

A dog is for life, or at least ten years

On paper I'm the perfect puppy candidate. I'm responsible, energetic, organised, my voice is louder than most and I work from home. As I write I could do with instant company and exercise rolled into one without having to worry about stretch marks or school fees.

But now I realise how a man must feel when his partner suggests having a child. Him Indoors, well actually Him At Work, wants to get a dog. Not a goldfish, or a cat, or a car, not even a joint mortgage but a four legged dependent with a life expectancy of ten to fifteen years.

Don't get me wrong, I've longed for the perfect canine companion since I feel in love with Snoopy cartoons. I've shed a tear in Lassie films, devoured the tale of Greyfriars Bobby, walked other people's dogs and even spent five weeks dog sitting in the British Virgin Islands and yet, acquiring a dependent of my own seems to have generated an unexpected tidal wave of nerves. I can feel my Sex and The City years coughing politely and sidling out of the front door and my LK Bennett kitten heels retreating into their cardboard boxes, out of harms way.

Maybe it's an age thing? Unmarried and child free, at thirty-two I still consider myself very young indeed. I like to think I could drop everything if summoned urgently to Los Angeles to write a screenplay. I could still decide to retrain as a doctor, a teacher or Madonna. And what if Brad Pitt needs somewhere to stay and it turns out he has an allergy to animal fur?

I know that, for now at least, my pelvic floor muscles will remain intact, I won't have stretch marks and I don't have to worry about registering our little one at a nursery.



Like most Brits of my age, and a fully paid up member of the most selfish generation yet, I know that a dog is for life and not just for Christmas.

Maybe I would feel better if we had a pre-pup? Some sort of guarantee that I am not, from this day forward, going to become second in line to his heart. Plus a promise that he will greet me before his dog on arrival home, love me if I spend more time in jeans and a fleece, that sort of thing. Then again, I've always been the sort of girl who knows that there are no guarantees in life, who doesn't like to know what's happening too far ahead and likes to be spontaneous.

It was only while sitting in Starbucks with a friend discussing the recent delivery of her baby (if only they did deliver instead of insisting you squeeze it out yourself) that I finally realised that it's not the thought of frizzy hair or early morning walks without make up that's making me reticent. It's not doubts about my relationship with the Dogfather either. But if we are going to get a dog, I want it to be well behaved, intelligent, adorable, Frisbee catching and anthropomorphic. Yes, I'm ashamed to admit I'm showing signs of being a competitive parent and this "child" will never be taking any exams.

My fear period in remission, we bought the books and saw the show. Not Crufts but

Discover Dogs at Olympia. Basically a petting zoo for thoroughbred Londoners like me, who only know about Golden Retrievers thanks to Blue Peter and Labradors because we collected milk bottle tops at school to buy Guide Dogs for the Blind, or something. I can identify English Bull Terriers thanks to Princess Anne's mauling a Corgi (also easy to recognise thanks to the Queen's), we can positively identify Collies in the park thanks to Lassie and St. Bernards because of the slobberings of Schnorbitz and Beethoven.

One afternoon of playing with dogs and owners of all shapes and sizes later, we'd decided on a Cocker Spaniel given our energy levels (high), size of house (medium), garden (small) and car (medium). We've also decided to go the girlie route – no leg cocking, more chilled out and able to cook and multitask. Well, almost. Having read up on temperament and debated the aesthetics of coat colour we've dismissed red (actually golden) on the grounds that they come with the minor risk of rage syndrome and the world is a scary enough place. We've rejected Blue Roan (smudged black/grey), Black & White (potential to look like a Friesian cow) and we're going for solid black – doesn't show up the dirt, if potentially difficult to spot at night.

Something about the specificity of our choice makes me uncomfortable. After all, we're after a faithful companion, not a mail order cardigan and there is a side of me that would like to feel that our dog has chosen us, that hopes there'll be a special unspoken bond the minute we lock eyes. I thought about going to Battersea Dogs Home. I have no problems with a genetically mixed bag (with grandparents from all over Europe, I am indeed one myself) but, we're no experts in dog training or behaviour so we've decided to start our dog parenting days with a baby rather than a teenager and a breed who allegedly like learning.

Decisions made, it turns out you can't just pop out and buy one. While friends are pretending they don't want to conceive but shagging like rabbits, I'm pretending it doesn't



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matter when we get our puppy and yet am scouring the Kennel Club website for new birth announcements in all my free moments. And then come the phone calls.

Only in the worlds of Gangsta rap and puppy purchasing can you get away with asking for a black bitch over the phone. Or at least you can if you can keep a straight face.

Breeders tend to be a serious bunch and more doggy than most. I'm sure they can tell I am bluffing Cocker Spaniel as I sweat and stammer my way through several questions with people who I just know are wearing a sweatshirt. I can tell several disapprove that I am unmarried/living in London/not an experienced dog owner/not planning to show

or breed from my pup to be. And then, after all that, every time it turns out that the bitches (dogs not breeders) are already spoken for.

Just when I was just thinking that there might be a national puppy shortage, as if by fate, my best friend's colleague's ex-dog's milkman's country cousin (or someone) had a litter of Working Cocker. Knowing nothing about this breed except that they are related to the ones we like and having instantly bonded with a photo of the mother and her litter in my inbox, I call right away and with one black bitch available, agree to an appointment on a Sunday morning at 10am, in Wiltshire.

And while friends expecting babies fret about a lifetime of responsibility, episiotomies,

and an end to lie-ins and expensive weekends away, I know that, for now at least, my pelvic floor muscles will remain intact, I won't have stretch marks and I don't have to worry about registering our little one at a nursery.

And, for any friends, relatives or long lost acquaintances reading, please, hold fire on the china statuettes of Cocker Spaniels, doggie coasters, posters, aprons, sweaters, tea towels, calendars etc. Soon we'll have a dog, we don't need the t-shirt. 🐾

• Jane's new novel *The Romancipation of Maggie Hunter* published by MIRA is out now, £6.99. Find out more about Jane at www.janesigaloff.com