

Letty Cottin Pogrebin

Born Free: A Feminist Fable*

At the stroke of midnight on January 1 in the year 2000, a baby was born.

Although it was reared in a rather typical way for the period, in a sense this particular child belonged to history. A record was kept of many details of its development, its childhood experiences and milestones, resulting in a well-documented story of an otherwise average child of the Twenty-first Century.

This is that story.

The child was named Millenny, in honor of the start of the third millennium, A.D. Now this may seem a peculiar name, albeit a most appropriate one for a child whose birthdate was 1/1/2000. But that is precisely the point.

You see, back in the 1960's and 70's, when women became conscious of their own identities, they insisted on retaining their own names. The children of these women were often given hyphenated appellations denoting both their fathers' and mothers' family origins. By the 1990's, the next generation of babies was carrying around heavy surnames like excess baggage. (Susan Greenberg-Ryan-Orsini-Jones comes immediately to mind.)

It became tedious to call the roll in school and tougher still to fit these names on social security cards. So, about five years before

*Adapted from Maggie Tripp (ed.), *Woman in the Year 2000*, New York: Arbor House, 1974. © 1974 by Maggie Tripp.

the turn of the millennium, a new law was passed that allowed babies to be given a single name, as long as that name was unique, creatively apt, and not likely to be mistaken for another. As parents began to name their kids Quellala and Talnafy and Xenobia, the new one-name names became more and more inventive and frequently quite poetic.

The Man, Millenny's father, had thought up the name at the very instant the baby was born — an instant that he joyously witnessed, since he was on the spot helping the baby to emerge from The Woman's birth canal. Having recently completed his six-month course in midwifery, he was entirely relaxed and confident about his role in the birth process. Actually, it was an uncomplicated delivery. The Woman had chosen a combination of acupuncture and the Lamaze natural childbirth method, so she too was feeling cheerful and in control.

She had read about the primitive straps, stirrups and sterile drapes that were in use up to twenty years before, but she could not imagine how women ever tolerated the helpless confinement and unnatural supine birth position. As it happens, The Woman was squatting over a mirror when Millenny was born.

From Millenny's point of view, the birth was a great trip. There were no glaring lights, no doctor's spanking, no tight swaddling clothes, no brisk, efficient hands examining her for flaws. Instead, she took her first breaths, without screams or spasms, and her lungs cleared as she was stroked and massaged. Then she was placed in a warm water bath that felt like the amniotic fluid she had known for nine months. When all was calm, Millenny reposed on her mother's belly, where she was lavished with admiration while The Woman and The Man savored the beautiful intimacy of the moment while music filled the air and the room was as warm as a womb.

There was great love between The Woman and The Man. They were among the minority of people in the country who had chosen to formalize their relationship in something that was called a "loyalty marriage," (although it was vastly different from marriages of a quarter-century before). They had entered into an agreement between themselves, outlining their expectations of one another, an equal division of responsibilities, and their goals for their relationship. Over the years, the agreement had been renegotiated and revised a few times to accommodate their changing needs; but it always contained a cancellation clause so that each party was free to leave after giving fair notice.

This was just one example of the many life-arrangements that were common in the year 2000. The Woman and the Man could have chosen to live together with no written contract, or to live apart, or each of them might have lived with other women or other men, or in a mixed communal situation. Then too, The Woman could have conceived a child by the man of her choice (or by artificial insemination), and raised the child as a single parent, with her friends and her community serving as the partner-parent. (By 2000, society had evolved a mature, human understanding that all children are our common future — and as such, we must care about them and use our collective resources and energies to nurture and enrich the life of every child.)

As a matter of fact, pregnancy itself could have been utterly passé by 2000. In the late 70's, scientists had perfected the technique of laboratory fertilization, and test-tube embryos had been successfully implanted in the wombs of three women. The next step was the development of an artificial uterus. However, this appeared to most people to be a terrifying misuse of technology. So in the year 1984, amid cries of "Brave New World" and "Remember George Orwell," the international scientific community had voted to outlaw such practices on moral grounds.

Medical brainpower was rerouted and a few years later, doctors found a cure for sterility. Shortly thereafter, hormone researchers invented male and female contraceptives that were completely safe (and conveniently dispensed by the government in banks and post offices).

With such signal medical advances, the plain truth was that everyone could conceive and anyone could prevent conception.

Oh, one more thing. By analyzing the female's fertility cycle and then precisely timing the act of conception, parents could determine the sex of their child at the point of fertilization. Choosing sex should have been big news. Instead, it turned out to be a rather ho-hum announcement for reasons which shall be clear in a moment.

All this background information is more than idle reminiscence. It is essential in order to explain why Millenny was not only a planned and wanted child, born to sensible, thoughtful parents — but a planned and wanted *girl* child, besides.

A girl as the first born child? Some people with long memories may marvel at this. For centuries male children were considered preferable — as heirs to the family fortune or enterprise, as carriers of the father's name, and as inheritors of the then-dominant male culture. We've all read those antique social psychology texts that reported stu-

dies in which twelve times more women than men wished they were the opposite sex. In the 60's, Edward H. Pohlman even found that pregnant women dreamed twice as often about male babies; and that more mothers of girl babies had post-partum depressions. In 1974, Candida and James Peterson found that of those with strong preferences for the sex of their first born, ninety per cent of the men and ninety-two per cent of the women wanted a boy.

This kind of male-infant favoritism faded away in the last decades of the century as the status of female human beings rose to the point where women and men became completely equal in the eyes of the law and one another. By the year 2000, women were casually accepted and well-represented in politics, education, business and the professions. Household roles were a matter of human ecology and personal preference, rather than sex-typed divisions of labor. Women's earning power matched men's in all fields. And the male contribution to child rearing was institutionalized in a new kind of full social parenthood which included paternity leaves, participation in the birth experience, and a role for all men (whether fathers or not) in the lives of society's children.

In this enlightened culture, there were no pat differences between all men and all women, except those that met the eye. What enlivened the human race were the millions of wondrous differences that have always existed between one person and another person, whatever their sex.

Since girl and boy babies were greeted with these equally opened hopes and expectations, couples tended to choose the sex of their child on the basis of personal taste or whim. In truth, despite the capacity to plan a baby's sex in advance, most people were actually ignoring the choice process altogether and letting the sperm fall where they may.

The reason why Millenny's parents had nonetheless decided to conceive a girl was quite a simple one: both The Man and The Woman had younger brothers and they felt like having a little girl around for a change.

When Millenny was brought home from the Natal Environment Center, The Woman and The Man invited some of their closest friends to a Life Celebration Ceremony. (This was an alternative ritual to the Christian christening of baptism and the Jewish *bris* for boys.) The friends brought gifts of personal significance, drank strawberry wine and toasted the new baby with warm wishes for a life of pleasure, usefulness and satisfaction. In a short speech, each of her

parents reaffirmed their hopes for Millenny and their intention to rear her with love and freedom. Both The Man and The Woman signed a pledge that Millenny would be free to leave them if, at any time in the future, she felt her life would be more rewarding away from her home and her parents.

Millenny flourished in infancy. Perhaps because she was delivered without birth trauma, or perhaps because she was breast fed by her mother and rocked regularly by her father, she was a contented child who slept well and suffered no attacks of colic.

Her mother worked in the morning from nine-to-one, and her father worked from one-to-five in the afternoon. The parents had chosen this job schedule since it accommodated work, child time and home-maintenance chores into each day.

They could have done as their neighbors did: work the three-day, eight-hour-a-day plan; or the four-day week with six-hours work each day. But The Man and The Woman preferred to put in their twenty-five-hour work week over the course of five days so that they were never too tired to enjoy each other, their daughter and their friends.

The child-care Center was a real boon. It was not considered a father or mother "substitute" but a vital, positive catalyst for child development. The Center accepted kids of any age, race or class. And it was open twenty-four hours a day. Millenny was taken there from the time she was a month old, whenever her parents wanted their half-day before or after work to themselves, or when they put in time on community projects. Millenny thrived there too, for the Center was staffed by caring men and women, child development specialists, painters, singers, acrobats, athletes, philosophers, dancers, craftspersons, educators, old people with patience, and young people with energy. A full-service health station at each Center assured children periodic medical and dental check-ups and immediate attention for their cuts and scrapes.

In the early months, when Millenny was fed at the breast, The Woman found it convenient to bring the baby to work, rather than travel to the child-care center to nurse her. Every office and factory was required to maintain an infant lounge for just that purpose. Many fathers also brought their babies to the infant lounges — so that they could spend coffee breaks with them or bottle feed them in a quiet place. Both the infant lounges and the child-care centers were free, first rate and supported by federal funds or subsidies.

Eventually, Millenny was spending less time at the infant lounge and more time at the child care Center. She attended the Margaret

Mead Center where a plaque on the wall bore a quotation from the ninety-nine-year-old anthropologist: "Child rearing is too complex for the individual small family unit to deal with." At the Center Millenny had a greater variety of playmates, caretakers, playthings, attention and affection than ever was possible in the days when children were raised solely by the mother in an isolated nuclear household, where the learning environment was only as rich as the parents' pocketbooks and educational levels allowed.

As she approached her first birthday, Millenny had been nourished by a number of devoted people of all ages: her parents (still the primary love objects and caretakers); her counsellor at the Center (the forty-year-old man who was in charge of the infant group); the older children and women and men specialists who regularly visited child-care centers to enrich the program. One of these specialists, a gymnast who came to exercise the babies, found Millenny to have a good spine, strong legs and an impressive grip for her age.

The gymnast's report presaged much that was to come. Millenny sat up by herself at six months, was a vigorous, speedy creeper, and walked quite steadily at nine months. This early physical and muscular development was accompanied by a devilish and adventurous spirit that often led Millenny into mischief.

By eighteen months she was jumping from her play cart into mud puddles. And the teachers at the center are still talking about the time she climbed up on the trampoline and bounced herself into the sandpile. When she became verbal, her speech was peppered with rhyming words which especially pleased her ear. Noticing this, her father began to read poetry to her at bedtime.

In 2002, when The Woman had to go to Mexico on a six-month business project, it was decided that she would take Millenny along. The Man would use these months for a return to school where he wanted to take courses in home economics and physics. He was a person who sought enrichment not "success." In the 1970's when he was in his teens, he had seen men driven to death by ambition and competitiveness, beset by ulcers and heart disease, and damaged by their emotional poverty. Now that men were in touch with their feelings, The Man enjoyed the freedom to express himself in many different areas.

Like most people, he considered education a lifelong endeavor, a continuing high voltage current that one plugged into at will. Since The Woman was earning enough salary, The Man felt comfortable about dropping out of his job, going to school and living on The Woman's earnings.

By the same token, The Woman was dedicated to her work, excited about the expedition and happy to take Millenny along. It would be no trouble. In all business travel, provisions were always made for the children of those workers who could not or would not leave their kids behind.

(Of course, there wasn't a hint of gossip when The Woman and Millenny left The Man at home for six months. Why should there be? Everyone understood that women and men — even those living in “loyalty marriage” arrangements — did not jettison their individual lives and interests when they formed their bond relationship.)

By the end of those six months, The Man returned to his job all the better for having mastered basic nutritional principles and having learned the effect of gamma rays on migratory birds. The Woman had completed her project and also unearthed some magnificent Mayan artifacts. Millenny was very nearly bilingual after the Mexican trip and could chat easily with her Spanish-speaking friends at the day-care center.

In the year 2003, when she turned three, Millenny celebrated her birthday twice. At home, on New Year's Day, her father baked a chocolate-walnut-orange cake from a recipe he had picked up in his home economics class. The Woman, who enjoyed decorating and designing, festooned the room with Fourth of July bunting and Christmas balls and Easter eggs and Halloween pumpkins because she felt Millenny's birthday was like all the holidays rolled into one.

After their meal, The Man and The Woman gave Millenny a very special gift, a small trampoline that they had made themselves. Millenny jumped and bounced and twisted and rolled on the trampoline until she exhausted herself.

The next day, she had another birthday party with her friends and teachers at the Margaret Mead Center. Thus began a tradition that was to last throughout her childhood: the tradition of Millenny's birthday parties with themes. Because of the extant record of many of these parties it is possible to trace the development of her wide interests through the subjects that she chose for each party theme.

To celebrate her third birthday, Millenny had asked for a Firehouse Party. The Woman, who loved to decorate, covered the little tables with red crepe paper and gave each child a tiny firefighter hat and a cupcake frosted to look like flames, with a real candle on top. Outside in the play yard, a “firepole” was set up so the children could slide down in their rush to the firetruck. Some children climbed ladders and rescued one another from the top of the jungle gym. Several

girls monopolized the big toy fire engine until a couple of the boys insisted on giving their dolls a ride in the vehicle. The party was a super success. When it was over, two girls and a boy announced they wanted to be firefighters when they grew up.

Millenny had no idea what she wanted to be. Anything was possible. And everything was fascinating.

When she was four, Millenny saw “The Nutcracker” ballet. That year she decided her party theme would be the Tschaikovsky ballet and all the kids would come dressed as toys or wooden soldiers. (Believe it or not, none of the guests wanted to be sugarplum fairies. Fairies had lost their glamor and most kids thought they were the least interesting of all make-believe characters.)

At five, Millenny came to her own birthday party dressed as a bride (though she refused to choose a boy to dress as the groom). All her party guests were attendants and wedding guests.

She never knew anyone who got married the old, fancy way but she had seen a movie from a half-century ago. She preened when she walked down “the aisle” in the white satin gown she’d made out of her grandmother’s wedding dress. But otherwise, there wasn’t much she could do with that theme, so Millenny was depressed when the party was over.

The following year, Millenny went to school. Again, there were many alternatives. Some kids were taught at home, others in their commune study centers, still others had individualized tutoring in their child-care centers until they were old enough for independent study. Millenny and her parents decided she would attend the Open Free School because it was exactly what its name implied. It was open and free and it tried to let people be the same. Students didn’t have to know a lot of facts, but they had to understand how to find out facts, and what facts were, or whether there was always such a thing as a fact at all. Most of the country’s educators had discontinued the practice of categorizing youngsters by age and sex. Gone were the spelling bees that pit the boys against the girls. Gone were the separate girl-boy lines for marching here and there — in fact there were no line-ups at all. Teachers weren’t flustered when girls got into fights — for anger was seen as a gender-free human emotion — and boys were comforted, not ridiculed, when tears filled their eyes.

The textbooks used in school were full of exciting stories of women and men who had contributed to society. Battles and territorial disputes were reported as the gruesome, ruthless realities that they were. Pictures, drawings, lists and bibliographies reflected women’s exist-

ence as well as men's. Textbooks also focused on children's rights and responsibilities at present and in various periods of history. And there were books that described how single people live or how ethnic groups preserve their special cultures or how past leaders made mistakes and current leaders were not infallible.

Human ecology was another course open to all children. Here kids could learn the multi-faceted art of self-sufficiency and perfect skills to help them cope with daily life. Girls and boys were taught to cook, do basic plumbing and wiring jobs, drive and repair a car or change a flat tire, sew and mend, sail a boat, build a fire, use power tools, keep a budget, read an annual report, change a baby's diaper.

In other courses, community organizers shared information about coalition politics and lobbying. Parents and child-care experts taught parenthood skills to students who thought they might want to have children someday. Revolutionaries were given a forum in which to present their radical solutions to contemporary problems.

Tired children could sleep in school; hungry children could eat there; sick children could find succor and medical care. At the Open Free School, there were no misfits because there was a place for every child.

Into this responsive learning community came Millenny with her love of poetry and her explosive physical energy and her new passion for baseball. Millenny had seen her favorite player, Joanna Cobb, in action in an exciting World Series game that filled the girl's dreams for weeks. Joanna had made a lightning double play, putting out the man on first and the woman on second. (Baseball's sex barrier had fallen in 1983, when the young girls who cut their teeth in Little League in the 1970's became good enough to break into the majors.)

For her sixth, seventh and eighth birthdays, Millenny chose baseball as the theme of her parties. There was always a seven-inning game to play before the birthday cake could be cut. Millenny's red baseball mitt had been oiled and softened until it fit her hand like a second skin. She played every day and showed considerable talent for the sport. She didn't have to con her way into older kids' games anymore. All the boys and girls wanted her on their teams.

One weekend, Millenny's father persuaded her to forsake baseball and go with him to a horse ranch. He enjoyed riding horseback through the woods and he wanted to share his enthusiasm with his daughter. Millenny loved the horses and the stables. The Man took Millenny riding at the public city stables every Saturday morning. Week after week Millenny and her father got on line at daybreak in

order to reserve a horse for the first half hour. On crisp, transparent mornings they could gallop through the park without seeing another human being. Just the two of them, their horses and the wind.

For months after her introduction to horses, Millenny wore only ranch clothes, boots and chaps and Western hats. It was no surprise, therefore, when she asked for a Cowgirl-Cowboy party as her ninth birthday celebration.

The surprising thing was that this request led to one of the very few recorded disputes to have arisen between Millenny and her parents.

With few reasons to lock horns, harmony had been habit-forming.

Until the Cowgirl-Cowboy party. In this altercation, The Woman and The Man exercised their authority much in the way that parents did in the last century and for centuries before that. The conflict was sparked when Millenny wanted a true-to-life Western party, and her parents drew the line at toy guns.

Even though guns had always been forbidden in her home, and all war toys were prohibited from her school and child-care center, Millenny insisted that gun play was an essential part of any self-respecting Cowgirl-Cowboy party.

“Other parents allow war toys in their houses,” said Millenny, with all the sass that children have spewed since time began. (Some things just never change.)

The Woman and The Man sat down with their child and talked about the futility of violence and the tragedy of war. They described how gun control laws had cut street crime in half and how world peace had been miraculously maintained for over a decade.

Millenny listened to her parents' position. Then she thought for a long time about how objects can become symbols of one's values. She thought about having cited what “other people” do, and she realized that she couldn't live an authentic life as Millenny, if she began imitating others or adopting their standards as her own. She agreed that there would be no toy guns at her party and it was a great party — with a lassoing contest and “hayrides” on Millenny's wagon, brim full of straw, and nine prancing ponies, one for each year, painted on the birthday cake with yellow frosting.

Nine was a watershed age for Millenny. It was the year she elected to take an ethics course at school. Suddenly, right or wrong seemed to be demanding questions. Her conscience kept insisting on defini-

tive answers. At the same time, peer pressure often promoted choices that contradicted her own instincts. When challenged to do her own thinking Millenny saw that having her parents' support made it easier to act on her opinions, no matter how unpopular.

As she moved into the second decade of her life, the girls and boys who became her real friends were those who understood. They were children of similar straightforwardness, children who were honest and genuine and free.

The boys had never learned to disdain girls — so communication between the sexes was zesty, loose and relaxed. Playing sports with girls was no different from playing with boys. There was no shame in losing to a girl because boys no longer had to protect the obsolete male superiority myth.

Without pretense between them, girls and boys could forge intimate friendships; without role-playing, there could be shared strengths and open confessions of weakness. Rather than waste the childhood years on teasing and enmity, girls and boys were unconsciously laying the groundwork for adult male-female relationships that would be based on respect and affection.

Just as cross-sex friendships prospered, so did same-sex friendships provide warm companionship. Boys talked to one another about their terrors as well as their triumphs. It was not uncommon for boys to hug and kiss each other in greeting, just as girls and women had always done.

Girls met on common grounds to exchange experiences, plans and dreams. In the first part of her adolescence, Millenny found girl friends who enjoyed many of the same activities. She found confidantes she could trust with her deepest feelings, and girls who seemed to understand her thoughts without a word being spoken.

One of her closest girl friends was more sexually sophisticated than the rest. This girl helped Millenny examine her own genitals and become comfortable with her awakening sexuality. Female sexuality was taught at the Open Free School and all the youngsters understood that sexual pleasure and procreation were not necessarily related. But it was invaluable to have a knowledgeable friend who could make these lessons tangible.

Such intimate discussions were quite unremarkable in the year 2013. Girls and women routinely assisted one another with personal or sexual problems. Moreover, adolescent sexuality was no longer a taboo subject. America, like other cultures through the ages, came

to accept the fact that when the body is ready, the spirit is usually more than willing. Nature had been trying to tell us this for a long, long time. Social mores began to change when Americans realized that the greatest immorality was, not sex, but war, hunger and assault on human dignity. Since 1981, gay people enjoyed all their civil rights and in the twenty-first century nobody cared much about anyone's sexual persuasion unless they were in bed together.

The Woman and The Man had always been heterosexual people. They may well have wished Millenny to choose the same avenue for her erotic pleasures. In any case, they knew from observation and from sheaves of studies and statistics that neither they nor anyone else could program their daughter's sexuality.

Years ago, parents had nearly expired trying to coerce their children into heterosexuality. Fathers sent their sons to military schools to "make men" of them. Mothers had trundled their daughters to charm classes in the hope of making a "tomboy" ladylike and feminine. In the end, children became the women and men they were meant to be all along.

Those who judge others by an arbitrary "moral" code, must make do without information on Millenny's sexual preferences. There are no entries in this category. The information was simply deemed irrelevant.

Unfortunately, a lot more is missing from this twenty-first century biography. For, sad to say, the story ends here. Did Millenny live on a Women's Farm or enter a "loyalty marriage?" Did she bear any children or was she unwilling to add another life to America's population of three hundred million? What work engaged her energies? We'll never know. And perhaps this information, too, is irrelevant, except as documentary minutiae of the third millennium.

What is relevant about Millenny's story is its perspective on the making of a woman out of a child — a complex, exultant, intoxicating and beautiful process that many of us are trying hard to understand. Millenny's life provides some of the clues we need. It took love and liberty to make the woman. It took a network of caring people. It took a responsive and resourceful social support system and an attitude that our children are our natural treasure. It took nurturant men and women and gender-free options and art and good health and friendship and physical exuberance and poetry. In a sense, Millenny was a product of the best that a humane culture had to offer. Its children were its gifts to the future.

The record stops here because along about the year 2016, Millenny tired of having her life observed so minutely. One day she decided to

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slip away to live in another place where the historians would never find her.

She told The Woman and The Man that she wanted to lead a natural, uninspected life and take her place in the society that nourished her. Her parents loved their daughter dearly, but they cherished the brave independence that inspired her decision.

Fulfilling the promise they had made years before at the Life Celebration Ceremony, they let her go.

The End

Author's Note: If this Fable reads at times as science fiction, the fault lies in our closed minds and limited vision. For nothing in Millenny's story has been invented out of whole cloth. The patterns exist, the resources are there, the consciousness is rising. Only the commitment is lacking. Right now we have the potential to enact the life scenario imagined here. Will it take us twenty-five years to emancipate children and parents from the prison of stifling roles and outdated conventions? If I could answer that question, I would have written not a fable, but a prophecy.