

# YOUNG at HEART

The kids are a worry, your marriage is in tatters, the dog's died... and you're turning 50. But unsettling, murky mid-life can be the making of you, says **Helen Brown**.



**OUT ON A WALK** one day, I caught a glimpse of Mum in a shop window. The harsh morning light emphasised the lines around her mouth. Her eyes bulged accusingly. With a jolt of horror, I realised it was my reflection.

I was shocked but it was time to face facts. Though I still felt 25 inside,

I'd just turned 45. I was so *old*!

Somehow in the whirl of raising kids and hammering out stories on the kitchen table, the teenage bride had morphed into frazzled middle age. According to everything I'd seen and read, I was about to lurch into a horrible phase of invisibility, neuroticism and neediness, ending in a circle of pale faces around my hospital bed.

I booked an emergency facial. The 12-year-old beautician tutted over my wrinkles and told me to eat blueberries. She seemed convinced that if I'd devoured more blueberries I'd have stayed young for ever. I didn't believe a word of it, but stopped at the supermarket afterwards and bought half a kilo of frozen blueberries.

Standing over the stove, stirring blueberries into oatmeal goo (good for lowering cholesterol), I wondered if I was in mid-life denial. I'm not someone who makes a fuss about birthdays that end with a zero. I'd spent my 40th painting bad pictures on the shores of Lake Taupo. There were no plans for my 50th other than thrusting my head into the nearest sand dune.

I cast about for role models. At the age of 45, Aunt Rosie had let her hair go grey. She wore slippers, no bra and a baggy cardigan most of the time. Her intelligence was searing, but she'd never held down a job. Though ►





I loved her dearly she was valued mostly for her ability to grow silverbeet.

The generation of women before Aunt Rosie wasn't much help either; not when a lot of them kicked the bucket around that age.

I figured the only way to deal with mid-life – and the dreaded menopause women friends were going on about – was to ignore it and just hope for the best. But then the night sweats rolled in along with periods heavy enough to wash me out to sea. My female GP had seen it all before and wasn't particularly impressed.

In desperation, I rang a friend who was well into her 60s and asked if it would ever end. With the infuriating serenity of Yoda in *Star Wars*, she replied that things would get better, but she couldn't say exactly when.

The following years were fairly typical for a mid-life woman. My mother died, our son Rob succumbed to serious illness and his sister Lydia considered becoming a Buddhist nun in war-torn Sri Lanka. Oh, and did I mention the mastectomy?

I celebrated my 50th over lunch with five women friends and a gay man. Soon after, the provincial newspaper editors I wrote for started dropping my column. One said my writing had gone stale. Another claimed I had become "irrelevant". I believed them. The message was clear: a middle-aged woman should shut up and concentrate on her silverbeet.

Though it was devastating at the time, I couldn't be more grateful to those idiots now. The sting of their rejection forced me into trying something new. Without them I would never have sat down to write a book about our family cat. Nobody was more surprised than I was when *Cleo* became an international best-seller published in 17 languages.

I've since watched many women



## THE MESSAGE WAS CLEAR: A MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN SHOULD SHUT UP AND CONCENTRATE ON HER SILVERBEET.

friends ride similar mid-life roller-coasters, hitting rock bottom when their marriages or work situations fell apart. We've wept together over troubled teenagers, worried over ageing parents. The pain is real and sometimes it seems like there's no way out. Yet further along the track, most of my friends look back and realise their crises brought with them life-affirming changes.

Now approaching 60, every one of these women is relishing an exciting new phase. No longer victims of hormonal surges, they're energised, self-empowered – and fearless. Not all of their problems have been solved, but they seize life with admirable intensity. They'll just as easily move to the country to grow nuts as to Buenos Aires to help street kids. Revelling in more freedom than they've ever had, they dress vibrantly and deck themselves out in jewels from their jaunts around Asia. Whether babysitting grandchildren

or drinking Champagne with lovers, they're savouring every moment.

These are the women I wanted to honour when I took another risk last year and plunged into my first work of fiction. *Tumbledown Manor* is about a woman who, after a nasty 50th birthday surprise, takes ridiculous risks and transforms rejection into a magical new life.

When I nudged 60 earlier this year, I kept quiet about it and begged my husband not to surprise me with a party. I hate surprises.

Instead, we got together with the family at a country restaurant and had a fine lunch on a terrace in the sunshine. Rob's two little daughters chased ducks while we devoured the sumptuous cake Lydia had made. The things I'd worried about so much in my 40s and 50s had turned out fine. It was a perfect, golden day.

Nobody can survive six decades without experiencing grief and sadness. The losses

only make life and the people in it more precious. Knowing time's finite makes me stop and notice sunlight on treetops and water drops glistening on a bird's wing.

I'll never get to be a ballerina or swim the Tasman Sea. That only heightens my admiration of those who do. I won't be hurtling down the middle of the road on a scooter any time soon. But I am looking forward to feeling the sun on my back and diving into the waves this summer – and later maybe visiting New York to watch my 65-year-old publisher and her friends perform ice-skating solos at the Rockefeller Centre.

I've got news. Sixty isn't the new 40. It's so much better. ■

*Tumbledown Manor* by Helen Brown, Allen & Unwin, \$37, is out now. For details of Helen's North Island book tour, visit [www.helenbrown.com.au](http://www.helenbrown.com.au).

