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Like any new mother, I am gratified when strangers smile at the sight of my little daughter. Unlike other women, however, I often wonder if the smiles mask surprise at the sight of me. Be-

cause the fact is I've become a mother again at a time of life when my friends are becoming grandmothers.

Conceiving a child at the age of 50 has put me in the eye of an ethical storm. It's not a place I ever expected to be. I wasn't looking to make history, only to make a family. Yet I realize that many people believe it is wrong for a woman my age to have a baby, that it is selfish, unnatural and not in the child's best interest. I dwelled on these considerations long and hard before trying to become pregnant—a goal that took four years of effort to achieve—but ultimately found, in the depths of my own conscience, a clear and compelling signal to go ahead.

Not that giving birth at the same time I am due to have yearly mammograms was ever part of my life's plan. I pushed the limits simply because I had to. I was almost 35 when I met my husband, closing in on 40 when I gave birth to our son. For a while after that, we were a busy two-child household, at least on the weekends, when my husband's son from his first marriage was usually with us. It wasn't until my stepson went off to college that we started trying for another child. If our friends were looking forward to empty nests and winding down, we still wanted the tumult of life in a lively child-filled home.

I hadn't forgotten that I was no longer a young woman. From the beginning I could calculate the years all too well. When I gave birth to my daughter, Rose, I was 20 years older than my mother had been when she gave birth to me. This means that, even with the best breaks in the world, I will in all likelihood not be around as long for my little girl as my

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child

mother was for me. I will not have as much time to be her friend. I may never see her children. I will have to try to cram 50 years of love into (if I am lucky) 20 or 30, and ultimately she will probably have less of me than she is entitled to.

Still, there are moments, infinite numbers of them, when I know I have done the right thing: when I hear my daughter's squeal of delight as her brother, pretending ferocity, chases her around the living room; when I see her curled sleepily in my husband's lap as he reads her one of her favorite bedtime books; when, suddenly, I feel her fling her small arms tightly around my knees and press her face lovingly into my legs.

Do I worry about the future? Of course I do. I bite my lip at the idea that my teenage daughter may one day hate me for saddling her with an embarrassingly wrinkled and gray mother. And I break into a sweat at the thought that I may get sick and die and leave her desolate just when she needs me most.

Yet in the midst of these concerns, I recognize other, mitigating truths. Yes, my adolescent daughter may hate me for being old. But if I were young, mightn't she hate me for something else? Yes, I may die too early in her life. But is motherhood ever a guarantee of longevity?

Instead of thinking about what I cannot offer my child—that is, a youthful set of parents—I contemplate the things I can offer her: the

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love of a mother and father who wanted her above practical considerations and in spite of substantial emotional and physical cost, proven partners and parents who have the maturity and the financial wherewithal to provide for her; and two older brothers who can protect and care for her if we cannot, and who have laid their hearts at her size-5 feet.

In return, Rose has given us incalculable gifts, bestowing on me and my husband a sense of renewed commitment to our life together and our future as a family, and conferring on her brother a hither to unknown awareness of what it means to nurture another human being.

I am humble, often tearful, in the face of being allowed such blessings at this stage of my life. But the tears I shed are joyous, the outpourings of a cup that literally runs over—at the feel of my husband's hand on my back as I lean over to change our daughter's diaper, or the sight of my almost adolescent son, decked out in his first necktie, bending down to kiss his little sister on her head.

The truth is, at any age, the heart expands to meet new demands for love—and mine has never been as big, or as full. ■

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