

SILVER LININGS

In the quagmire of midlife, letting yourself go isn't such a bad thing after all.

STORY BY *Susan Horsburgh* ILLUSTRATION BY *Tanya Cooper*

WHEN I came out to the kitchen to walk the kids and cavoodle to school the other day, my husband took one look at me and laughed: "You've really given up, haven't you?" I had no idea what he was talking about, until he pointed at the freebie Qantas headphones I was now wearing in public – crappy black plastic ones with a flying kangaroo on each ear. My ill-groomed, albeit lovely, husband usually looks like he's just been tipped out of a wheelie bin, so if he's critiquing your appearance, you know it's time to take a long, hard look at yourself. The thing is, I don't care. I might look like a frumpy cheapskate, but the headphones work perfectly well – and who do I have to impress?

Last week saw a new low when I found myself singing *out loud* at the supermarket. Even worse, the song on the Coles PA system was the '80s easy-listening abomination, *That's What Friends Are For*. Yet there I was, surveying the mayonnaise jars and mindlessly chiming in during the Elton John bit. It wasn't until I hit "Keep smilin', keep shinin' " that I finally got a grip on myself. It seems I've officially "let myself go".

I'm now in the Year of Impending Doom, my 50th birthday coming for me like a freight train. I freaked out when I was 39, too, although now I don't know what I was worried about back then. I should be more evolved – yes, it's only a number and, yes, I'm lucky to be alive – but let's not dress it up: this is about death. The past 30 years seem to have evaporated and now (if I'm fortunate) another 30 is all I have left.

So what now? To work that out, I've become the full midlife cliché, dabbling in meditation apps, gratitude journals and Brené Brown TED talks, even contemplating a trek along Spain's Camino de Santiago. I've turned into a batshit-crazy combo of molten rage and inexplicable sentimentality, weeping over social injustice and Taylor Swift lyrics. I can't even listen to a '90s lady ballad (I'm looking at you, Everything But the Girl) without riding a wave of nostalgia and melancholy.

It feels unseemly to flirt with a 20-something bartender when you could have spawned him.

I don't want to wear the "mom jeans" again, but I'd like that sense of possibility back. Time seems abundant in your 20s: you can squander hours making mix-tapes, pash inappropriate people and watch the sun come up; a book or a night can change your life. Quiet contentment might seem elusive when you're young and flailing, yet when you finally clinch it, you sometimes hanker for those heart-stopping highs and lows.

Celebrities – even the ones who freeze and fill their faces – love to tout the joys of ageing, but I don't think creeping decrepitude can be that breezily dismissed. These days, "You don't look 49" has to pass for a compliment; turtlenecks and "architectural" clothing seem to be breeding in my cupboard. I may feel moderately young and vital, but I look in the mirror and see hints of my grandmother – the mean one. It feels almost unseemly to flirt with a 20-something bartender when you could have spawned him.

I've always feared becoming *that* woman at the wedding – the one of a certain age who takes up a bit too much room and dances with a bit too much abandon. Now I understand she's just fresh out of f...s to give. If she wants to stress-test her dodgy pelvic floor with some artless, high-impact dance moves, the disdain of her fellow wedding guests isn't going to stop her.

Caring less what other people think is one of the big upsides of ageing. So is having buddies to bitch about it with. If midlife is a battlefield, good friends are the ones dragging us to safety across a brutal no-man's land of demented parents and anxious kids, cancer treatments and peri-menopausal shark-attack periods. Those precious women are the sweeteners of these stressful years – like the friend who offered to fly from Los Angeles to hold my hand through my husband's open-heart surgery, or another who swooped in from interstate to distract me during those eight excruciating hours, taking me to the movies to perve on a hairy Bradley Cooper.

That female camaraderie extends even to strangers. After school drop-off the other day, I got chatting with a random 50-something owner of a French bulldog. Within minutes, she was joking about her lacklustre libido. "I reckon I've been asexual," she confessed, "since I brought my first baby home from the hospital."

It's the kind of casual intimacy I shared with women in the smoky, sweaty bathrooms of nightclubs 30 years ago. As we wrestled with the crotch clips of our shoulder-padded bodysuits, we'd shout, "He's not worth it," over the cubicles to comfort crying strangers. Now we're doing it stone-cold sober at the dog park, eager to laugh about life and less afraid to expose who we are. Perhaps that woman saw my crappy headphones and could tell I was a kindred spirit. ■

ILLUSTRATIONROOM.COM.AU