



I don't  
know how  
I do it  
*Lorraine Candy*

**G**EORGE OSBORNE is trying to give me some money. At least I think he is, who can say? It's all so complicated. He seems to be trying to make up for the fact that I pay tax on childcare out of my already taxed income.

When I read about George's new childcare vouchers for working parents, I end up as confused as I was when my six-year-old told me Jedward were the new Doctor Who, which is farcical (like George's tangled proposals).

I don't really understand what the Chancellor is offering. All I know is that, as a result, it's been a bad week in the spin cycle of the 'working versus non-working mum' debate.

Women who gave up (or 'sacrificed' as they say) their jobs to have families have been writing about 'doing the right thing' by staying at home.

They quote statistics to prove their children are less likely to become mass murderers (I'm paraphrasing), while so-called career mums respond by saying those who stay at home are statistically more likely to be depressed than Marvin The Paranoid Android from The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy, which is not conducive to happy offspring either.

No one is right, no one is wrong. None of it is helpful.

If Mr O hadn't used the phrase 'lifestyle choice' (referring to mums who chose to stay at home) when he announced his plan, I think the reaction would have been less volatile.

And it's what I call 'accidental sexism' on his part, because I think we should stop using the word 'woman' in the same sentence as 'work and parenting'.

It doesn't matter if you are a man or a woman, does it? There are two people and there is a child. Who stays at home or who works is down to each family; it's not dependent on gender.

There is no scientific proof of what is 'right' or 'wrong' due to the vast number of variables in every individual situation.

It's all just opinion and conjecture, made more sensitive by the ridiculously emotive language we're all guilty of using to justify our particular choice.

Anyway, George, if there's some cash up for grabs, we need it for the tortoise fund.

On Sunday, the fearsome foursome summoned us into the front room for a performance. Something they had been rehearsing all day entitled: 'We need a tortoise.'

Mabel, two, was lying star-shaped face down with a small cushion tied to her back pretending to be a tortoise. She'd been duped into this with the promise that Peppa Pig was coming round for tea.

I was looking forward to the kids' argument for getting the world's most boring pet because they know I am more likely to agree to them getting a tattoo than a tortoise.

They listed some impressive tortoise points of interest, not least the little-known fact that the word for a group of tortoise is 'a creep'.

Mr Candy and I nearly lost our serious faces at this point.

They estimated that they needed £180 for the tortoise and all its reptilian accessories. Steep for something that doesn't move.

I suggested a garden gnome might be more fun. The dog looked crestfallen.

How humiliating to be discarded in favour of something that shifts so slowly Eric Pickles could out-run it.

But they displayed admirable team-work, and showed us their

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already pooled pocket money of £8.50. I was so impressed by their passion I told them I'd think about it.

Then they handed me a sock for my donation to the fund and I was left to break the news to Mabel that Peppa wasn't coming to tea (you may have heard her reaction to this).

Later, I ask my son, six, what he'd do with the tortoise, and he says it depends if it is a boy or girl.

If it is a boy, he tells me, he is going to play football with it. Which both confuses and concerns me.

'You can't kick pets,' I say sternly. 'I know that,' he replies shocked at my suggestion. 'It can play a game of football with me.'

This makes me cross. Why does he think only boy tortoises play football?

So I lecture him about accidental sexism (using George Osborne and the Government's childcare vouchers as an example).

'Besides,' I say. 'Tortoises don't move.'

'But the girls told me they chase tomatoes,' he says, a little sadly. He, too, has been duped. How much of your pocket money did you give them, I ask?

'All of it,' he says. '£8.50.'

Then the doorbell rings and there's a policeman on the doorstep. He's come for Mr Candy...

■ **LORRAINE CANDY** is editor-in-chief of *Elle* magazine.

**S**ITTING in a restaurant, the stunning brunette in the figure-hugging red dress commanded the unwavering attention of her date.

His eyes feasted on her lips as his hand crept seductively over the tablecloth to gently touch her fingertips. There was only one place this date was heading. He just hoped the taxi could transport them there fast enough.

But just as he summoned the waiter, his date, 40-year-old Pascal D'Sanchez, leaned forward and whispered words that took the wind out of his sails. Although she'd had a wonderful evening, she said, she was not going to have sex with him. Ever.

Pascal, from Chesterfield, Derbyshire, is one of a new breed of women for whom celibacy is a lifestyle choice. It is not that they have sworn off men — they are rarely short of male attention. But rather than viewing sex as an intrinsic part of a successful relationship, they see it as an unnecessary hindrance.

Recent research revealed that a quarter of middle-aged British women have sex less than once a month — making us the most abstemious in Europe. It seems women are increasingly uninterested in sex, with more of us than ever taking this stance to the extreme.

The poster girl for this surprising trend is author Sophie Fontanel. Her memoir, *The Art Of Sleeping Alone*, describes her decision to refrain from physical relationships for 12 years after becoming disillusioned with sex. Already a bestseller in her native France, it was released in Britain this week.

Fontanel, 50, claimed her self-imposed celibacy led to a journey of self discovery. 'The fact women can make love when and how they want is sexual liberation. But sexual liberation is also to not do it, if you don't want to,' she says.

It is a sentiment Pascal can well understand. 'I feel happier, more focused and in control,' she says. 'Being celibate has changed my life. I have my self-esteem back. I don't need sex to validate me.'

So why are women turning their backs on sex? Research is patchy, but several years ago an American study into sexual attitudes suggested the number of women opting for celibacy has quadrupled in the past ten years, up from 2-3 per cent to about 10 per cent. Other research suggests one in 20 couples has relationships that are sex-free.

'The pressures of modern life, past emotional trauma and intimidating media images can lower libido,' says sex and relationship psychologist Diana Parkinson. 'There are women who don't have a sex drive and are happier without the pressure of a sexual relationship.'

'But most human beings benefit from a healthy sex life in a loving relationship. Trying to suppress a desire for sex can be detrimental to physical and mental health.'

Pascal, a training course manager, hasn't had sex since April, 2012, when a nine-year relationship with a painter, now 45, ended. The hurt she endured certainly contributed towards her vow of chastity.

'I felt taken for granted,' she says. 'My confidence was shattered and being on my own was daunting. Being single a year short of my 40th birthday was frightening. I knew I had to do something to regain control of my emotions.'

'Cliche that it is, I wanted to find myself. I knew sex would create issues I could live without.'

So she decided to give it up altogether. She would tell any man she dated that she would go no further than kissing or hand-holding.

**D**RASTIC? Perhaps. At first, she found abstaining tough. 'Of course, I got urges,' she admits. 'It wasn't so much the sex as the intimacy of lying in bed cuddling.'

Although the men she has dated while celibate have been of a similar ilk — successful, middle-aged professionals — their reaction has varied widely.

'Some have mocked or thought I was joking,' she says. 'Others' eyes have glazed over. One date actually complained, "I need to test out my women before I can marry them." Offended, I pretended I needed the lavatory and snuck out of the restaurant.'

'Another man, a salesman, said he couldn't believe he had wasted his money buying me dinner.'

But the majority have, she claims, simply seen her celibacy as a challenge. 'It brings out the predator in them,' she says. 'I'm an enigma. They find dating me an unpredictable adventure.'

There were a few — admittedly a very tiny majority — who saw her reluctance to jump into bed with them as a good thing. 'So many

by *Antonia Hoyle*

fortysomething women want to have sex in a last-ditch attempt to get pregnant,' she claims. 'Men I date can be sure that's not on my agenda. I don't want their children.'

Pascal's longest relationship has been with a 56-year-old surveyor, whom she dated for four months last year and who she claims respected her decision. But, perhaps tellingly, she ended the affair because she suspected he was cheating. Although she wouldn't have sex with him, she wouldn't tolerate him doing it with someone else.

Meanwhile, she has no qualms about dating more than one man at a time. At one stage earlier this year, she was going out with a 46-year-old property developer, a salesman aged 42 and a car dealer, 50, simultaneously.

'I didn't tell them about each other, but I wasn't doing anything wrong,' she insists. 'It's only if I had been sleeping with them that it would have been cheap.'

**A**S TIME passed, her confidence soared. 'The longer I went without sex, the easier it was,' she says. 'Dating wasn't anywhere near as emotionally draining as sex. Instead of focusing so much energy on someone else, I would pay more attention to myself. I started eating healthily and going to the gym. I lost 7lb.'

While Pascal's celibacy was by choice, other women say it is forced on them, due to the economic crisis, work pressure and pace of modern life leaving little time for physical intimacy.

Diana Parkinson explains: 'Years ago women were having better and more regular sex. Now, there's no time for a loving, satisfying relationship. Sex becomes a stressful ordeal when it's supposed to be a cathartic release.'

But Pascal insists the relationships she has formed are often more meaningful than the ones she had before.

'Taking sex out of the equation removes the pressure and awkwardness,' she explains. 'If you rush into sex with the wrong man, a part of you has been taken away that you can never reclaim.'

Although her early sex life was unremarkable — Pascal lost her virginity at 18 and had a handful of sexual partners in her 20s — she says, like many young women, she sometimes felt taken for granted.

'I didn't have one-night stands, but I was naive and didn't treasure



Picture: SOLARPIX.COM

myself as much as I should have,' she says. 'I felt wretched if a man rejected me after sex.' Now, she says: 'Learning to say "no" is liberating. I'm in control of my life. I'd have to be ridiculously in love to have sex with anyone again.'

Judy Hanson, 55, a divorcee who has been celibate for 17 months, certainly feels more secure now she no longer has sex. 'I think it's undignified to be having casual sex at my age,' she says. 'I have had plenty of opportunities to do it, but

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# The women who have decided to live without sex

... and the hilariously revealing reactions of their male suitors when they break the bad news



No sex please: Judy Hanson, far left, and Pascal D'Sanchez, left, now feel more in control

tried to get me to go home with him again. He even said I could leave my pyjamas on. I was astounded by his arrogance. He gave up and I never heard from him again.'

Judy's bravado belies a vulnerability that has crept in with middle age, however.

'When I was in my 20s I was more relaxed about sex,' she admits. 'Although I only slept with a couple of men before I married my first husband, I didn't take rejection personally. But for a woman of my age to be rejected would be horrible. I'd hate for a man to leave after we'd had sex. I'm more self-conscious about my body. I miss sex, but I'd rather keep my body to myself than risk getting hurt.'

Diana Parkinson says insecurity is another reason older women are becoming celibate. 'Media images suggest sex is just for the young. It's intimidating and celibacy is convenient for women who have fears about their ability to perform sexually.' Mother-of-two Delyth Gammon, 41, a family support worker from Oxford, has been celibate for three years after discovering in 2010 her husband of 14 years had been having an affair.

'I knew straight away my sex life was over,' says Delyth. 'I wouldn't want to have sex with a stranger on a one-night stand and won't have sex again until if and when I marry.'

Delyth's mother was a vicar and her father a policeman, and as a Christian family they believed sex should be saved for marriage. 'There was an expectation among my peers I would be doing it, but I didn't feel under pressure because I believed equally as strongly I didn't want to,' she says.

She met her husband, ten years her senior, at work when she was 21. They married three years later, in 1996. She doesn't want to go into details of his affair, but admits it left her heartbroken.

**M**ANY women might — faced with such a betrayal — have wondered why they'd bothered saving themselves for their husband in the first place and endeavour to make up for lost time.

For Delyth — who divorced her husband last year on the grounds of his adultery — it only reinforced her determination to abstain.

'When your marriage breaks up through no choice of your own, you immediately feel out of control,' she says. 'Celibacy helped me feel stronger, as if I'd made a choice.'

She admits, however, that abstaining has been harder than it was in her 20s. 'Sex was an important part of my marriage and, just as you wouldn't know how lovely chocolate was if you hadn't tasted it, I now know what I am missing,' she says.

'I'm human, so the desire is there. And I'm not a prude. I'm open to talking about sex. But that doesn't mean I have to follow through on it. I've been on a few dates, but haven't had boyfriends, and the men I've dated have been entirely respectful of my decision.'

Her decision is fuelled in part by a desire to set a good example to her children, a son and a daughter in their early teens.

'I'm teaching them sex is just for marriage, and you have to practise what you preach,' she says.

But she believes, too, that in today's society far too much emphasis is placed on physical desire.

'The world has become sex obsessed,' she says. 'It's all about instant gratification. I believe sex should be between two people who love each other.'

It is, of course, ironic that for all the sexual imagery we are bombarded with in today's society, more women are opting for celibacy.

Perhaps it is only when we go back to viewing sex as what it should be — an intimate part of a loving relationship — that they will start wanting to make love again.

I don't want to be just another notch on a man's bedpost. I respect myself too much.'

Judy, a twice-married mother of four adult children, first married in 1983 when she was 24, but was widowed aged 28 when her husband, Tim, died after a car crash in 1987.

She married her second husband, a managing director called Dave, now 50, later that year. After 18 years together, they divorced in 2005. 'We grew apart,' she says. 'I lost all interest in sex. I had no desire to go to bed with anyone.'

She says she became devoid of libido. She didn't have sex for three years before she accepted a friend's offer to set her up, and met a

businessman called Alan, a year her junior. The relationship lasted three years before she ended it last April.

'Although I enjoyed the sex, Alan wanted commitment and I didn't love him. I didn't want to sleep with a man for the sake of it. I decided at that moment to become celibate.'

These days Judy, a book editor from Bridlington, Yorkshire, is certainly not short of offers — mostly from successful fiftysomething men she is introduced to by friends. She usually waits until at least their second date before she announces she's celibate — and says her revelation is initially always met with disapproval.

It invariably happens as the man is making his move, an arm placed

nonchalantly around her shoulder, one hand wandering south of her waist and lips poised for a kiss.

'It's their body language that tells me they are after sex more than anything they say,' she says.

'That's when I know I can't put them off any longer and tell them I won't sleep with them — normally with a light-hearted rebuff to the effect of, "If you want a quickie, you've come to the wrong person".'

'I don't want to make a big issue of it by going into my reasons. If you're not naked by the third date, men sulk. But, interestingly, they rarely disappear. It makes them more determined to get what they want.'

She says her past three suitors

## Supermarket swaps CAESAR SALAD VS BABY LEAF



THEY look the same, but which is healthier?

**YOU** might think that when it comes to nutrition, it's hard to go wrong with a salad, but some are surprisingly bad for you.

Sainsbury's Caesar salad (£2, 265g), for example, has egg and cheese and is particularly calorific (168 kcal per 100g) and

fattening (13.3g of fat per 100g). But a 100g bag at £1.50 of its Watercress, Spinach & Rocket has just 30 calories and 0.6g fat.

It's also rich in folic acid, which aids conception, and vitamin A, which helps us see in the dark.

**DR EDD MACLEAN**

