



LIFE'S *quiet* AWAKENINGS

THE QUARTER-LIFE CRISIS, THE MIDLIFE CRISIS... THE TRUTH IS, WE CAN'T PREDICT WHEN WE'LL FIND OURSELVES AT A TURNING POINT – OR WHAT WILL HAPPEN NEXT. FOUR WRITERS SHARE WHAT THEY'VE LEARNT FROM THEIR OWN MOMENT OF CATHARSIS, AND COMING OUT THE OTHER SIDE

ILLUSTRATIONS *by* ANNA BU KLIEWER

THE BEGINNING *of all* CRISES *by* REBECCA WATSON

I didn't realise my first crisis was a crisis until a year after it had happened. I was in my late teens and, afterwards, I remembered the incident with a split lens. The reality of it lingered but I would evade it, planting on top a story I told myself. There wasn't an exact moment I knew the truth; it was a creeping realisation that, a year ago, I had been raped.

In some ways, I had been prepared for this experience: not of being raped, but the aftermath. I had spent my early teens feeling outside of my body. I remember the first moment it happened: looking in a full-length mirror and seeing a sticker from a piece of fruit that had managed to plant itself on the bottom of my T-shirt. Glancing down to peel it off, I could no longer see it, but back to the mirror, it was there. Breasts grow slowly, but the revelation that I had them was sudden: an exhilarating, fearful *Oh!* Until then, I had never thought to pay much attention to my own body. But after this, there were two of me: myself, and the body I inhabited.

Those moments grew, training my eyes to look back at myself as well as out: a strange man saying something I didn't understand as he traced the line of my newly curving figure with his eyes; boys at school insisting that girls must earn the right to sit at the back of the classroom by undoing the top three buttons of their shirt when the teacher wasn't looking.

Years later, I would read John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and come across the lines: 'Men look at women. Women watch >

themselves being looked at.' I read this passage and was grateful. This was the double-sight! Being inside your body while feeling outside of it.

I thought a lot about these moments in the aftermath of realising I had been raped. I recalibrated my own memories: not just recognising that what I had considered aggressive, unwanted sex had been rape, but about *all* the times I had seen double. Those moments were tiny but added up. I had layered over reality since puberty. Sometimes it was a coping mechanism, other times it was an anxious reflex telling me to fear the worst.

These layers wouldn't have been such a problem if I hadn't kept them a secret. But during puberty I wasn't old enough to deal with my own body. And besides, it didn't feel like mine. I didn't know how to articulate feelings I'd never had before. Somehow, I knew shame already. I would watch my hips grow, my boobs swell, my face grow longer, and I'd stay quiet. Where was the magic of becoming a woman? I wanted my eyes back inside my head, I wanted to return to not being looked at. Later, after I had been raped, I knew the pattern. What was the easiest way to handle the experience? Which way would not affront the man who had done it? There I was, outside my own body. Silent. Thinking not how I could help myself, but how I could make things easier for the man who had raped me.

When I confronted that, lots of other things began to make sense. I recognised the narratives I had built; the way I had often detached myself from my body. I realised I'd prioritised other people's relationships with my body over my own.

Now, I am better at recognising how my mind and body play tricks on me. The realisation that I had been raped was in some way the resolution. It drew me back into my own body. Once I had realised it, then it became a crisis I could speak about.

Little Scratch by Rebecca Watson is out next January

"I RECOGNISED THE NARRATIVES I HAD BUILT. I had prioritised OTHER PEOPLE'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH MY BODY OVER MY OWN"

The CONVERGENCE CRISIS

by RACHEL FRIEDMAN

I had just turned 30 when I drove a 12ft removal van around Lower Manhattan, navigating 20 blocks with a death grip on the steering wheel, too terrified to turn off my hazard lights. I was moving out of the spacious apartment I'd shared with my husband of five years, and into a cramped flat with a roommate. In my haze of sadness, I'd insisted on driving the van myself, in the misguided belief that it would help me to feel empowered as I embarked on my newly single life.

Cut to 32-year-old me. After publishing a book in my twenties, my second book proposal failed to get a contract. I'd naively assumed that one book would naturally lead to two books, three, four. That my career was on an inevitable uphill trajectory towards 'making it' – where I'd achieve critical acclaim, enough money to write full time, and invitations to parties thrown by famous writer friends.

At 34, I've finally got my bearings, professionally and personally. But wait, what am I holding? Surprise! It's a positive pregnancy test! We've only been together for five months, but turns out that practising safe sex offers no guarantees.

Then there's me at 35, sobbing with joy as I hold my baby for the first time, my heart full in the way you're told it will be. And me a few weeks later, sobbing as I struggle to breastfeed around the clock, exhausted and overwhelmed, not to mention scared I'll never have time or be rested enough to write again.

But fast forward six months: I'm celebrating a book contract. Followed by me as I am now, a 38-year-old single parent finally holding said published book because it took longer than expected: turns out balancing a baby, a breakup and one's ambition isn't as easy as Instagram makes out.

Our thirties are more of a biological and financial pressure cooker than ever, especially for women. Key demographic milestones – marriage, having kids, buying a house – are converging in this decade for more and more of us. It's a time when we're reckoning with various 'shoulds' – we should be married and have a baby (or two), be more successful, be happier. Even when we get what we wanted, it's not always how we thought it would be, which is its own kind of reckoning.





Our current self-help culture insists that with enough hard work, grit, ambition and vision boards, we can achieve greatness in all areas of our lives. We're encouraged to rebrand failures as opportunities, to believe that we alone control our destinies. It follows, then, that if life zigzags or veers entirely off course, we only have ourselves to blame. Even proactively changing course can feel like failure when you've been schooled to persevere at all costs because the only failure is giving up on something.

I spent the first half of my free-spirited twenties backpacking, and I was still screwed up from my parents' divorce, so I never planned to marry young. But I was more shocked to find myself divorced. If I had to sum up the reasons with Twitter-type efficiency, I'd say we were one of those heady young romances that slowly disintegrates as each person grows into the adult version of themselves, and realises those versions are incompatible. In addition to the emotional wreckage, it left me feeling like by 30 I'd failed at one of adulthood's Most Important Things.

**"I FELT WHIPLASHED
WHEN
EXPECTATIONS
inevitably clashed
WITH THE
COMPLICATED
REALITY OF
BEING AN ADULT"**

A few years later, I had to admit that I wasn't cut out for the financial insecurity of freelance life. I took a day job, as many artists do. It was a necessary compromise, yet I felt like I was giving up. Wouldn't a real artist pursue her art, even if she was poor as a result? I found myself fantasising about alternate versions of my life as I grappled with the unanticipated zigzags. What if I'd stayed married? Been on *The New York Times* bestseller list? Had more talent? Made better choices, bolder ones?

For much of the decade, I felt whiplashed when expectations for my grown-up life inevitably clashed with the complicated reality of actually being an adult. Until finally, as 40 looms, it's dawned on me that it wasn't serving me well to spend so much time in 'what if' land with the ghosts of what psychologists Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius call our 'possible selves' – fantasies about who we'd like to be or might have become.

My thirties have been a convergence of unhelpful myths butting up against my lived experiences, and the realisation that only I could unravel them to grow into my actual adult life.

The myth of 'making it': a subjective label bestowed on us by other people. The myth that we have total control over our lives. The myth that not being able to make your full living doing what you love means you have failed. The myth that we need self-improvement more than we need self-acceptance. The myth of the *shoulds*.

I've had to grapple with feelings of failure and regret, as many overachieving recovering perfectionists must at some point in our lives. Not to convince myself out of these human emotions, but to move through them and ultimately learn to value missteps as part of my gloriously imperfect path as a gloriously imperfect human. To put it simply: I've had to learn to be kinder to myself.

Letting go of these myths enabled me to realise how my life, with all its twists and turns, has more potential and power than any fantasy. For me, that has been the biggest takeaway of this decade. Well, that, and to never, ever drive a moving van in Manhattan. *And Then We Grew Up: On Creativity, Potential, And The Imperfect Art Of Adulthood* by Rachel Friedman is out now >



THE SHAMELESS *midpoint* CRISIS by HEATHER HAVRILELSKY

I intended to grow old gracefully. Obviously, this meant letting my hair go grey. For someone in my position – an advice columnist – it was the only possible path. I was to move smoothly into the next phase of life looking like a nurturing hippy goddess with wisdom to spare.

I started to visit the @grombre account on Instagram, where beautiful women show off their grey hair. I loved their silver and white shades. I loudly admired other people's grey hair on the street. But, as my own hair started to turn white in my forties, it depressed me. On a visit to New York, I told an older friend I was thinking about going grey. 'No,' she said. Nothing more. 'I just figured I was entering a new phase of life,' I told her. 'Phases of life are for others,' she said. 'People who need a narrative, like a kids' book.'

And just like that, I ripped up my own book and replaced it with a question mark. The question mark felt more alive, somehow. Inside my question mark, anything could happen, from this moment until the moment I fell off the edge of the flat earth. I didn't have to follow someone else's script on how to grow older in a so-called dignified manner. It felt better to kick dignity to the kerb and follow my heart, however undignified it might look to others.

My new bottle-blonde hair might suggest to some that I'd chosen another script, something closer to *The Real Housewives* franchise: desperate women fighting age tooth and nail. But I don't recognise myself in those characters, or see myself engaged in some epic battle, so much as I now feel like my exterior is a closer match of how I feel inside.

To be more specific, I don't recognise myself. That's how I feel inside, too. My interior life is completely different to a few years ago. Now I'm in my late forties, I feel closer to the way I did when I was in my late twenties and early thirties: full of inspiration, energy and passion for being alive. The neuroticism and insecurity of mid-career paths and early motherhood have dissolved. I'm adventurous again in every sense of the word.

I want to travel the world and meander through my neighbourhood, making little discoveries, living in the moment.

I feel more powerful and more content. My blonde hair feels like an

**"NOW BLONDE
HAIR FEELS
RIGHT: IT'S A
tiny bit obnoxious,
WHICH I LOVE,
AND IT WORKS
WITH MY
FACE AT THIS AGE"**

accurate reflection of this unfamiliar state of being. I've always preferred brown hair, but now blonde feels right. It's a tiny bit obnoxious, which I love, and it works with my face at this age. I can wear different colours – of clothes, of lipsticks. Suddenly fashion is interesting in a way it's never been before. I feel like I've been given a new way of moving through the world.

For a while, all this made me paranoid that I was having a midlife crisis. I made fun of myself to make it clear that I knew how stupid I looked. It didn't help that reactions ranged from baffled to annoyed. 'So, did you just have a margarita and say, "what the hell"?' my brother-in-law enquired. 'Why not just look your age?' a close friend asked.

I don't have an answer for that last question. I'm not interested in making any kind of stand – either for or against looking your age, and whether it's appropriate or thrilling to do this or that. Everything a woman does in our culture is encountered as offering a moral lesson or a cautionary tale: here's how to be, how not to be; this is graceful, this is awkward; this is wholesome, this is vain. Women are asked to be generous at all costs – to other women, to men, to the world – but never to themselves. The eye-rolls incited by talk of self-care is a direct reflection of how easily we refuse to make space for what individual women might want or need.

My primary intention right now is to free myself from all of that eye-rolling. I love where I am and how I look and I'm not remotely embarrassed by it anymore. I see now that, in spite of our culture's dominant story about what happens to women as they age – a story I've feared since I was in my early twenties – in my experience, women only become sharper and more formidable they grow older. I've felt more self-possessed and more joyful year after year. So maybe it's time to stop listening to other people's stories about me and write my own instead.

I guess if you need a simple book explanation for this phase of my life, you could call it my shameless phase, which you might view as a market correction for half a lifetime of feeling shame over every choice I've ever made. All I can tell you is that this market correction feels correct. I've become a vainglorious stranger to myself – vain and glorious. You're welcome to disapprove or feel conflicted about that, but I don't. *Heather Havrilesky is a columnist at New York Magazine. Her latest book is the essay collection What If This Were Enough? ▸*

THE NO GOING *back* CRISIS

by LOUISE CHUNN

My legs shook with fear, my throat was desert-dry, my eyesight was blurring around the edges. As I stepped onto the stage in front of 200 investors and fellow tech founders in a San Francisco startup warehouse, I was so far out of my comfort zone, I was almost out of my body. But I did my three-minute pitch for investment in my new business, and I've lived to tell the tale again and again.

Being a tech entrepreneur was not something I ever thought I'd be. I had decided that words would be my life's work before I even went to school. Journalism took me through decade after decade: I was first female editor of my student paper, then a rock and pop critic, then a teen mag editor, then I launched myself into the world of fashion magazines, including this one soon after its launch.

Being a staffer was always part of my plan. I jumped wholeheartedly at each new contract, increasingly unconcerned that the creative side of journalism is compromised the more senior your role. Employed, salaried, looked after, then poached for more money; that was my trajectory. It rarely crossed my mind that I might have to forgo the cocoon of regular money, with a desk to call my own, staff to make my coffee, run my diary and take care of my tech troubles.

When that day came, it was traumatic. My final redundancy from my role as editor left me with a paltry pay-off, zero confidence and the belief that radical change was needed. If the internet was eating the lunch of my beloved journalism could I, by then a 57-year-old without a single hoodie in her wardrobe, climb on board?

Not without a leg-up, that's for sure. I'd spent years being grudging toward tech; took forever to get a smartphone, mostly shopped in physical stores, fretted about social media and its effects. But that was about to change. In the middle of the night, as we discussed where I might find gainful employment, my husband had a lightbulb moment: 'Remember when you were looking for a therapist and couldn't decide which one was right for you? What about a match.com for therapy?'

He was right, it was a good idea and it still is. But getting from washed-up editor to zinging startup founder is a big move. Many a time I sat, head in hands, angsting over what I'd done. And don't think you can brush it off as impostor syndrome – I was an impostor! What did I really know about a) therapy or b) technology?

**"GETTING FROM
WASHED-UP EDITOR
TO STARTUP FOUNDER
IS A BIG MOVE.
MANY A TIME I SAT,
head in hands,
ANGSTING OVER
WHAT I'D DONE"**

The answer is, of course, you learn, you grow, you improve. You may feel a fool sometimes, but that's understandable. I found a small cohort of similar-aged women through a London Google initiative, Founders Over 50, which led to a two-week accelerator programme in Palo Alto. Late-fifties mother of three, the only UK rep on an international accelerator course with 19 Mark Zuckerberg lookalikes hyping their world-changing unicorn-to-be, it was a muscle-screaming stretch. As the organiser of the event said to me: 'Most startups have the hacker, the hustler or the hipster. You're not really any of those, Louise.'

Much of the truly tech talk shot over my head, though I go by the maxim, 'There are no stupid questions.' There was much knowledge to be gleaned from the sort of people who first supported Facebook or Twitter or LinkedIn and shared such gems as, 'Those charts that show exponential growth? If you narrow it down to the early beginnings, it looks quite flat. It takes a long time to get the flywheel going.'

Or rockstar style consultant Mike Maples ('I wanted to be for the tech industry like Berry Gordy was to Motown records') who told us that: 'Every startup starts off dead and has to prove it can become alive.'

My startup, welldoing.org, has already helped more than 20,000 people find the right therapist for them. Getting this far has taken me through a complete work-life change, just when many of my friends are starting to take their pensions. The downside is a startup demands 24/7 oversight and genuine devotion.

You have to innovate, push and publicise **all** the time.

But I love being part of the new world of health tech and I take enormous pleasure in knowing that people are being helped. My eyes have filled with tears when people have told me how the therapist they found – because of that conversation with my husband – has changed their life. Now more than ever it's good to remember that sometimes, out of adversity, you can start doing things that you will eventually realise are what you always wanted, and never want to stop. □

Louise Chunn is the founder of therapist-matching platform welldoing.org



