

## **Fluffy little hybrid, be my baby**

**By Ruth Ostrow**

LOVE can make you do strange things. Which is why I am standing here in a pet shop, staring into a cage at six little balls of fluff that are rolling about and biting at dangly things. They mew loudly.

But not as loudly as the constant meowing from my own litter. Can we get a pet, Mum, please can we, Mum? Jenny has a cat, Cathy has a dog, Freda has a budgie.

Guilt has been mounting for a long time now as part of the dilemma: What do you do about an only child? Coming from a large and loving family, I always intended for her to have a brother or sister. It was part of the golden plan hatched so long ago when I used to push my dollies around in their pram. I would meet the perfect prince, we would have two or three children and all would be well in the land.

Best-laid plans. I met a prince but he already had two grown children from his first marriage and it took all of my seductive wiles to convince him to have one more. We had a beautiful baby girl and entered the ranks of the mounting new social group, single-child families.

Single-child families are all the vogue in Europe. With couples having children later, and women seeking career satisfaction, and consumer society urging people to value lifestyle above all else, and the trend towards blended families, more and more people are stopping at one. Fate has decreed that we are among them.

Suddenly, while we were debating whether to have another child, and he was thinking it through, and I was processing how I would balance a busy career with a newborn, time ran out. Just like that.

And so I'm standing here in the pet shop, looking at a cage of squealing, meowing things that I hope will give her a sense of the love and nurturing that I grew up with.

I've done my research on the internet. Cats seem the most appropriate for our living arrangement, our garden limitations, our temperament. So here we are just looking for the right one -- a process that I estimate will take a few weeks. The woman reaches in and pulls out a ball of fur. The kitten doesn't like me. It scratches and jumps back in its cage. A series of kittens are picked up, examined and put back. Time to go, I say to my daughter, who agrees.

Just then, a little creature wakes in the cage. Like in the movies, it walks over to us with pleading eyes. It's the most adorable thing I've seen. A mass of fluff. Half Persian, half Himalayan. Bred to make you weep with longing. But highly impractical. It is male, we want female. It is black, we want white. It is fluffy beyond belief, we want sleek, shiny. But its tiny face is holding us captive.

Can we hold him, I ask, as the warm thing climbs into my arms and on to my chest. The kitten is purring. I keep talking to the shop assistant, asking about appropriate cats for this climate, asking a million questions, and then I look down into those eyes. I slip deep into that hypnotic gaze. Hormones start flooding into my body.

Mum, please, I love him, can we have him, my daughter begs. And I realise it's the same pleading I've been hearing inside my head. My hormones and ovaries have been at me for ages as I enter my final fertile years: Please, Ruth, can't we have another baby? A cute little baby? Please, please, please?

"Please, Mamma?" my child says as I clutch the warm, living thing in my arms. It curls against me the way she used to do when I was breastfeeding. I feel the heart beating. My body fills with familiar love. And suddenly I'm thinking a truth I've forbidden my mind from really admitting: I am never going to have another baby.

I walk into a corner, holding the little moggie, and the strangest thing happens. Tears start filling my eyes. I am standing in a pet shop, in the middle of nowhere, under a pair of dark glasses, weeping quietly for something I never knew had made me so sad. And grieving a loss that all women finally have to face -- the imminent end of fertility.

The kitten in my arms is pawing at me. It needs a mother. There are many children and animals in the world who need love. I look down at the face again and let the purring be soft against my breast. I pull out my credit card. This moggie will cost a fortune, and not just in money.

But it will bring us a fortune, too. They say animals have a healing property. And as my daughter and I drive home, laughing at the furry ball, I know that he's already started healing a part of me and our little family I didn't realise was hurting.

[www.ruthostrow.com](http://www.ruthostrow.com)

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