

I. The blue faded cover of the book *Passages* peeks out of the top of a liquor box. My first edition hardback has survived multiple book purges, packed and re-packed with each move, stored on high shelves and in dank cellars, in case of renewed interest in its subtitled theme—*Predictable Crises in Adult Life*. Thirty-eight years have passed since I first thumbed through the book’s pages, contemplating the decades that stretched luxuriously beyond my horizon. The self-help book was shelved then boxed and mostly forgotten.

During a recent book purge, I re-discovered *Passages*, and paused. The life crisis, popularly known as “The Empty Nest,” loomed. I wondered how to prepare for this next crisis of my adult life—a stage I must have skipped during my first reading of the book. In the yellowed pages, I find scant mention of the sixth decade of life, until the final pages. Here, the author inserts a stunning declarative: “It is imperative that a woman finds a sense of importance and means of independent survival before the empty nest leaves her feeling superfluous.” The author has sounded the alarm. Prepare to be unnecessary, redundant, expendable and obsolete.

Amazon.com describes Gail Sheehy’s 1976 first edition of *Passages*, as a “road map of adult life [that] shows the inevitable personality and sexual changes we go through in our 20s, 30s, 40s, and beyond.” So it seems, I have journeyed into “the beyond,”—a mysterious life stage for which my only context has been my mother.

When *Passages* was first published, my mother had transitioned from the Fabulous Forties to her superfluous 50’s. Though she maintained the home fires with panache, she was NOT adept at handling “The Change,” a euphemism for menopause

used by polite women of her generation. It's is an inclusive term, inviting diverse crises to the life-adjustment party.

I cannot ask, but only remember, what “The Change” was like for Mom. I will not know if she felt empty when I flew the nest. I cannot know precisely how she adapted to the crisis of old marriage. But my memory returns me to one ordinary evening, when she tried to share her struggles with me before I wished to listen.

I arrived home at about 10 o'clock from my job at Sears Roebuck & Co. Mom sat in her chair with her needlepoint in her lap. She was tuned into the television, for companionship more than entertainment. My father was on a business trip. My brother was married and living away. We were home alone— a stay-at-home mom and a restless adolescent.

“Look at you! You're so busy. Always coming and going,” she said. I dropped the keys to the Chevy Caprice on the front hall table and wandered into the living room on my way to the kitchen. I would like to say that I sensed Mom's loneliness. I would like to say that I became a confidant to the woman who had given me life and clean underwear for 17 years. But I was more interested in nabbing leftover cheesecake from the fridge. I was annoyed by the prospect of a heart-to-heart talk with Mom. I sat down on the arm of the sofa, as a dog on its haunches prepared to leap into action.

“I wish I had a job to go to!” she said.

“Why don't you get a part time job?” I said.

“I can't do that. When your Dad is in town, he likes me to be available . . . And he says I don't need to work.”

This would have been the end of the conversation. Mom was a captive to her generation and her compliant temperament. Indeed, successful men of my parent’s generation believed the man would appear a poor provider if his wife worked.

As a young adult, I was sure my experience with “The Change” would be nothing like my mother’s. I would not succumb to mood shifts, tears and spontaneous agitation. I would be patient with my husband. I would treasure the fact that my grown children no longer needed me. I was proud that my elder daughter had departed for college. And, I bragged about my high school daughter’s independence. Who would question the value of raising two self-sufficient women? As a Second Wave feminist, I continue to wait eagerly to celebrate the Equal Rights Amendment. I have never been an Earth mama wanting to sacrifice myself to childrearing. So, why would the Empty Nest pose a problem?

I first noticed a dullness of mind and a vacancy in my chest. Others observed this detachment. I remember a stranger at the YMCA who asked me if I was all right. I had been sitting at a weight machine, immobile, staring into space, looking like I had suffered a small stroke. I reassured the woman, explaining I had just returned from taking my daughter to college and was feeling a “little sad.”

Several years passed, and my younger daughter—the last child— left for college. At first, I was symptom-free. No dull feelings, no momentary out-of-body experiences, no tears and no imagined catastrophes. It seemed I had escaped the melancholy associated with the emptied nest. Then, Liz transferred colleges, moved to Chicago, leased an apartment and remained in the city during the summer vacation. For the months of that summer, I was irritable— a moody insomniac lacking my usual sunny view of

life, plagued by a shape-shifting anxiety— a voice that was mine and not mine, continually reminding me of countless shortfalls in my career, my body, my husband, my life. For the first time in 20 years, I craved a cigarette.

My anxiety appeared in the ordinary moments. One night, my husband and I sat on the front porch sipping wine, his red and mine white. This had been our habit for 25 years. When our daughters were young, wine and conversation had helped us feel like a couple— a relationship that parenthood had interrupted. Absent now was the need for adult time-out. But the ritual continued.

After a period of twilight silence, I pronounced myself “overwrought.” The wrought-iron porch railing probably inspired my word choice. It’s a thing of beauty, resembling a series of ocean waves on a suspended century-long journey to crash on some distant shore.

“Overwrought is a bit dramatic, don’t you think?” John said.

Actually, I thought, overwrought is exactly the right word. Iron is bent into shape, forged by fire —its shape created by the blacksmith. Iron does not have a will of its own. Do I? There was something pathological about my compulsion to buzz from activity-to-activity each day, then lie awake for hours each night wondering why I buzz from activity-to-activity each day.

On this particular evening, I complained about my day—the constant phone calls, the politics of leadership, the college students who studiously avoided completion of assigned homework, the insomnia and the general lack of appreciation for my service to the world.

“I’m overwhelmed,” I said.

“You give yourself away.” John said. “Maybe you should stop saying ‘yes.’ You could spend more time at home.”

“Well!” I said. “I suppose you’d be happier if I stayed home, cleaned the house and had a nice hot meal on the table each night.”

“It’s not my happiness we’re talking about,” John said.

I’ve often thought my husband wishes I were more like my mother. Her towels were freshly fluffed; her napkins ironed, counters and sinks wiped clean, vacuum tracks visible on the carpet, ashtrays empty. She was the model housekeeper whose fork-tender fall-off-the-bone roasts followed a platter of cheeses served room temperature, with martinis very dry.

“I am not my mother,” I said.

“No, you are not.”

“I will not be remembered for my housekeeping,” I said.

“No you will not.”

Both of us continued to stare into the distance. Cars circled the median slowly searching for parallel parking, and dog-walkers passed our porch.

I knew the list of symptoms for The Change—the hot flashes, mood changes, memory lapses and weight gain. I had not expected the crisis of “old marriage.” Our union has outlived its evolutionary purpose.

In the beginning, I was attracted to John’s intellect and his interest in my thoughts—a rarity among the young men I knew in the 1970’s. Within the first hour of our first date, he asked what I thought about gun control. I had no opinion on guns but was pleased at the inquiry. Both of us preferred to skip small talk. In all other ways, we

differed— Beatles versus Rolling Stones, Catholic versus Presbyterian, Untidy versus tidy, Extrovert versus introvert.

The differences have continued in predictable rhythm, illustrated by our morning routine. Each morning, John and I stand at our respective mirrors, our coffee cups brimming, black and steaming, on countertops. His bathroom routine is laborious. Mine is rushed. He rinses and flosses. I brush and spit. He pats his face dry with a washcloth. I rip a towel off its mooring and step into the shower, slamming the glass door behind me. He hates it when I slam the door. The shower steams the room. He turns on both the fans, in the water closet and the bathroom.

“It sounds like a jet engine in here,” I yell from the shower. He does not respond. I tell John he has a hearing problem. He says I mumble.

“Don’t you need some light in there?” he yells.

“No,” I say at top-of-voice. “I like it hot and dark.’

We have been married thirty-plus years, a lengthy duration by anyone’s standards. We have raised two daughters, three dogs, three cats and one ferret. We have raised each other. Now what?

Years ago, in my pre-married life, while in graduate school, I interned with a family therapist who shared wisdom about marriage. “The qualities that attract a person to a mate,” she said, “are the same qualities that are most annoying, once married.” John’s spontaneous dry wit, his charming German obedience to rules and his extraordinary intelligence now annoy me.

My crisis peaked the first summer that neither of my grown daughters came home. One hot July day, I pulled weeds in a community garden with a 70-year old friend.

I confessed to her what I had not admitted to myself. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me; I feel so angry.”

“Hmmm,” the woman said with authority, neither proposing a problem nor solution. I needed no response. I had wanted to say what was obvious to everyone around me—I had become restless, critical and labile. My life had changed in estrogen and purpose. I could adapt to the estrogen deficiency. But how might I adapt to the change in life purpose? I confronted a dichotomy of feelings—wanting to feel needed and needing to escape. One thing was certain. Neither of my grown daughters would return to the nest. I would have to find a way to be more comfortable with the extra wiggle room, or fly away.

II.

“I thought that writer-in-the woods thing was only in the movies,” our pet sitter said as I explained how to feed the cat. I would travel to meet a few writer friends in a four-bedroom cabin in a resort area by Lake Michigan. It would be an idyllic retreat, in which we would write in the morning, explore in the afternoon and read aloud in the evening.

On the first hour of the first day of my retreat in a charming fishing village turned resort, I sat down on a rise on the beach and wrote in my journal:

If bodies of water had a gender, the ocean would be male and the lake would be female. The ocean is a roaring foaming opaque thing. Lake Michigan seems feminine—soft, quiet and transparent, and so clear you can see the smooth rocks beneath. Even the rocks have rounded edges formed by millennia of the water’s embrace. The sunshine creates a honeycomb pattern on the surface, which

shimmers in its undulating mirror of water. This is a place where you could find yourself, if you were lost.

In this place of ponderous beauty, I was alone with the water and the big sky. I could see my writer friends, in the distance, walking the beach. It was one of those perfect moments, when you realize peace is possible. Then my cellphone rang. Life once again reminded me of its reality— everything is often fine, until its not.

My neighbor Maria’s voice was breathless. “Something is terribly wrong with Whiskers. She is stumbling around by my fountain, trying to get a drink. She has a black lump on her neck and. . . . and . . . there are flies all around her.”

I called the veterinarian, who deduced Whiskers was infested by maggots. “Have someone bring her in right away,” she said.

Maggots? I remembered my days as a social worker at a Burn Center, where I learned that maggots—fly larvae— were once used to debride wounds. Dead biological matter is mother’s milk to maggots.

“Sounds like a brown recluse,” the vet said. A spider bite resulted in necrotic tissue, inviting the maggots to banquet.

Quickly, I returned to the cottage, where I would coordinate cat rescue and veterinary care. Cell reception was fickle there, so I walked the property until I discovered a place with a strong signal— a tree stump. Often, in the next few days, I stood at a the stump, making phone calls while my writing friends were sprawled on couches with laptops, glasses of wine, books and poetry.

Neither the pet sitter nor I knew how badly Whiskers would smell. “We had to clean out the maggots,” the vet said. “The smell was awful. One of our techs threw up.

But, we’ve got Whiskers cleaned up now.” She hesitated. “She’s a very sick cat. We’ll see how she does overnight.” The necrotic tissue on Whiskers’ neck extended all the way to her jugular. They had to debride the wound completely; the area remained vulnerable. The vet described a two by one-inch section of naked dermis, giving Whiskers’ neck the appearance of a raw chicken breast.

It is hard to avoid cliché, when your daughter’s favorite animal is likely to die, and you know she will blame you, and you are ashamed because you resent your daughter’s cat for interrupting your idyllic writing retreat. “Keep her comfortable. Don’t take extreme measures. I don’t want her to suffer. She’s an old cat,” I said.

I called John, who was out-of-town, to inform him of Whiskers’ injury. I asked him to call Liz. “I can’t talk to her. I’ll cry. She doesn’t need to hear me cry.” Then, I continued to participate in the retreat, whenever I was not standing by the tree-stump to negotiate cat care. Though I attended our book discussions and readings, I could only focus on one scene with two characters—John is on the phone telling Liz in his matter-of-fact manner, “I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news. Whiskers is very sick. She might die.” Liz refuses to weep. Stoicism is her inheritance.

Liz called next day to ask for plane fare. She would be flying home. “I want to be there,” she said. We both knew her reason for the journey. She expected death. Liz flew from Chicago to Louisville. She sat with her cat, feeding Whiskers fingertips of deli turkey. And, after two days of IV fluids and antibiotics, it looked like Liz’s cat would survive.

John and I talked by phone about the cat’s progress and our daughter’s mental health. We discussed the immediate future—how we would have to do twice daily

dressing changes, how Whiskers would need one to two more surgeries to close the wound. John did not debate the need to spend more than \$1,000 on veterinary care. We laughed together at discharge instructions that advised, “Keep your pet from jumping or climbing stairs.” We housed the cat in a dog crate to make sure she would be quiet. For several weeks, I extracted her from the crate once daily, laid her across the kitchen counter, medicated and changed the gauzy bandages around her chicken neck. She was a wounded warrior—defeated by the freedom of her outdoor pursuits, resigned to her fate, too tired to resist wound care.

I was gratified by my job as cat nurse and sensed a subtle change within. Absent was the disembodied anxiety. Absent was the irritation or dissatisfaction with life and marriage. During the time Whiskers recovered, I was essential, not superfluous. Of course, my new purpose-in-life was transient. The cat would heal and live another year. The daughters would continue to shape their lives independently. John would continue to be the man he had always been—my tender opposite. Life would revert to the “new normal.” And I would have to invent ways to avoid feeling unnecessary, redundant or obsolete.

I scorn the adjective I fear—“superfluous.” In order to escape its grip, I must determine its full definition. I find the answer in this writer’s favorite self-help book—the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). The OED defines “superfluous,” as “unnecessary; especially, being more than enough.” The Latin root is “superfluous,” which means, “overflow.”

Ah yes, my nest overflows—not with children, but remembrance, accomplishment, wisdom of the world, a sustaining marriage and two adult women who

exist because of me/because of Us. My purpose in the world has shifted. I might even be unnecessary. But, I am “more than enough.”