have no modesty left. In fact, I wonder if I can still pee when no one's watching me. I've probably developed some pathological need to go to the bathroom in front of people."

When she'd finished flushing and washing her hands, she came back out. Her jeans were still unzipped, and I could see the elastic band of her underwear just below her belly button as we walked back together to the living room. "I'm sorry," she said, starting to zipper herself before changing her mind again. "I haven't worn these pants in months, but they're still tight. I thought eight hours in the car might stretch them out, but clearly I was wrong."

"You look great," I said with enough enthusiasm to make her think I was lying, even though I wasn't. Her hair was shiny and black and straight to her shoulders, and she'd always had a great smile, which together almost completely distracted from the toddler-induced dark circles under her eyes.

Lynn rolled her eyes. "I do not," she countered. "I'm a tub."

"You are not."

"I am, too."

"I can see you're as ill as you've always been," I said, finishing the same exchange we have whenever we see each other again. It was our version of two apes preening each other: *You look good. No, you look good.*

No, YOU *look good*. Even though she was heavier since she'd had Nicole – a little extra padding on the hips and thighs – she was still far from fat. She'd just been spoiled all her life. Being born with an enviably long waist and a flat stomach that required no maintenance of abdominal crunches will do that to you.

She looked at me and grinned. The last time we'd seen each other was two months ago – in early July, when I managed to eke out a week's vacation with them and my parents on Cape Cod. "Your hair's gotten so long," she said. "And straight."

"Like yours."

People always said we looked like twins, but Lynn and I had never seen the strong resemblance. Just coloring – brown eyes and olive skin – and hairstyle, if I grew mine out and blow-dried the hell out of it.

"Well, you look great. How's . . . ?"

Malcolm? "He's fine. He's the same." Which is what I always said when she asked and which meant: *Don't ask. I don't want to talk about it.*

"Maybe someday we'll meet him."

"Maybe." I doubted it.

And just as I was starting to wonder what was taking Paul and the Pickle so long to come up from the garage, Lynn and I heard a howling screech that Dopplered from the elevator in the hallway, past my door, and then back to it as they finally located the correct apartment. With excitement and dread – My Pickle was here! But she was not happy! – I lunged for the doorknob and saw Paul, wrestling back arms and legs and miniature Timberland-booted feet as he failed miserably to maintain some semblance of control over his daughter.

Nicole was adorable in thick white textured tights, miniature red plaid kilt, and denim jacket. In between her wild writhings and through all the tears and sniffing, I could see her baby teeth: the two front ones on top pushed out from too much pacifier sucking. It seemed every time I saw her now, she had either just cried, was just about to cry, or was indeed crying, and at that very moment she was somewhere in between all three stages. I saw her eyes register me, but my fantasy that that would be enough to stop her tantrum was ill-conceived and short-lived.

"Hiiiiiiyyyyy!" I squealed, bending down and opening my arms for the big greeting, but Paul pushed past me without bothering to say hello. Not that I blamed him, of course. The Pickle's unwieldy fluff of curly brown hair was, after all, covering his mouth at the time, and she had just hit him twice on the side of the head with her Madeline doll.

"It was the M&Ms," he said, as he bent down and lowered her onto the kilim rug. He looked like he'd just stepped out of the L.L. Bean catalog with his multiple layers of turtleneck and sweater and zippered fleece jacket, even though here in New York, three hundred miles south of the Maine tundra, it was still summer. "She wanted more than the five we gave her."

"When we said no—" Lynn added, playing couple's tagteam storytelling and setting Paul up for his next line.

"She flipped out."

"She hates it when—"

"—we say no."

"Or anything that—"

“—rhymes with no.”

They looked at each other with bemused frustration and exhaustion. Paul's wire-rimmed glasses were askew on his nose, and Lynn still hadn't zipped up her pants – while I – the uninitiated, the unprepared, the inexperienced guest-host aunt who was suddenly wondering whether she should have added a leash and muzzle to her list of sleepover supplies – simply watched the epic unraveling continue: the final slow-motion meltdown as Nicole flung herself flat onto the floor, head back first with a sickening thud, eyes to the heavens, screaming bloody murder.

For a few seconds, we all stared down at the rug, shaking our heads and wondering, I was sure, the same exact thing: *How can something so small and so cute make so much noise?* Then Paul bent down, then Lynn bent down, then I bent down – all three of us baby-talking and crawling around on the floor in the hopes of cajoling her back to civility. But given the fact that she was understandably tired and cranky from the long drive and not used to my apartment yet, the crying continued.

“Any change in her daily routine is very disruptive,” Lynn said. “She hates change.”

“Me, too,” I said.

Paul caught Lynn's eye to signal that it was time for them to leave, though I doubted they actually needed five hours to get dressed for the wedding.

“You're sure you really want one?” they said in unison while standing in the doorway. They were looking at me as if I were a madwoman.

Speechless, frozen-smiled, briefly glancing over my shoulder at the rug in my foyer, wondering when

and if this tantrum would ever cease – I nodded unconvincingly.

Of course I did.

Didn't I?

But once I administered the recommended remedy for a code one tantrum – two Fig Newtons with a chaser of five M&M's – and the screaming had stopped; once they each kissed Nicole good-bye and finally slid out the door and I'd picked her up off the floor and wiped her tear-stained face with the bottom half of my white T-shirt; once it was just the two of us alone in the precious silence of the late afternoon Labor Day weekend – her drying her eyes and holding my hand as she walked shyly into the kitchen and the bedroom and back into the hallway toward the living room – once she'd opened her presents and put her new *Cat in the Hat* slippers on her hands like puppets and tried to shove them in my mouth; once I knew what it felt like to be her only focus – what it felt like to feel just right – I reconsidered their question.

Yes, I did want my own Pickle.

I knew it.

I was sure of it.

IN THE BLISSFULLY quiet posttantrum hours, Nicole and I ate a box of Eggo waffles (hers cut into eight pieces – not seven, or six, or nine, but eight exactly) while watching *Barney* videotapes and coloring in coloring books. Then she went into my bedroom closet and tried on all my shoes, falling over several times before finally returning to her own favorite pair of bejeweled Barbie dress-up mules, which she slipped on

and pranced around the room in. Mesmerized and barely able to breathe at the sight of her – all diaper and three-year-old chubby legs clip-clopping back and forth across the room – the vision of me when I was her age, if family photos and lore about my legendary baby-fat and predisposition for theatrical nudity were any indication – I finally grabbed her by the back of her Pampers and pulled her up onto the bed with me.

“You . . . are . . . my . . . Pickle!” I said, my face so close to hers, she became a giggling blur of fluffy hair and baby teeth.

“No way!” She grabbed my nose with one hand and tried to stick the fingers of her other hand into my mouth.

“Yes way!”

“No way! I’m not a pickle. I’m Nicole.”

I grabbed her cheeks and put my face up against hers. “Okay, then: *Nose kiss!*” I yelled.

“*Nose kiss!*” she yelled back.

We were both laughing so hard that before the one of us not wearing the diaper peed by accident, I reached for the book she’d picked out for me to read – *Curious George Goes to the Hospital* – and opened it up. Exhausted, we curled up next to each other as we turned the pages – me, for once, thinking only of my delight in her being there and not about how, in less than twelve hours, her perfect smooth chubby baby-flesh would be gone. But it didn’t take long before Nicole became distracted, restless – I was never quite sure if she actually listened to the stories when I read them to her or if she just enjoyed soaking up the attention of being read to – pushing the book away and sitting up to ask me a seemingly urgent question.