

ONLY, *not* LONELY

Moya Sarnar has often felt judged for not having siblings. But, she counters, what matters isn't how big your family is, it's how much love is shared around



I remember being nine years old, looking out of my bedroom window on to our garden below. I soaked up the green of the lawn, the red of the apple trees, and Mum and Dad dozing side by side on blue deckchairs in the sun. I thought, I am so lucky. I have parents who love me and who love each other – the perfect family.

It wasn't until I was an adult that I realised not everyone sees it that way. Where I see a complete family of three, many others see a gaping hole where my siblings should be.

Once, I asked my parents for a sister for Christmas, but they said 'no' – given that my mum was 39 and my dad, 51, when I was born, it was a biological improbability by then, although I didn't understand that at the time. So I asked for number two on my Christmas list – one of those dolls that could wee – I got a 'no' for that one, too, but I was pretty happy with the pack of felt-tip pens I was given instead. That was just about all the thought I gave to being an only child when I was young.

But that changed when I went to university. When sussing out my new peers, having those conversations about where home is and what 'family' means, I began to pick up on strange remarks and sideways glances, looks of pity, surprise, and even disdain. There was

the apparently innocuous, 'Oh, I never would've thought so!', intended as a compliment, as well as the snide dig, 'Oh, I thought so...' Once, I got a full-on, unapologetic, 'But you seem so normal!' – to which I could only say, appearances can be deceptive.

In the decade since, I've met women everywhere, from the gym to the office, who are mothers of only

children and who have confided in me that by seeing I've turned out okay, they feel reassured their kid will be okay, too.

Those thoughtless comments and looks never made me feel angry or upset, but they did make me think twice about the people who made them. They had clearly judged me based on my background, rather than my character.

I found it by turns baffling and amusing that a stable family home that was loving and warm and nourishing could possibly be considered a disadvantage. I grew up blissfully unaware of this stigma, but over the years, I stitched all those comments

together and now I get it. The stereotypical only child grows up lonely, spoilt and selfish, a kid as lacking in social skills as in hand-me-down clothes, who sits alone in the school canteen with nothing but her entitlement for company, and who doesn't know how to share a pizza.

Well, it's about time we got rid of that stereotype – and all the rest of them while we're at it. They reduce and »

Moya, aged eight, with her mum and dad



'Mothers of only children have CONFIDED in me that by seeing I've turned out OKAY, they feel reassured their kid will be okay, too'

simplify our humanity and they make the world more ugly – as well as being plain wrong. Half of British families now contain only one child, according to Office for National Statistics figures, the highest level in 80 years. It is becoming the ‘new normal’, the newspaper headlines roar, thanks to social and economic factors including increased living expenses, decreased housing options and women delaying motherhood.

IT MAY BE THE ‘NEW NORMAL’ FOR SOCIETY, BUT IT’S ALWAYS BEEN NORMAL FOR ME.

I had just as much fun as my friends who had brothers and sisters – more fun than those with really annoying ones. My mum schlepped me to baby groups, toddler groups, dance classes and friends’ houses. I played netball, I read, I wrote stories, I went shopping with my friends. I got bored, just like any other kid. We had quiet family holidays where I overcame my shyness and talked to other little girls at the swimming pool, who would go on to become pen-friends and then distant memories. We had big, noisy family Christmases, with cousins who would tickle me until I was laughing so hard I couldn’t breathe.

And yet, despite the rising numbers of ‘onlies’ like me, the stigma persists. I recently interviewed a TV presenter who became a mother in her forties and who told me, off the record, of her guilt at knowing her daughter would never have a brother or sister. More than anything I felt sorry for this woman, who clearly wanted the best for her baby, but tortured herself that she was giving her daughter a disability by denying her a sibling.

I told her my mum doesn’t feel guilty, and neither should she – and I wish I could say it to all the other mothers who are beating themselves up about having ‘only’ one child. I told her about all the wonderful things that have filled the space in my life that might have been taken by siblings, like the cousins who are such close friends of mine they might as well be sisters, unflinching in their love and friendship. The fearlessness I learnt by necessity; all that practice on childhood holidays came in useful when I lived abroad as a student and had to start a new social life all on my own, going up to strangers and asking them out for coffee. And the contentment I find in spending time alone, whether it’s dinner out at a table for one, or a night in the flat cooking for myself. That feeling

of ease when on my own, comfortable with only my thoughts for company, gives me confidence and self-assurance. I know that only I can make myself happy – other people are just there to help me enjoy that happiness. I wish I could show that TV presenter, there’s a big difference between only and lonely.

BUT THERE IS ONE THING THAT MAKES ME SAD, AND THAT, IF I DWELL ON IT, LEAVES ME FEELING


LIKE I’M MISSING OUT.

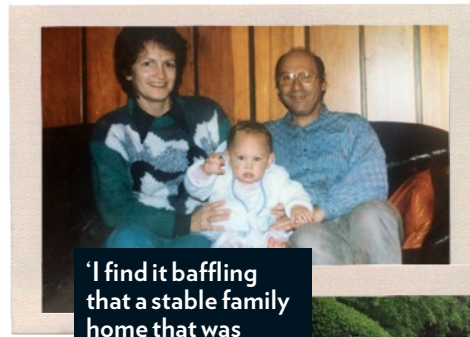
It’s that I will never know the love of a brother or a sister. I will never have the bond that comes with that relationship, and I can see from my cousins and friends and boyfriend that there is no love quite like it; it is its own unique and beautiful connection. But I also know that it doesn’t always work out that way for siblings – the relationship can also bring pain, resentment and a guilt all of its own. Besides which, if you spend your time totting up the love you’re lacking rather than the love you have, you’re counting the wrong love. And you should probably get a hobby.

Still, my partner and I have discussed it and decided that if we do choose to start a family, and we are lucky enough to be able to have a child, we’ll stop at one. I know myself well enough at 29 to accept that I can’t predict how I’ll feel in five months’ time, never

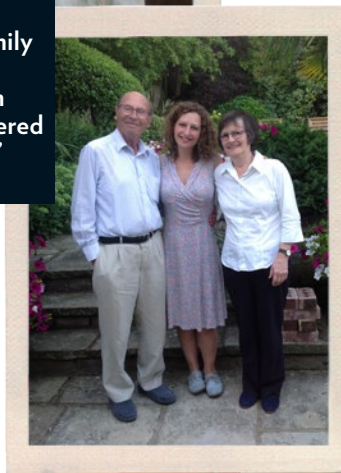
mind five years, but I have felt this way for as long as I can remember, and my boyfriend feels the same.

If we have any, it will only be one. I want only one career break, like Hillary Clinton (might as well aim high); I want to be able to afford to go on holidays, and to be able to relax enough to enjoy them. I want to have a (relatively) tidy, calm home, where arms and parents outnumber children. I want the same relationship with my child that I have with my parents. I find my friends from big families often want to replicate the childhood they had growing up – as an only child, I am no exception.

Now, when my extended family gathers together to celebrate, it’s my turn to tickle the next generation of cousins until they laugh so hard they can’t breathe. Perhaps one day I’ll be tickling my own child – we’ll see – but whatever happens, I know that happy families come in all shapes and sizes, and there is no perfect, there is no normal. Whether you have a family of one, two, three, four or more, what matters is not numbers, but love. 



‘I find it baffling that a stable family home that was loving and warm could be considered a disadvantage,’ says Moya



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