



## What 'The Back-Up Plan' Gets Wrong About Single Mothers

***Women who decide to have children without a partner don't fit into rom-com clichés.***

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I was sitting in a darkened movie theater waiting for Jennifer Lopez's new movie, *The Back-up Plan*, to start, when I got an e-mail on my BlackBerry. Subject line: "Breakthrough Egg Freezing Technology Offers Women a New 'Backup Plan.'" The press release, from Shady Grove Fertility in Rockville, Md., was touting a technology that "flash freezes" a woman's eggs until she's ready to conceive. It was a classic moment of life imitating art.

The two seem to be inextricably linked these days. The insemination of single women is an ever-growing reality in the world of reproductive medicine: births to unmarried women shot up 26 percent in just five years, between 2002 and 2007. So it's not surprising that single motherhood is part of the current Hollywood zeitgeist. Turkey basters and morning sickness—what could be better entertainment? The J. Lo movie, which features an unknown sperm donor, had its debut last week; in *The Switch*, scheduled to be released in August, Jennifer Aniston plays our heroine, an unmarried 40-year-old woman, whose donor is a guy named Roland. (Or is it her +++best friend, Wally? [\[\[www.imdb.com/video/imdb/vi2220491801/\]\]](http://www.imdb.com/video/imdb/vi2220491801/)+++.)

*The Back-up Plan* opens with Lopez, playing the single, pet-store-owning Zoe, with her legs high in the air immediately following her insemination. Moments later, she meets Mr. Right, a cheese-making hunk named Stan, when they happen to jump into the same cab at the same time. Aside from the usual rom-com high jinks, though, the most ridiculous portrayal is the "Single Mothers and Proud" support group that Zoe joins, with its pudgy tent-dress-wearing leader and hippie, man-hating, tattoo-laden gal pals. They look like they haven't showered in weeks. "We do what we have to when we don't have a penis partner," Mama Tent says to the group.

The film isn't getting rave reviews. In Roger Ebert's words, "It plays like an unendurable TV commercial about beautiful people with great lifestyles and not a thought in their empty little heads." It also bears no resemblance to what single career-minded women go through when they reach what is often a heartbreaking revelation: if I wait to meet the right guy, I may be too old to have a baby. Anne Catherine Hundhausen, 38, is living this reality now. "I wanted

the dream: the two kids, the husband,” she says. “I’ve had a lot of wonderful relationships. I dated creative, interesting men. But nothing’s ever panned out in terms of marriage and a family.”

For the last two years, Hundhausen has researched every aspect of single motherhood. She’s interviewed her ob-gyn, visited a sperm clinic, and had long, involved conversations with single women who’ve done it on their own. She trekked to Texas to talk to a 26-year-old woman who is determined to find the anonymous sperm donor her mother used to get pregnant. And she flew to Colorado to interview Wendy Kramer and her son, Ryan, who launched the +++Donor Sibling Registry [\[\[www.donorsiblingregistry.com\]\]](http://www.donorsiblingregistry.com)+++ to connect offspring with their donors and their half-siblings around the country.

Hundhausen, a freelance media producer and independent documentary filmmaker in New York City, chronicles all of this in +++*Single Choice: Many Lives* [\[\[www.singlechoicemovie.com\]\]](http://www.singlechoicemovie.com)+++ , which is scheduled to be screened next week in New York at Hunter College’s *Reel Dialogue* documentary series. Where *The Back-Up Plan* has “the approximate depth of a cookie sheet,” in the words of +++one reviewer [\[\[www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/movies/20100423\\_J-Lo\\_s\\_new\\_film\\_likable\\_and\\_forgettable.html\]\]](http://www.philly.com/philly/entertainment/movies/20100423_J-Lo_s_new_film_likable_and_forgettable.html), *Single Choice* walks viewers through the sticky ethical and practical challenges. Single motherhood is about so much more than the path from insemination to birth. It’s an emotional lifelong journey filled with unknowns: Should I really go ahead with this? Am I equipped to take this on? When’s the best time to tell my child?

There are no guarantees when it comes to baby making, no matter how it happens. But the use of donor sperm ups the complexity in spades. In Hundhausen’s film, a professor who got pregnant with donor sperm at 40 talks about her son’s diagnosis with autism, a diagnosis that several other boys conceived using the same donor have also received. This raises all sorts of questions about how much sperm banks really know about their donors’ medical histories, and what we can ever really know about a sperm donor. The banks test specimens for infectious diseases like HIV, and some genetic disorders, including cystic fibrosis. But there are no gene tests—yet, anyway—for autism and other developmental disabilities, such as ADHD.

Learning more about their health histories is one reason offspring may want to track down their donors. Some feel it’s also their right to know where their DNA came from, and they may want to meet their genetic relatives. The young donor-conceived woman from Texas says donors shouldn’t be allowed to remain anonymous. She’s happy to be alive but says, “I feel like my biological father sold me for \$25.” And there’s an ethical debate, too, over how many is too many. An enthusiastic 21-year-old sperm donor interviewed on camera says he’d be fine with about 100 “little mes” running around. Ryan Kramer says the limit should be five.

All of this leaves Hundhausen, who bookends the film with her personal story, confused. “I don’t know what I’m going to do,” she says. The pendulum swings continuously: “There are days when I’m thinking, ‘I’ve got to do this,’ and other days when I think, ‘What if I did this

and something horrible happens or I'm not happy?" Recently, she bought some books on the advantages of being childless and started envisioning a life of travel, including trips to France with her beloved nieces. She didn't give up on single motherhood, but decided to put the overwhelming feelings aside and thought she'd found some peace. Weeks later, she went for a routine ob-gyn appointment and her doc said bluntly, "Don't wait."

That is reality. The romantic-comedy genre doesn't need to be laden with the complicated details of real life; movies are, after all, a getaway into fun and fantasy. The problem with *The Back-up Plan* is that it goes overboard on the stereotypes, it's agonizingly predictable, and it's annoyingly Hallmarky. There is one part that gets it right in an artistic kind of way. During the opening credits, an animated female character walks through life with baby-tinted glasses. A couple in a restaurant clink glasses, which morph into baby bottles; TV screens in a shop window air fetal ultrasounds; a policeman's whistle turns into a pacifier. Yes, it's chick-lit sappy stuff, but plenty of women will identify with it. When you want to get pregnant, big bellies and babies are suddenly everywhere—the stuff of reality and the stuff of dreams.