

– Introduction –

For the last five or six years, on many afternoons around 4 or 5 p.m., I've been overcome by the feeling that my life is effectively over. This is not a sense that the world is ending, which has been in vogue for quite some time now, and maybe for good reason. It's a personal forboding, a distinct feeling of being at the end of my days. My time, while technically not 'up', is disappearing in the rearview mirror. The fact that this feeling of ambient doom tends to coincide with the blue-tinged, pre-gloaming light of the late afternoon lends the whole thing a cosmic beauty, as devastating as it is awe-inspiring. As such, I've dubbed this the catastrophe hour.

Getting older is the oldest story in the world, of course. Still, the time – my time – is disappearing at a pace that is faster than I had ever anticipated and, I daresay, faster than the pace experienced by any previous generation. As far as cultural relevance goes, GenX is shaping up to have a tragically short lifespan. Just as we were finding our footing in the early to mid-2000s, getting real jobs and looking almost like respectable grownups, the twin forces of hyperspeed tech advancement and head-spinning social changes

came along and fermented us before we'd even ripened on the vine. By the time we were fifty, many of us were as good as eighty. Or so it often feels to me.

The consolations of aging have always been in the eye of the beholder. Virginia Woolf, at fifty, wrote in her diaries of feeling 'poised to shoot forth quite free straight and undeflected my bolts whatever they are.' She did not believe in aging, she said, but rather 'forever altering one's aspect to the sun.' I am now three years past the age Woolf was when she talked about altering her aspect to the sun. And while I don't know enough about astrology to connect the dots of my memories to trail markers of the earth's orbit, I've lately become aware of a sort of baseline visceral sensation hovering over my emotional life. Again and again, this sensation conjures the same sentiment: I'm glad I lived when I did. Specifically, I'm glad I was young when I was.

Life to me these days often feels like I'm backing up slowly from a tense and increasingly untenable situation. If the world in the post-Trump, post-George Floyd, post-COVID, post-whatever-happened-five-minutes-ago age feels in many ways like a bank robbery in progress, I'm the lady who was finishing up with the teller at precisely the moment the robbers entered the building. While the rest of the customers dropped to the ground, I managed to slither away just in time, my transaction completed, the door hitting me firmly but not violently on the way out.

Safely outside, I can peer through the glass as the people younger than I surrender like hostages to the demands and punishments of the digital era. Fledgling journalists churn out multiple articles per day for a fraction of what I was paid twenty years ago (and are appraised not by the quality of their work but by the quantity of their clicks). Artists forge their own lonely and starving paths, unsupported by institutions and economies that once upon a time, for better or worse, buoyed them enough to at least keep them paddling along. Teenagers with undeveloped frontal lobes are effectively subject to twenty-four-hour social media surveillance, their every poor choice and dumbass move recorded for potentially cataclysmic posterity.

There are things I did and said as a teenager that would ruin me today if they had been captured, immortalized and weaponized per the current protocol. I'd give you some hints as to what these things might be but, honestly, I cannot remember. In shame or mortification or unconscious self-protection I've blocked them out. I have sense memories of these idiocies, but there's no precision to them. They remain preserved in an impressionistic muck. In turn, that muck is what preserves my ability to live with myself. How lucky to have lived in a time of such muck. How lucky to have grown up in private.

The essays in this collection were written, for the most part, between 2017 and 2024. The subjects covered include divorce, travel, dating, music, friendship,

beauty, aging, death, art, solitude, music, money and real estate. (I could go on, but I'll stop at real estate, where the buck always stops.) Though many were written during the Trump administration and into the pandemic era, I'm relieved to tell you that they don't linger on politics or Covid.

It feels important to say these essays were written in the privacy of my own mind. By that I mean they did not germinate in tweets or blog posts or Instagram stories. They are not my 'take' on anything. Instead, they are products of those tender, fleeting moments when a writer finds herself staring into space (or out her window, or at the wall) and thinking about what she wants to say not to her social media followers but to her reader. They were inspired not by news headlines or social media dustups but by the free-floating anxiety that underscores and perpetuates all of that. They are my attempt to grab some emotional abstractions out of the air and examine them until they can start to make sense. They're about the pleasures of staring out the window or even staring at the wall.

The final three essays in this collection are brand new; you are reading them here for the first time. Others appeared on the platform *Medium*, specifically the no-longer-extant publication *GEN*, where I wrote a regular, magazine-style column (with real editors; a rare luxury today) that lived a rather shadowy life behind a paywall. Others lived in my proverbial desk drawer and some, more recently, have assumed a place