

VOYAGE OF A KISMAMA

A Creative Story of Motherhood

Natalie Scott

“Reading yourself as a fiction as well as a fact is the only way to keep the narrative open. The only way to stop the story under its own momentum, often towards an ending no one wants.”

– Jeanette Winterson: *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*

Hairdresser: Do you have any children then?

Me: No, I don't. Not yet anyway.

Hairdresser: Oh, you've got plenty of time! D'you know, there was a lady in here the other day and she was pregnant with a baby, but guess how old she was.

Me: Oh, er, I couldn't guess. How old.

Hairdresser: FORTY-THREE!! Forty-three, can you imagine? Why would anyone want to have a baby at that age?

Me: Oh, I'm not sure...

Hairdresser: So, how old are you?

Me: I'm, er, I'm...

Breaking News

28th July, 2021

I'm going to be a geriatric mother. That's the official term apparently. I imagine it being said by someone in a white coat with a fake smile, offering me a bunch of wilted flowers. Or should that be a poisoned chalice.

Before I go on, there's something I should set straight with you. This isn't going to be your average memoir about pregnancy. I won't be sharing cutesy photos of baby faces or waxing lyrical about baby showers. Not that there's anything wrong with those things if they make you happy, it's just that all that stuff has never really been my cup of tea and I don't expect that beverage to change now I'm pregnant. If it does at any point in this story, please let me know and we can discuss what happened and how to move forward.

My pledge to you is that I will provide an honest account of my experiences of becoming pregnant aged 42 and giving birth just before age 43. It'll be mostly in my voice but, with your permission, I may invite some characters to take over at points if I need a break. A shift in perspective is usually a good thing. It's what I do a lot of in my poetry. I'll also be adding my trademark social commentary™ in places as I go along because, for me, topics like pregnancy, maternal health and motherhood invite all kinds of interesting social and political debates connected to gender and identity. It won't be so much a cooing over photos of pretty baby clothes but more an asking of questions like 'Why is that pink cardigan advertised for girls only?' This story intends to be varied: part memoir, part critical essay, part social debate: serious, funny, a little bit cynical, tackling some of the trickier taboo topics, presented through prose with dashes of script, song and poetry, and maybe a few adverts when you need a break. But above all it will be very much me. The real me. If you're interested in a pregnancy story with an edge, read on. If not, I'd love to offer you an alternative version with a nice sugary frosting but it would be pure schmaltz, so I won't be doing that here. Sorry, and hope we meet again in my next book, or perhaps yours.

I'll be writing this in stages as the story unfolds, so right now I have no idea how things will go. I hope that this means you are more involved with the ride as it happens. If you read this over the course of about nine months, you'll witness the developments and changes in the same timeframe as I did. Again, if you're not up for that it's no problem. Just follow the exit signs and I'll see you in the next adventure. But whatever happens, even if it ends in tragedy, I intend to complete the story, as difficult as that will be. I can't promise a happy ending with singing, dancing and multiple marriages, but I can promise a good story, and one told in an interesting way.

So, at the moment, I'm lying in a pool of hard facts, (don't worry I'm actually sitting in bed with a decaff coffee and a piece of fruit cake). To be a mother aged 40-plus classes you as geriatric, a word I don't even like using for elderly people. And what is 'old' anyway? It's funny how in some situations people say 'age is just a number' or 'you're only as old as you feel' and other such well-meant platitudes. Well, when it comes to being pregnant there needs to be an age-related label. They could at least make it creative: 'over the hill mum' or 'life begins at ... ah no, wait a minute ... your life is actually over.' Google tells me that actually 'geriatric' used to be a term for mothers over 35 (yes, over 35!?) but now it's more common to see the term 'advanced maternal age.' Ah I do love a euphemism. Almost as much as a pun. Let's see how many terms like this I come across during this journey (and, sorry, maybe clichés too). To be honest, if it comes down to being either 'geriatric' or of 'advanced maternal age' I'll take geriatric. It has a punky quality to it. I can see it on a T-shirt. It kind of kicks ass. Advanced Maternal Age is wishy washy in comparison. She stands at the sides trying to be 'down with the kids' while Geriatric struts her stuff. Geriatric it is then. Maybe I'll start a trend to reappropriate the word and then in a few years' time a load of 40-something mothers will be sprinkling it throughout their everyday speech. Now that's the power of words.

I think it's only fair that I tell you a little bit about myself and my backstory just to set the context and keep you in the loop. Some of you may already be designing your GERIATRIC T-

shirts – seriously, shall we do that? It's safe to say that I've gone through most of the significant milestones in the last couple of years. At the start of this period, I was about to come out of a 22-year relationship and marriage – I still had a husband, a house, a mortgage, a cat family (like children, I mean – I don't have feline genes, although that would be very cool) and all the responsibilities that go with those things. And I can still see that version of me standing in the kitchen, because that's where we were when the decision was made to separate, feeling like everything I'd worked so hard to fight for and keep intact, solid, stable, was turning to rubble, leaving me coughing and choking on the dust. Two years later finds me here (still in bed with cake) at the other end of the country in a new job which I enjoy very much and about to share parenthood with a kind and loving partner whom I love dearly.

There has inevitably been a fair share of trauma along the way. It has been a grieving process and I'm going through the stages at my own pace. According to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) there are five stages: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. Applying this model, I realise that I went through several loops of these five stages in the latter stages of the relationship. I was on a kind of grief instant replay. But with the closure of the relationship, I've been able to reach an acceptance, however wobbly that might feel at times. It's been difficult nurturing a new relationship whilst mourning the last one and sometimes just that in itself is exhausting, emotionally, then physically. But I'm proud of how I've handled it so far. I've maintained a good friendship with my ex-husband, whilst showing commitment to my partner (who to respect his identity will be referred to as G in this story). And they have both been kind and supportive too. Okay, so before this turns into an episode of the Waltons, 'Goodnight John-boy!' 'Goodnight Daddy!', I'm going to leave the backstory (don't worry I will return as things crop up) and skip to now. Well, yesterday in fact. That's when we did the pregnancy test and got the news. I visited the NHS website and calculated my due date. My brother's birthday. At the time of writing this I am five weeks pregnant. Now that alone is scary because there's a month gone already and which means there's only eight left to go. It sounds silly because this is just how it works but I feel like I've missed out on a month of preparation time (by the way I'm also a planner and overthinker).

I've also terrified myself with the statistics connected to having a baby in your forties. I did know some of these before but I wasn't sure whether they'd ever be relevant to me. Now they play like film credits over my eyes: 30-50% chance of miscarriage. 50%. That means either I or the pregnant woman lying in bed next to me (image a bit weird, I know) will miscarry. It's a worse-case scenario but I am unapologetically a glass half empty kind of person, so it's not a surprise that I'm focusing on this statistic. I don't want to tempt Fate, whoever she is, but I think it's good to be aware of potential problems so that we can a) talk about them (which we did yesterday) and b) be able to cope better if something bad did happen. A kind of pre-crisis management. We told each other's set of parents. One in Hungarian and one in English. (This isn't random oddness – G is Hungarian.) We included them in on the sobering stats, saying we wanted to take it a day at a time and not plan too far ahead, in case we do miscarry, and it is 'we' because apparently the age of the father can influence the health and development of the embryo. I said to my parents 'we're pregnant' because it's a team effort, I'm just more directly and physically involved (oh to be a female

seahorse!) Anyway, it's better if the family know the risks too, so that it would come as less of a shock to them if it happened and they would be better prepared to support us emotionally. I won't say anything more about that for now. I'd rather like to entertain you with what has become for me the early shenanigans (one of my favourites words and dolefully underused) of researching pregnancy.

The NHS website has a helpful step-by-step guide for what to expect at each week of the pregnancy - remember, this is when I initially panicked as I'd unwittingly missed weeks 1-4 and therefore branded myself a bad mother for the time before I even knew I was a mother. (Own worst critic - fear of failure. Textbook case.) I read that at five weeks the baby's nervous system is developing and the foundations for its major organs are in place. And it's 2mm long. Slow down Junior - let me catch up! It already has some blood vessels and a string of these are connected to me, which will later become the umbilical cord. I discovered that folic acid can prevent spina bifida which is caused by a defect in one end of the neural tube, then gave myself a gold star (need for praise) for having bought those pregnancy vitamin tablets a month ago and taking one per day ever since. I knew some of the more obvious facts about pregnancy and what to take or avoid, but soft mould covered cheeses such as brie was a surprise. They can contain listeria and listeriosis can lead to miscarriage or still birth. This was also a disappointment as I'm partial to a slice of brie and a glass of red (also out). On this site I learned that I qualified for free dental healthcare which is an unexpected bonus. Due to Covid, I haven't had a check-up in about 18 months, so perhaps I'll get a job-lot of treatment when I go. Not that I'm wishing for multiple crowns, fillings and root canal surgery mind you, but it would be nice to get tidied up in the tooth and gum department free of charge. G asked me if he would qualify for this, and thus shakily begins the debate about the unequal treatment of father and mothers. No doubt more will be to come. Regarding this, I can only laugh as I imagine thousands of new born babies with million-dollar smile mums and toothless dads.

The website recommended new mums to make an appointment with the GP or midwife (people have those allocated? I'm very green ...) as soon as possible after a positive test result. I'd like to present what happened next as a short script:

Scenario: telephone conversation between woman and doctor's surgery receptionist at the Hullabaloo Doctor's Surgery (fake name for obvious reasons).

Characters:

Woman: early 40s - has just found out she is pregnant. Feeling excited but nervous about the next steps.

Receptionist: mid 50s - hates this job and imagines all patients are an inconvenient interruption to her day dreaming about a holiday at Disney World, the real one in Florida, not that Euro Disney one.

R: Good morning, Hullabaloo Surgery.

W: Hello. Er, I've recently done a pregnancy test and, well, it was positive. The advice online said to contact my GP to book an appointment.

R: *(3 seconds of silence then makes a sucking noise with her mouth)* What's your name and date of birth?

Woman provides those details.

Who advised you to contact your GP?

W: Well, er, it's on the NHS website.

R: Because that's not how it works. You need to self-refer to the maternity unit when you're 6 weeks pregnant. Not before, because the system won't let you in.

W: *(confused)* So, who do I speak to about being pregnant? And my medication?

R: I'll see if the GP is free. No she's not. The pharmacist will call you in the morning.

(Phone call comes to a mildly polite but abrupt end)

THE END

I was taken aback by this and couldn't understand why an NHS funded surgery appeared to have no idea about the information on the NHS website. The cold manner of the receptionist didn't help. Seriously, is it a criterion for this job description because there seem to be so many unfriendly doctor's surgery receptionists. I was a little anxious about making this call, and some human compassion on the other end would have been welcome. Perhaps my expectations are unreasonable but this is how I would have liked it to play out from the first time the receptionist speaks:

R: Thank you for sharing that information. Don't worry you're in safe hands and we'll guide you through the process. It works a little differently here to what the advice says on the website but well done for being so diligent and following those instructions. Have you got a pen to write down some information? Here's what you'll need to do... *(Receptionist provides instructions)* but if you need any support or advice in the meantime, here's the number to call.

W: Thank you so much! That's really helpful.

R: No problem at all. And congratulations by the way!
Goodbye.

W: Thank you! Goodbye.

It's amazing how much simple interactions like this can affect your mental wellbeing and how you feel for the rest of the day. Or maybe it's just me? If it is, please let me know. Okay, on one hand you could say 'Toughen up. Stop being so sensitive. Not everyone is good at communicating and not everyone thinks they're being rude.' But I think that showing care and compassion in the way we speak to others is so important. Especially in a sector which is providing care. I felt deflated after this conversation. And small. Like I was a silly school girl being told off by a dinner lady for doing something I wasn't supposed to be doing. Even though I was doing the right thing. But at the same time, it wasn't. Nevertheless, I knew what I needed to do next, and in one week's time (not a day earlier or smacked bottom!) I will complete the online self-referral form for the maternity unit. Although I'm 42, I've never felt this grownup until now. I've also realised that I'm going to have to grow a tougher layer of skin to get through this process (or rock that kick ass Geriatric T-shirt). For now, I'm armed and not-so-dangerous with my tick-list from the NHS site of what to do and when.

The Hungarian word for pregnant woman is 'kismama' (pronounced kish-mam-ma), which, apart from being delicious to say, literally translates as 'small grandmother.' I don't know quite why this is but it's lovely. I've decided I'm going to embrace being a kismama, maybe for the days when the geriatric mother isn't feeling quite so kick ass.