

A Therapist Walks Into a Bar

S3E5: An Untakebackable Choice

Episode Transcript

[News clips about millennials not having babies]

Narration: Most of my life, whether or not I would eventually make babies didn't feel like a choice. Not because anyone was directly trying to force me. I imagine adults in my life may have said stuff like "when you have kids someday" but really, it didn't feel like a choice because I always assumed I would and that I'd be able to. The idea of not doing it didn't even cross my mind.

Nuala: I actually held a baby yesterday for about an hour. She's eight weeks old. Yeah, just the sweetest little thing and I love them. I really, I just love babies and she fell asleep in my arms with her arms way above her head the way they do, like they're cheering and I just sat there watching her little eyelashes move and playing with her little feet and marveling over how tiny her fingers were

Narration: Now 34, single, running a business, producing a podcast, I'm caught in a cycle of disbelief - disbelief that I'm not a mother yet and disbelief at the idea that I easily could have been and at a much younger age. By my age, my mom already had 4 kids and would go on to have 3 more. The gravity of how being a mom through these formative years would have changed me feels impossible to comprehend. And the way my life looks now is nothing like what I imagined - which is exciting in some ways, and hard to grapple with in others.

It can often feel like there are only 2 choices and you have to feel 100% happy with your choice once you've made it. Oh, and also, no matter what choice you make, people will judge you.

I'm Lily Sloane and this is A Therapist Walks Into a Bar.

Lily: Oh my God, I have to unbutton my pants,

Nuala: I have stretchy pants. So there's no button to unbutton

Lily: Mine are pretty stretchy. But there's a button.

Nuala: [laughing] My name's Nuala. I'm a reporter living in San Francisco. Um, I grew up in the desert. That is something that always feels important to you. Who I am. Uh, yeah. And I have a dog and a cat and a great boyfriend.

Narration: Getting comfortable on my couch after dinner, I talked with my baby loving friend about her choice, one that doesn't fall into a convenient category.

Lily: Yeah. So you wanted 10 kids then how many kids do you want now?

Nuala: I really still want 10 kids and I have decided not to have any.

Narration: When I first heard her say this, I wondered how this could be a possible choice someone could be ok with. As a therapist this piqued my curiosity but also as a woman trying to figure out what choices I'll make as things out of my control don't go the way I imagined.

The choice to have children is not quite like other choices in life. Because it's pretty untakebackable. And like many other choices, saying yes to one thing and no to another can be full of complicated feelings.

Nuala: I think there's always sadness when you anticipate another path, right? There's always, there's, there's that fork in the road and you're always going to wonder a little bit about what happened ~~in the other~~, on the other path.

Narration: Nuala's path up to now, in this particular dimension of the multiverse, began with her, an only child in the desert.

Nuala: New Mexico, rural, northern New Mexico. Yeah. Very wild.

All of my childhood memories are from the desert of waking up, especially in the mornings. I love the mornings in the desert. I love the light. Uh, I love the quiet, um, the animals, you know, picking up, we called them horny toads when I was a kid or these big bet big fat frogs that would hop around. Desert Frog. Yeah. Desert is just such a huge part of who I am as, as my life has been so transient. It's, it's the one constant and a nature is very much like a church to me so that, that nature in particular is a little bit like my religion.

I read just voraciously as a child I think partly because I was so lonely and didn't have anything else to do so I would just disappear into these books

Narration: Nuala's parents divorced when she was 7 and living so far out of populated areas, her parents going through their own stuff, she spent a lot of time entertaining herself.

Nuala: and there was one series of books, that was all about orphans and I just became obsessed with the idea that they could adopt me an older brother. My best friend had an older brother and he had cute friends and he took care of her and he stood up for her on the bus when people bullied her and God, I just, I would have done anything for an older brother. So for years at the top of my birthday and Christmas lists was an older brother even though my parents were separated.

Lily: So I am curious about when, like how far back you remember thinking you wanted to have children?

Nuala: So I don't remember really being conscious about my desire to have children until I was in college. Um, and I, uh, went through a really terrible breakup with a woman, um, after two years. And at that point, I'd already been thinking about families all

throughout my childhood. I had latched onto big families. It was just, you know, whoever it was in my friend group who had a big family, all of a sudden I was being invited there for Thanksgiving, for Christmas, you know, and it was the same with this relationship.

So when that ended, I kind of lost a huge section of what I had started to consider family as well. Um, and it was at that point that I realized I was going to have to build my own, that I couldn't rely on other people's families to hold me.

And so I, um, shortly after the breakup started seeing a man and it was around then that I got really into the idea of having lots and lots of babies. I mean really 10 was not, not a false number. That was a number that I was really committed to. Um, and I had an enormous physical biological reaction to children at that time as well. It was, you know, I'd be walking down the baby aisle at target and see these little shoes. And it was, it was like a punch in the gut. I mean, it was so physical, it was so incredibly physical, this desire for babies and, you know, holding them or if I could hear them crying in a restaurant and it's almost like my breasts would start hurting. I just really felt this enormous biological drive to have children. Um, and that was when I was starting to really reflect on my childhood and all the things that went wrong and the ways that it could have been happier. And I definitely was thinking about creating my future in that way about creating my own family.

Lily: So when you imagined having 10 children, like what, what did you picture that life being like?

Nuala: I always thought I would be a really good mother. My desire for 10 children was definitely tied into living somewhere rural so that they could just be completely free and off leash and chickens and almost like a homestead in a way. I don't remember getting really realistic about how I would afford such a family. It became this beautiful thing to imagine being needed and imagine being able to provide support to people that I loved. Um, and to just have a house full of people was such an exciting idea to me.

Narration: We're fed this binary of want and don't want. Especially in a capitalist culture that's about telling us we can have it all. Convincing us we always have a choice. And yes, some things are a choice. Some things aren't. Like, if you want biological children and everything lines up to provide that except your body - even if you can afford the most expensive fertility treatments medical science can deliver.

And here we are, trying to "decide" in the midst of innumerable factors outside of our control and innumerable unknowns about how this will actually impact our lives.

Which brings me back to Nuala's decision.

Lily: Yeah. So you wanted 10 kids then how many kids do you want now?

Nuala: I really still want 10 kids and I have decided not to have any.

Lily: that, that really, really hit me hard the way you just said that. How does it feel for you to say I want 10 kids and I'm choosing to not have any?

Nuala: I think I, I feel especially talking about it in this bigger picture of, of the context of my childhood and my, my desires and past relationships. I feel so sad for little Nuala. I think she really would have been a good sister to somebody.

Narration: This might be hard to understand. How could she possibly deny herself this happy vision, an experience of something she missed so badly growing up? I think the big question people ask in these situations is “what if you regret it?”

Lily: How did. So yeah, it kind of walk me through how this decision came about. Like when, when did you realize, was it gradual? Was it like sudden what, how did that go down?

Nuala: It happened over the span of a couple years.

Narration: After a really painful breakup with her ex which was then followed by the cautious start of a new relationship. Despite her caution, it was hard not to wonder about what the future might look like with this person she was growing attached to.

Nuala: But I started falling for him you know. I was already kind of thinking about how cute our kids would be and what a good dad he would be, you know, not necessarily grounded in reality but just, just carrying on that daydream to another person. And then I learned that he didn't want kids and it was such a moment. I can remember every single detail of it.

Lily: Tell me. Tell me every single detail of that moment.

Nuala: We'd been dating for a couple months and we went to a little Taqueria and we got Tacos, you know, a big plates of Tacos. And I don't remember exactly how it came up. I remember everything else, the fluorescent lighting, the floors, there was only one other table of people in there. Um, and he just casually mentioned in between eating a carne asada Taco that he didn't want children. And it was, oh my God, I just remember the physical pain. My stomach just dropped and this huge wave of sadness just swept over me, you know, really, really immense. And the interesting thing is the sadness was not about his lack of desire for children, but it was about that I, I couldn't be with him because I really wanted kids and I liked him so much already at that point. And it was, I was staring in the face of this possibility of falling in love with someone who didn't want the same type of future that I did. That was really, it was pretty earth shattering.

Lily: You really had. You had gotten to that place where you were sort of picturing it with him and then he totally ruined it with his reality.

Nuala: He really did. It's not something that I ever wanted to change in him and yet, you know, as time went on I didn't break up with him.

Lily: Yeah, what's up with that?

Nuala: You know, I was lost and he was, he was there and I just slowly kept falling deeper and deeper in love with him and in that falling in love with this person, started truly questioning for the first time in maybe really in my life, but especially in that span of years about why I wanted children at all.

It really dates back to, you know, all of the pain that I was feeling as a kid and in my past two relationships to be honest. I mean, there was a lot of loneliness in those relationships as well and so I hold a lot of love in my heart for, for that desire and that the person who really desired to fill that hole with children, but I think, you know, having a really amazing relationship. It's just, it's so great that I feel like I have a life partner and it's not like he is a sibling in any, in any regard. [laughing] Um, but, but I have my person, I have someone who is on my team, I have, I have a life partner to navigate all of this stuff with and I don't feel as lonely.

There's all these other dreams that I'm going to be able to fulfill regardless of whether or not, you know, I have kids. So it's, it's, it's exciting.

Narration: Nuala could easily say "I don't want kids" but that's not true. It's more complex than that. And I think it might be for all of us. Just like wanting them feels complex to me. There's things about it that I dread. And there's even a part of me now that can put my impatience about attaining this thing aside, and enjoy what my life is like without them. Like Nuala, there's other parts of my life, outside of partnership, that have turned out differently and it's interesting to feel into the possibilities that have come along with that.

Lily: what's, what's exciting for you about it?

Nuala: Well, it's, it's liberating. I'm, I'm a reporter and I'm horrendously underpaid, always overworked. And neither of those things go well with raising children. I think it's possible. Um, you know, I was raised very poor and I grew up more or less Okay. Um, but it's not something that I want to ever feel like I have to sacrifice. I think there's a lot of people who work in journalism who ended up leaving because they have a family and it's too hard to make the bills.

Narration: But...there's another reason too.

Nuala: I have been a long time a sufferer of anxiety and depression and I think my mother has too and I think at various times my father has and both of those relationships I was really aware of their mental health when I was growing up and nothing, nothing was extreme, no one was hospitalized, nothing like that. But the weight of living with someone who suffers from depression is, is really real. And I think even when you're a kid and you can't put your finger on what it is, it can be very, very profound to come home from school and realized that the house is a mess and your dad is still in bed and he won't want to cook you dinner. Um, and that's, those are traits that I see in myself all the time and I'm working constantly to maintain any semblance of, you know, mental health, good mental health. And so there is an element of me not wanting to put kids through my mental health issues, um, and making the decision not to have kids is in part for their sake on that level. And then also really for mine because as much as I think kids

would bring me an enormous amount of joy, I also know that my mental health would really suffer to have to have children in the stress of having children.

Lily: Yeah. I mean it is a tremendous amount of stress. What feelings come up for you around that kind of thought process in conclusion? Like are there self judgements that come with it?

Nuala: I think it's such a personal decision and I would never judge anyone else no matter their mental health state for choosing not to have children or to have children. I think, you know, my, my desire and my concerns about my mental health or just super, super personal. it honestly just becomes one more factor, right? It's like the finances and working a job in which I'll never be paid. Well, the fact that I'm madly in love with someone who doesn't want kids, um, the fact that I struggle from depression, you know, that it kind of just is added to the list of reasons why this is not a good idea for me.

Narration: It strikes me that the very thing that could so easily be a reason TO have children could so easily be a reason to NOT have children. Which of course makes these choices so much trickier.

In a way, I'm grateful my path hasn't made it so easy to have the kids I always thought I wanted. I've had a lot of time to think about it. Doubt myself. Question everything. I've had panic attacks over it. And then come out the other side more willing to ask myself really pointed questions like: what if this doesn't work out the way you envision it? Are you willing to try to have a kid on your own? And when I realized that right now the answer is for me is "No." I know I'm gonna be ok either way. And I don't mean "ok" like no big deal. It will be a big deal. It's just that it's possible not having a kid won't destroy me. Of course it will probably always nag at me that I missed out on something that always seemed like a cornerstone to being human. But isn't that life? There's always stuff that nags at us. Possible futures left in the past, or maybe they're being explored by other Lily's and other Nuala's on different timelines.

Sitting with uncertainty, ambiguity, unknowns, and still having to make difficult choices we can never be 100% certain about is not something we're well suited to. And usually the people around us have a hard time being in that place with us as well.

Nuala: but I know that there are other women out there who want children and who are comfortable in their decision not to have them. It's just really people don't know what to do when, when they, when I tell them that

Narration: To be honest, this whole topic makes me really uncomfortable. I just want to know what's going to happen. Sometimes I envy Nuala making her choice because she's taken control of the question and answer. But I'm kind of waiting which I'm so bad at, I even asked a Ouija Board about it recently. It's response? "TBRAHP3QN then a long pause followed by 6" so...yeah.

For a choice like this there's no simple solution. There's only living. And feeling. And observing your internal experience - hopefully you'll find a voice in there to guide you when there are decisions to be made, another to comfort you when you've lost access to other pathways, and another to help you find meaning and joy in the places you go.

Nuala: Can I tell you about this plan that I came up with in my head? So it was at this baby shower. Okay. It wasn't completely my idea, but I'm stealing it because no one else is gonna do it because the people who came up with it are having babies, but I have the idea since I'm not having kids, that means I miss out on all the baby shower stuff. So my plan is to hold a baby shower where we do all the things that you can't do if you're pregnant. So sit in hot tubs and eat Sushi and lunch meat and do a slip and slide and get really drunk. And then everyone gives me presents for my life, for my kid free Life. I actually think I might do this next year, maybe when I turned 35.

Lily: I better be invited

Nuala: Oh yeah, you have to do shots with me though

Lily: Well hopefully I won't be pregnant then.

Credits:

A Therapist Walks Into a Bar is produced by me, Lily Sloane. Music and sound design also by me.

Thank you Nuala for opening up to me with your story. I can't wait to follow up as the years go by and our lives continue to take surprising twists and turns.

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Also, tune in for the next episode - I have a big announcement to make.

Thanks for listening!