

INTRODUCTION

By the time we reach fifty, over half of women have been through at least five big life challenges, including: divorce, bereavement, redundancy, abuse, bankruptcy, illness, coping with tricky teenagers, or elderly parents falling ill and dying. Not to mention our own health issues and menopause. Often, these challenges hit us all at once in a midlife maelstrom, leaving us spluttering and stranded. And because we are a pioneering generation of women – one of the first to reap the benefits of greater equality – there is no guide for how to pick ourselves up and persevere; no map for what our lives could look like from here on.

This book provides that map, drawing on inspiring tales of how women have survived and thrived; how they moved into, through and beyond adversity in midlife. This is a positive book – a guide for how women can make the most of their third quarter. It's a rallying cry for a new kind of woman hitting midlife. For, after all, if many of us will live to nearly 100 years old, fifty is only halfway through. The old map may have run out but there is so much more life still to come. And midlife women have the wisdom and strength to see these years through – they just need to know what the next phase might look like.

I hit my own midlife maelstrom when I was made redundant from the job that had defined me for twenty-five years. I searched in vain for a guide to what came next, for what the next version of me might look like and what I needed to do to find it. The redundancy section of the

HMRC website was *not* what I needed. Nor was scrolling through lists of ‘Things To Do When You’ve Been Fired’. I couldn’t find anything out there to help me navigate my next chapter.

So, for the last number of years, I have been on a journey of discovery. I have pulled myself back up again after a professional whacking, through a mixture of hard work, determination, bloody-mindedness and rage that the world was writing off women like me when we still had so much to offer. I knew from a decade of being a weekly newspaper columnist on the UK’s highest-selling broadsheet that if I was exercised about something then other people probably were too – so I set up Noon, a community for women pivoting in midlife, and started gathering stories to inspire other women not to give up. I’ve always loved the phrase, ‘You can’t be what you can’t see.’ I wanted other women who felt lost and on the scrap heap in midlife to look at Noon and read my story and know that they weren’t done, it wasn’t over, there was a path to reinvention and a good act to follow. That there is a positive answer to that dreaded question: what next?

I like to think of fifty as the age when we finally become the women we always wanted to be. It’s why I coined the term Queenagers. I wanted to communicate that sense of us coming into our prime, becoming our true selves – a kind of through-the-pupa-and-out-of-the-chrysalis period when we spread our wings into our own brave new worlds like midlife butterflies. The word Queenager was inspired in part by a woman in one of our Noon focus groups who said, ‘I feel like a teenager, but in my own house, with good sheets and proper tea.’ I was also inspired by my frequent trips to Jamaica, where they talk about women as ‘queens’, which I love. In my funny old headline-writing brain the two ideas came together and – boom! – Queenager was born. I’m proud to say it was listed in roundups of 2022 as one of the new words of the year and is catching on fast, having made appearances all over the UK press and now the *Washington Post* and Bloomberg too. For me, it sums up the experience and transitional nature of this time in a woman’s life:

that we are in a kind of young-old phase – a bit hormonal, in a period of change but packing wisdom and dignity – midlife queens, if you like. Queenagers.

I love stories. As a journalist, ink is in my blood. So this book is full of the conversations that have helped shape my transition into a new, happier, more whole version of myself; accounts gleaned from the community of women in midlife that I have created at Noon and through my bestselling Substack newsletter, *The Queenager* (one of the ten most read globally last year). My audience responds to the optimism of the tales I tell about this transition; these stories of transformation that become the stepping stones to our own reinventions. These tales are like the white pebbles which shone in the moonlight for Hansel and Gretel and provided a path out of the dark wood, away from the wicked witch's house and safely home. *Much More to Come* is the guide I was seeking when I was lost in that midlife wood. I hope it helps point the way for others.

In fact, I want all the women following along after me to look forward to being fifty as the point when they come into their prime as Queenagers – not dread it. Women have no sell-by date! Women of fifty today are pioneers – we are feeling our way to a new kind of later-life adventure. While on this journey, I have created a new vocabulary to help us talk about this time in our lives, which you can find in the glossary at the end of this book.

Of course every loss leaves a hole, but what I've learnt is that in that void something wonderful can grow – if we have the support and confidence to let it. At fifty, we women aren't done, unseen, invisible, all the things popular culture would have us believe. We are just getting going. Just hitting our stride. As one Queenager put it to me: 'I feel like I am just getting the hang of things.' But we need to hear these stories in order to emulate them. We need to see what others have done in order to recreate and reimagine what the later stages of women's lives can look like.

You can read this book from the beginning, or you can dip in and out, to focus on a story that relates to something specific you are going through today. The sections are there as signposts to help you through your own dark time into a brighter future. This book is a bit like a patchwork quilt – the stories hang together as a narrative or can be dipped into individually. The story of my own becoming weaves them together. At forty-nine I thought my life was going swimmingly – then the bottom fell out of my world and I had to reinvent it from scratch. And I am not the only one. Many of us have spent the first two twenty-five-year chunks of our lives playing out other people’s expectations, looking after others, putting our own dreams aside. Well, the good news is that fifty – when we hit the third quarter of our lives – is *our* time, when it finally is all about us. And no, it’s not too late, and you aren’t too old!

What all these stories from women all over the world, in midlife, moving through trying times into better ones demonstrate is that in the darkest moments there is always light, just as the black of a shadow can accentuate the brightness of the most sparkling day. When I was a young woman, I loved Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying* – it summed up how women felt as they set out from the shores of the sexual revolution, relishing the freedom but also trepidatious about the unknown. *Much More to Come* is a similar positive, poignant guide.

It is time for a new script. I offer these tales from midlife to encourage you on your journey, wherever you are. I found that these conversations buoyed me up when times were tough. I hope these women who share their stories can inspire you just as they did me. I also offer you my own story. I know that it is a tale of privilege – I admit I am a white, privately educated Cis woman, born in London, which is an extraordinarily lucky bit of inheritance – but there is so little out there tackling the midlife maelstrom for women that I hope I have something to offer this discussion. This book is intended to lift you up when you are down, and light the way to the next part of your life.

Maybe it will help you through a bad day or provide suggestions to guide you through the pinch points and on to the sunny uplands of this stage in life: not caring what others think and instead living and speaking your own truth. Researching and sharing these stories guided me on to a new and happier phase in my life. I hope that with the help of this book and all these wise women you will find your way there too. It is okay to find it difficult. It *is* difficult. But if we dare to dream, we can do it – and our individual stories of flourishing and living well from midlife onwards can build a whole new sense of what this time in life can look like. A whole new movement. I call it the Queenager Revolution. Come and join us!

Eleanor Mills
Noon.org.uk
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PART ONE

THE MIDLIFE MAELSTROM

My new life began on a bench. An ordinary wooden bench in the scruffy inner-city park behind my house. It's the kind of place where teens hang out and smoke marijuana. Where knackered parents push toddlers on rusting swings and dogs sniff each other while their owners fumble with scented plastic bags. It smells of pee and pavement. At dusk the graffitied metal gate is padlocked.

To this paradise, then, I went on a hot summer's day in lockdown to meet an old friend. She lives round the corner but we hadn't seen each other in a while – partly because of the pandemic but really because I'd been dodging her texts, sending her calls to voicemail. I'd just been made redundant and I couldn't face anyone. I was too sad. Too ashamed. Humiliated. Lost. It sounds mad now but in the aftermath of being let go, I felt like I had died. There was the same finality.

There was no way back to what had been my life. It was over. Gone. It happened with dizzying speed.

One moment all was normal. I'd come back from lunch, waved cheerily to my team and headed up to a meeting with the top boss, full of plans for the next few months. Then I was out. Whacked.

As legal papers were passed to and fro across the table it all felt far away. My mind had checked out. The conversation continued but I was swooping and diving with the pigeons on the roof of the church

opposite. Watching a tug make slow progress against the frothing current on the river below. I couldn't take anything in. I just remember chanting to myself: 'Don't cry, don't cry, don't give them that satisfaction.' I'm proud to say that I didn't crack then. But nothing made sense.

My world stopped in that moment. In the ensuing months, my mind kept returning to those minutes in the boss's office like a moth to a flame. I'd be lying in bed and find myself back there, my heart racing. I was unable to process what had happened. How everything that had been familiar was over. That it was all gone. Afterwards I was in freefall, disorientated. I couldn't stop crying. The only place that felt safe was home; in bed, binge-watching *The Crown*. But that day my friend insisted ... and I hadn't the strength to resist.

When I got to the park, red eyes hidden by big gold sunglasses, she was already on the bench. Next to her was a Tesco carrier bag.

'Look! Pimm's!' She cracked open a tin and offered me one too. I took a long, warm, sugary swig. It was noon, on a Monday. It felt like rock bottom.

'How are you? I haven't seen you since ...' She trailed off. No one wanted to say the word. It *was* a bit like a death.

I tried to be cheerful. It is my trademark. But the upbeat words just wouldn't come. I'd spent thirty years telling stories, finding sexy angles – but I couldn't put a good gloss on this. There was a long pause. And then a big sob erupted from deep inside. My whole body shook. Despite social distancing, she edged closer and gave me a forbidden hug.

It all came tumbling out. Who was I without the job I'd spent half my life doing? Without that cloak of power, the status it lent me, what was I? It was like Darth Vader taking off the mask. I'd put the job ahead of so much, sometimes even my kids and my family. When the boss said 'Jump!' I leapt with alacrity. I'd worn the *Game of Thrones* power cloak for over two decades, while I had grown from a young gun to a middle-aged woman; it was part of me and now it was gone. I felt lost. A failure. A big tear plopped onto the bench. I took another

swig of Pimm's. It was flat and the alcohol burnt my stomach. I took another, larger one.

I cried some more. I felt awful. On top of losing my job I'd had Covid and was physically weak and frail. I was staring down the barrel of my fiftieth birthday and felt every one of those long years. My eldest daughter was about to go to uni, leaving a yawning hole in my home. I was worried about money (I'd always been the main breadwinner and, now that I didn't have a job, I was racked with anxiety about what came next for all of us).

Even worse, all the inner doubts and gremlins – many from my childhood – which had been silenced by busyness, by worldly success, were now raising their painful heads. During that time my brain felt full of whirling knives, each thought worse than the one it replaced.

I felt like I was unravelling – in bright sunlight, on a bench with my friend, glugging a tin of tepid Pimm's.

I hiccupped and coughed, snorting my way through a pile of tissues. And do you know the best thing about that day? My friend didn't say: 'You'll bounce back!' or 'It'll all be fine!', like everyone else had. Quietly, she was just there, passing me tissues, patting my arm. Letting me feel my loss and my pain. There are times when we don't want to be fixed, we just want to be witnessed. To be held. To be heard.

'We can't go over it. We can't go under it. Oh, no! We've got to go through it.'

Like the children in Michael Rosen's *We're Going on a Bear Hunt*, who must swim across a river, splosh through mud and swish through long grass, there is no shortcut through the grief that accompanies the end of one life phase and the beginning of another. Just endurance. Sympathy helps, and distraction (TV, chocolate, Pimm's, hugs). But time is the real medicine. Time and being kind to ourselves.

Did you know that the necessity for a pause, for a wait in the darkness before life starts again, is the oldest story of them all? I didn't

until a new friend sent me a book about an Assyrian goddess called Inanna. She was the Queen of Heaven and Earth and is the hero of one of humanity's earliest myths found etched on tablets of stone at the beginning of writing.

So, Inanna. Her sister Ereshkigal, Queen of the Underworld, is mourning the death of her husband. Inanna descends from her earthly kingdom down into the realm of the dead to attend the funeral rites. At each of the gates that guard the way to the underworld Inanna is forced to shed some of her mortal finery; first her golden ring, then her lapis beads – even her royal robe is taken. It is the beginning of a nightmare. Stripped naked, totally vulnerable, Inanna is imprisoned in the underworld by her grieving sister, and is unable to return to the light and the air.

Then Ereshkigal fastened on Inanna the eye of death.
She spoke against her the word of wrath.
She uttered against her the cry of guilt.
She struck her. Inanna was turned into a corpse.
A piece of rotting meat.
And was hung from a hook on a wall.

The goddess hangs there in the dark. Stuck, unable to move, lifeless.
A hunk of decaying meat.

But in what looks like death, something surprising happens. Inanna is not dead, but fallow. Waiting. Like the earth in winter, she seems forgotten but she is actually regenerating, rebooting, renewing herself quietly, in the dark and the silence. Eventually, she is rescued by her mortal friends who come to look for her. She emerges from this time in the darkness way more powerful; wiser, brighter. She has regenerated and brought the spring, the renewal. Through her ordeal of being hung on the hook, she has managed to unite the worlds of the living and the dead. And she now rules as Queen in both.

So it is for us Queenagers. In midlife, we will go through dark times. Be hung on our own hooks. We probably won't be struck down by Ereshkigal, but the vast majority of us will get whacked by something. I have seen it over and over again – in our Noon Circles and in our research. What is for sure is that whatever has propelled us through the last twenty-five years of our life will end at around fifty. Whether it's the termination of a career, or a marriage, having to face illness – our own, or that of a child or parent – or bereavement or an empty nest, whatever shape our own midlife maelstrom (or midlife clusterfuck) takes, it often all hits at once and manifests as a kind of death that blows away everything we have known. In that moment many of us feel like it is all over. That what we were has died. That it is the end.

If that sounds familiar, please don't despair.

What I have learnt from my own experience and seen in all the thousands of midlife women who I've talked to is that, like Inanna, if we wait, if we are kind to ourselves and allow ourselves to sit in the dark and reflect and regenerate, and particularly when we engage the loving encouragement of family, friends and a supportive new community to help us into this next phase, then we – like the ancient Queen – can flourish again.

It's not easy. At the beginning, the path is steepest. The way ahead is unclear. Anxiety stalks us. Tears are legion. Our minds keep coming back to the loss, the pain, like worrying the hole in your mouth after a tooth extraction. It's horrible. It's painful. And inescapable.

I remember taking myself to a qigong class (like tai chi but easier) and at the end of the two-hour workshop (yup, not something I'd ever really done before, but hell, I had time on my hands ...) the instructor asked us all to say how we felt. He went around the class. The woman next to me said mystically she could feel energy charged between her hands crackling like rainbows (yeah, right). A bloke quoted something wise from a Chinese text. I was so choked up I couldn't speak. I also didn't have a hanky so was covered in teary

snot. I mumbled something about having had some bad news and finding the transition tricky.

The teacher nodded and said, matter-of-factly, 'Change is difficult' before walking back to the front of the room. I am sure he had no idea what he had done. But all I can say is that his words were a tonic. He was the first person who had acknowledged where I was. That I was finding the change unbearably tough. That it was difficult. That I was a snotty, snivelling mess. Not coping at all. He was the first person who gave me permission to not be okay. Who acknowledged I was in a real hole and finding it tough. His recognition of where I found myself, his casual acceptance of it as fact, was a sweet relief. It was like hitting the bottom of a swimming pool and feeling concrete beneath my feet so that I could push back up.

Change is difficult. With those words I stopped feeling ashamed and furious about how pathetic and weak I was being, and for the first time I felt a little sympathy for myself. I accepted where I was: in a state. That I wasn't a failure for finding it tough. It *was* tough. And humiliating and worrying and disorientating. The shift was being told it was okay – even normal and acceptable – to find it so.

So that is what I hope these words will do for you too. Repeat them to yourself: *Change is difficult.* Pat yourself on the back that you are getting through it. Allow yourself to feel all of it. Sob on your friends, partner, family or children (mine got so used to me being teary that they'd joke about 'what the mum weather was like' that morning: drizzle, hard rain, deluge ...). Remember, there are no quick fixes; that, like the first time you had your heart broken, only time can make it better. And that this phase will pass.

Give yourself a ticket to wallow. Lie around and watch sad films or binge-watch your favourites. Eat ice cream. Consider yourself hugged. Don't try to do anything. Shedding old identities and ways of being is hard. Particularly if you are used to being super-busy – I felt like one of those Indian deities with sixteen arms and nothing to do with any

of them. Sit with it. Think of Inanna the Queen hanging on her hook, waiting in the dark, feeling it all. Locked in the underworld. Know that this is the only way; and remember that this is how that earliest of myths ends:

‘You mount the steps to your high throne/ In all majesty you sit there/ Queenship and godship in your hands.’

It just sums it up. We can rise again, have a fantastic next chapter, move into the light and rediscover our joy. That is what the stories in this part of the book are all about. Inspiration that this too shall pass.

But first. Pause.

Please.

