

Half Life

Once she was 9; someday she'd be 80;

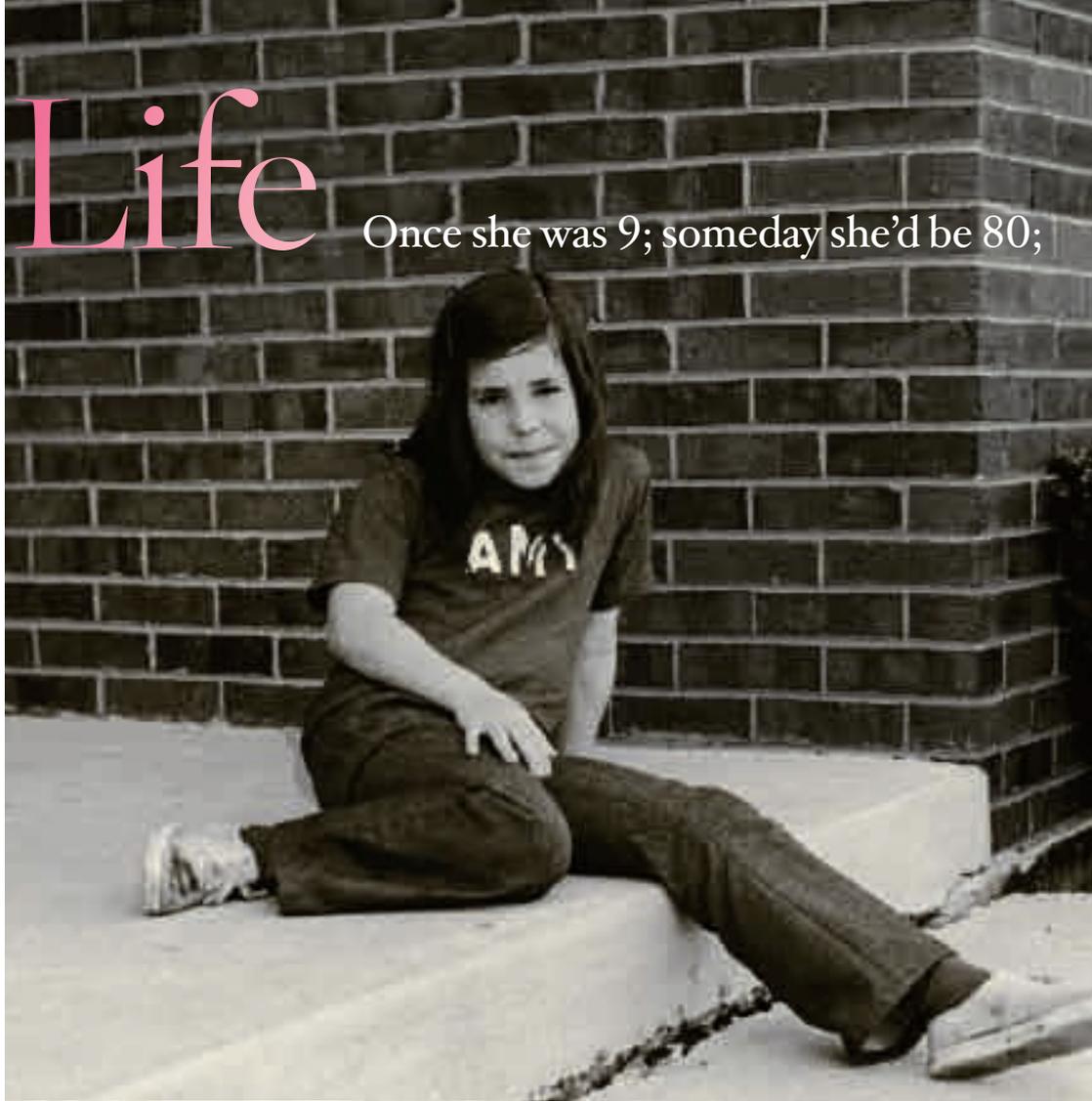
I PURCHASED A MASSIVE BOX OF Q-tips at Costco. Maybe there were a thousand Q-tips in there. Maybe 10,000 million—I have no idea. Whatever the number, it was a lot, a real lot, somewhere between excessive and insane. When I put the box in the bathroom cabinet, it was like, Well, one thing's for sure, I will never, ever have to buy Q-tips again. I could imagine using one or two a day and then maybe, eventually—after a decade?—getting to the point where I made a noticeable dent in the tightly packed layers. But I couldn't conceive of a time when there would be just a couple of Q-tips left, two lone skinny stragglers flopping around the bottom. And then, one day while everyone else was going about their normal business, I—drumroll—used my very last Q-tip. The damn box of Q-tips turned out not to be endless.

I turned 40 recently, and I'd like to report back on the status and nature of my midlife crisis. I did not get a sports car. (I like my minivan.) I did not have an affair. (I like my mate.) I didn't even have a party. (Too many thank-you notes.) But here's what I did get: weepy, chronically weepy.

I wouldn't describe the origin of my tears as *Boo-hoo, I'm so old; I'm so depressed; what have I done with my life?* but more, *Oh my, here I am living, and I would like to keep on living, preferably indefinitely, but check it out, I'm getting old.* I am a die-hard optimist and can look on the bright side with the best of them, but the statistical reality is, if I'm lucky, this girl's hourglass is officially half empty.

My weepiness, in other words, seemed to stem from a temporary state of hyperawareness and acute vulnerability. Everything around me had a bittersweet sheath to it; every moment was singed “fleeting and transient” with a branding iron. A simple exchange between my son and me, for example, felt epic in its beauty and poignancy—and all that happened was that he tapped

Her younger self: Rosenthal, age 9, at home in Chicago, 1974.



but right now she was 40—wondering, counting, and weeping at the strange, golden, fast-paced beauty of life. By Amy Krouse Rosenthal

on his bedroom window, I looked up at him from the sidewalk below, and he waved.

I'd say I didn't exactly have a midlife crisis—rather I had a midlife cry-bliss. For weeks after my birthday, I would unexpectedly lose it. I lost it at the ATM machine. I lost it in the car listening to Wilco, precisely two minutes and 30 seconds into track ten on *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot*. I lost it at a park district ice-skating show when the girls did their synchronized straddle leap just as Irene Cara screamed "Fame!"—something about the earnestness of it all, the matching costumes and well-rehearsed jump in the air, the song itself, a mighty combination of kitschy and touching. And I didn't even have a kid in the show. I lost it when my son excitedly asked me to "Quick come outside and watch this; see how much faster my new sneakers make me run?"

This midlife cry-bliss in concert with the hourglass leitmotif (how many grains of sand are in fact left?) led me to some scary math: If one is fortunate enough to live to 80, that's 29,200 days on the planet. How many more times, then, do I get to look at a tree? 12,395? There has to be an exact number. Let's just say it's 12,395. Absolutely, that's a lot, but it's not infinite, and I'm thinking anything less than infinite is too small a number and not satisfactory. At the very least, I want to look at trees a million more times. Is that too much to ask?

Also, I would like to stare at my kids a million more times. Make that a million trillion; I could run my hand across their foreheads while they sleep a million trillion more times, easy.

I wonder. How many more times do I get to cut an apple? How many more times will I put on my coat? Put

a quarter in the meter? Kiss my mother? How many more times do I get to quiz my daughter on her spelling words while I make the salad? How many more times will I hold my purse up to my ear to see if it's my cell phone that's ringing? How many more times do I get to ask my husband how much longer till the chicken's ready as he pokes at it on the grill? How many times do I get to wake up? Run inside after getting drenched in the rain? Look for the Ping-Pong ball? Check my e-mail? Play "Heart and Soul" on the piano? Use a straw?

I HAVE THIS VIVID, PICTORIAL memory of being 9 years old, sitting on the sidewalk by my house and thinking, There is nothing special about what I am doing right now, but I want to remember this moment, perfectly intact, for the rest of my life. I don't recall the fine print of it—like what I was wearing, or if there were worms on the sidewalk, or where my siblings were—but I have a carefully preserved recollection of the certainty of my mission, of sitting there in that suburban subdivision feeling adamant about carrying this moment with me into old age. I swear to God, I feel like I could just plop down on the curb next to that girl; she seems that close.

Hi there, 9-year-old me. Can you believe it, here I am, that middle-aged you you imagined, and here we are together, and here, still, is that moment, just like you wanted.

What about the very old and gray 80-year-old us? Is she coming?

I believe so. I hope so. Let's sit and wait. I have a feeling she'll be here in no time. ●

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What Is Middle Age... Exactly?

The end of all beginnings? The beginning of the end? Or an elusive moving target?

The average American will live to be 77.5, but good luck finding a 38.75-year-old woman who feels middle-aged. "When I hear that term, I think of my mother," says Hillary, 40 (last name withheld to protect her youthful self-image). "And she's 63." Yet according to Mark Mather, a demographer for the Population Reference Bureau, neither Hillary nor her mother makes the cut. "Right now middle age is defined by the baby boomers: anyone born between 1946 and 1964," he says.

The 42 to 60 range is more a matter of convenience than of science, and as boomers age, that definition will have to change—though with midlife increasingly considered a mind-set rather than a number, Mather isn't sure what the new parameters might be. "It's the part of life when you begin to fundamentally reexamine where you are, where you've been, and where you're going," notes Gene Cohen, MD, PhD, author of *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*. But it was Shirley Polykoff, the legendary advertising copywriter responsible for the slogan "Does she or doesn't she? Only her hairdresser knows for sure," who may have put it best: "Middle age," she said, "is ten years older than whatever you are." —Rachel Bertsche

