BOUNTIFULL

The Second Half

What nobody tells you about
the slow reckonings of midlife

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You see, my dad died when he was 44. That shaped how I see life. I decided early on that I don't want to wait for retirement to do the things that matter to me, because there's no guarantee any of us will get there.

I used to do this thing when I was little where I'd picture future me at certain ages. I could always see her. And then somewhere around 25 I realised the vision had gone blank. I didn't have a picture for 30-year-old me. Not because I'd stopped caring, but because the version of the future I'd been given, the one where you tick certain boxes and arrive at a life that feels like yours, had quietly stopped making sense.

This essay is about that gap. The one between the life you build and how you expected it to feel. It's about the slow unravelling that happens in your thirties, forties, fifties, when the identity you constructed over decades starts to feel more like a costume than a core. And it's about what comes after, if you're willing to sit in the discomfort long enough to find out.

None of this is tidy. That's the point.

Over the past few years, through Bountifull, I've had conversations with psychologists, researchers, entrepreneurs, artists, coaches, and ordinary people doing extraordinary inner work. Midlife kept surfacing. Not as a crisis, which is the word we've been handed, but as a series of reckonings. Quiet ones, mostly. The kind that creep up on you in the shower, or in the car, or at 3am when everyone else is asleep.

What follows draws on those conversations and on my own. I'm not offering a framework or a fix. I'm offering what I found when I looked honestly at this stretch of life, and what the people I trust most had to say about it.

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1. The costume falls off

David Spinks sat across from me and couldn't answer a simple question. I'd asked him who he was. Not what he did. Who he was.

> ***'I just have a really hard time answering that question,' he said. He talked about how any words you use to describe yourself will always be limited, that there's no set of labels broad enough to capture who a person actually is.***

He's right, of course. But the reason it's such a hard question in midlife specifically is that most of us spent our twenties and thirties building an identity out of the answers. Job title. Role in the friend group. The way people introduced you at parties. And then one day you look at those

answers and realise they're descriptions of what you do, not who you are. The costume falls off and you're standing there, not sure what's underneath.

> **"The costume falls off and you're standing there, not sure what's underneath."**

Magenta, a psychologist I spoke with, described reaching the end of her clinical training and looking around her life like someone waking up from a long sleep. She'd become Magenta the psychologist so completely that she'd lost sight of who Magenta was underneath that. She had this moment where she looked around and thought: what do I actually like? What interests me? What is my life outside of this one identity?

That question terrified her. And I get it, because I've been there. I was so tied up in my work and career at one point in my life that I looked at a hobbies list and realised I didn't have any interests. My identity was my work. Everything else had gone thin. In a way, it made me deeply boring.

Klay, who works with people transitioning out of long careers, told me about a woman from one of the big cosmetics companies. Her husband asked her at a cocktail party who she was going to be once she left. She brushed it off, said she'd still be the same person. But just two months into retirement, she told Klay she felt like she didn't matter any more. In nearly 40 years, nobody had needed her for anything except the power she held. When the title went, the phone stopped ringing.

Klay's observation was blunt: so many people don't think about who they are when they're no longer in the game. When they're no longer the master chess player. How do you find a sense of mattering and purpose when the thing that gave you both is gone?

Lynne Sandri, an artist who spent years in corporate life, put it more quietly. She kept asking herself: am I making a difference? Would the doors of this place open the next day with or without me? It wasn't a dramatic moment. Just a persistent one.

I think that's more honest than the way we usually tell these stories. It's rarely a bolt of lightning. It's more like a low hum that gets louder until you can't pretend you don't hear it.

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2. The gap between what you built and how it feels

There's a quieter version of the midlife reckoning that doesn't involve identity at all. Or rather, it does, but sideways. It's the moment you arrive at the life you planned and find it doesn't feel the way you thought it would.

David Spinks named this with uncomfortable precision. He talked about creating and achieving from a place of not-enoughness, where you build things not because they matter to you but because you need them to feel like you're enough. The return on energy, he said, is negative. You're hollowed out. There's an emptiness in the work.

I think most people who've had any degree of professional success know this feeling but don't say it out loud. Because admitting that the thing you worked for doesn't satisfy you feels ungrateful. It feels like a problem you're not allowed to have.

One of my guests described how even after reaching every milestone she'd set for herself, it didn't ultimately feel like she'd done anything on a day-to-day basis. The hedonic treadmill, they call it. Success resets your baseline. You arrive and the finish line moves.

Bari, who's 55 and works as a money therapist, frames her life through a different lens entirely. For her, it's a constant equation: time, energy, money, family, health. She's always checking in on how she's doing across all of those. Sometimes she is. Sometimes she's not. She says it plainly, without pretending everything is sorted.

I love that honesty. Because I think what midlife actually offers, if you stop fighting it, is the chance to stop performing contentment and start tracking what's real. Like tending a garden. You look at what's growing, what's dying, and what needs attention, and you stop pretending the whole bed is thriving when half of it clearly isn't.

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3. What falls away

I ask every guest on Bountifull the same question in the quickfire round: what did you think mattered that you realised didn't?

Two answers dominate. Reputation. And what other people think.

Jessica, from Houston, answered immediately: reputation. Cheryl said the same thing, in different words: what people think of you. Jed Diamond, who's been working in men's health for over 50 years, said he'd always wanted to be a millionaire growing up, and that all of that thinking about needing money in order to do or be something was, in the end, useless. The things he'd enjoyed had nothing to do with having a lot of money.

But the answer I think about most came from David Spinks. When I asked him, he paused. Then he said: reputation, or legacy. And then he added this qualifier: that's an aspiration to believe it doesn't matter. He wasn't pretending he'd fully let go. He was being honest about the fact that he was still working on it.

That honesty is the whole thing, I think. Midlife isn't about arriving at some enlightened state where you've transcended ego. It's about getting honest enough to notice what you've been carrying that isn't yours. The ambitions your family had for you. The version of success you absorbed before you'd had time to develop your own. The reputation you built because you thought it would fill a gap that it can't.

> **"It's about getting honest enough to notice what you've been carrying that isn't yours."**

We should ourselves into corners. And then we wonder why we're exhausted.

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4. Purpose has an expiry date (and that's okay)

Nell spent ten years in nonprofit work before waking up one day and seeing how broken everything was. She'd missed her father's funeral. Her marriage was falling apart. She was professionally unfulfilled and crabby with every one of her talented colleagues. The purpose she'd been running on had expired, and she hadn't noticed.

She went to business school, worked in consumer product marketing, and found that more purposeful than the nonprofit work she'd thought was her calling. Her take on purpose is worth sitting with: if you're not living it in action, the lofty purpose statement doesn't matter.

I think we've been sold a story about purpose that does real damage. The idea that there's one thing you're meant to do, and you just have to find it, and then you'll feel complete. It sounds beautiful. It also sets you up to feel like a failure every time the thing you were doing stops feeling meaningful.

Alia, a psychologist I spoke with, challenged the whole framing. She said that living a life of purpose isn't about sitting in a box trying to contain it. It's about expanding. Challenging yourself. Exploring. She's wary of labels and definitions because the minute we pin purpose down, we limit what we can do with who we are.

Most of us discover purpose indirectly, Alia said. And she thinks that's the way to go about it. Not the consolation prize for people who couldn't find it directly. The actual way.

Klay summed it up like this: purpose is never dead. It's a continuing learning process. If we invite people to be lifelong learners, the learning itself can be just as golden as the parts of life we typically hold up as the best bits.

I keep coming back to that. The learning can be golden. Not what the learning leads to. The learning itself.

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5. The wound as the doorway

Jed Diamond has been working with men for over 50 years. When I asked him about purpose, he didn't talk about passion or talent or calling. He said something I haven't been able to shake: for most people, one of the hidden doorways into purpose is through their wounds.

His own story makes the point. His father took an overdose of sleeping pills when Jed was five years old. That wound, that specific, personal, devastating thing, eventually led him to his life's work helping men navigate the parts of themselves they've been told to hide. If people can even hear the possibility that your purpose may be through the wound and into the darkness, he said, that's where you find why you're here.

I understand this in my bones. My dad's death shaped everything. My sense of urgency. My refusal to wait. My need to figure out what a good life actually looks like, not in theory but in practice, every single day. My life has been haunted by suicide for the last seventeen years. My dad, two uncles, a best friend. That's not something I'd have chosen. But it's the ground I grew from.

Sam Harrop told me a version of the same story. He got forced out of a successful business between 40 and 43. Four years of anger. But he described it as ironically becoming the start of a bountiful period in his life, because it forced him to question himself. He went on a personal discovery that led him to understand his ego, what it truly was, and to stop feeding it. Since then, he said, his life had become more abundant than it ever was when he was clinging to the thing he'd lost.

If he could go back, he'd tell his 35-year-old self: just slow down. Go on a voyage of personal discovery earlier.

Not everyone's wound is dramatic. Sometimes it's quieter. A relationship that eroded without you noticing. A career that slowly stopped fitting. The death of an idea you'd had about how your life would go. But the pattern is the same: the thing you didn't choose becomes the thing that cracks you open, and through the crack, something real starts to grow.

"The thing you didn't choose becomes the thing that cracks you open."

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6. Relationships change shape

Sabina Read, a psychologist, said something I think about often. Friendships ebb and flow over time, she told me. They're not always forever. She described it as season, reason, lifetime. Sometimes we hold onto friendships out of history, because we were close in school or bonded over something years ago. And those are beautiful to revisit every five or ten years. But they might not be your people now.

I surfaced something in that conversation that I hadn't quite articulated before. I'd been wanting more from my friendships but couldn't tell if it was geography, or stage of life, or something else entirely. What I said was: maybe I've moved into a new time. I want to actually live life with some of my friends, not just catch up.

Catch up is the default mode for most adult friendships, isn't it? A coffee every few months. A text when something big happens. The annual birthday message. And that's fine, it keeps the thread alive. But it's not the same as doing life together. Being in the room when something ordinary happens. The kind of closeness that doesn't require an event to justify contact.

Klay was honest about how hard this gets as you age. Making friends as an adult is difficult, he said. The older you get, the harder it feels. And Julianne, who studies loneliness, warned against putting all of your relational weight on one person. Building a network of people across your life, she said, gives you greater resilience to whatever life throws at you.

I think midlife is where you start to notice the difference between the people who knew you and the people who know you. The past tense matters. Because you're not the same person you were at 25, and some of the people who loved that version of you don't quite know what to do with this one. That's not a failure. That's growth. But it can feel like loss.

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7. The body changes and nobody warns you

My partner once told me that men have cycles too. At the time, I didn't fully understand what he meant. But the more I've observed and learned, the more I've realised how little we talk about the biological and emotional rhythms that shape men's lives.

Jed Diamond reframed male menopause in a way that stuck with me. He compared it to puberty, which prepares you for adulthood. Male menopause, or andropause, he said, prepares you for what he calls super adulthood. A stage that can be more passionate, more powerful, more purposeful than anything before it. But he was also honest about what it involves: decreasing testosterone leading to irritability, fatigue, loss of libido, depression. And most men don't know about the interaction between belly fat and hormones, where fat converts testosterone to oestrogen, compounding everything.

We talk about women's hormonal shifts constantly. Menopause has become, rightly, a subject of public conversation. But the equivalent conversation for men barely exists. And I think that silence costs us. It costs men who don't understand what's happening in their own bodies. It costs those close to them who feel the distance but don't know why.

Bari, at 55, simply named menopause as part of her current equation. No drama, no euphemism. Health is doing pretty good, she said. I'm in menopause now. But all those things are always changing. That kind of plainness about the body feels radical in a culture that either medicalises ageing or pretends it isn't happening.

I think we owe each other more honest conversations about this. About what our bodies actually do in the middle of life. About how it feels when the thing you live in starts operating by different rules and nobody gave you the manual.

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8. What they wish they'd known

I ask every guest what they'd say to their younger self. The answers always cluster around the same few ideas, and I find that comforting. If this many different people, from different backgrounds and countries and professions, all land in the same place, there's probably something in it.

Sam Harrop: slow down. Go on a voyage of personal discovery earlier.

Holli-Anne, a wellbeing researcher: probably just chill out. Trust yourself. Don't be so worried about how you look, or how other people see you.

Julie: breathe. She described her younger self as wearing pretty tight, getting uptight about things that really didn't matter.

Adam: everything that you think you're going to do, you are going to do, so good job, but you will not achieve any of it the way you think.

Jessica, who has kids watching her figure it out in real time: follow peace. It won't always be the easiest thing, but you'll always have peace when it's what you're supposed to be doing.

There's a through line in all of that. It's not advice, exactly. It's permission. Permission to slow down. Permission to trust yourself. Permission to not have it figured out. Permission to let the path be indirect. Permission to follow what feels right even when it doesn't look like what everyone else is doing.

If I could go back and talk to 25-year-old me, the one who'd lost her vision of future-her and didn't know what came next, I think I'd say: the blank space isn't a problem. It's the beginning. You don't need a picture of where you're going. You just need to keep paying attention to what's right in front of you.

"The blank space isn't a problem. It's the beginning."

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The quiet after

Midlife isn't a crisis. I'm sure of that now. It's a series of slow reckonings. Identity unravels. What used to work stops working. The gap between the life you built and how you expected it to feel becomes impossible to ignore. Relationships shift. The body changes. And somewhere in the mess of all that, if you're willing to sit in the discomfort rather than sprint past it, there's a chance to figure out what actually matters to you. Not what you were told should matter.

Every morning, I walk around my garden. Twenty acres in Central Otago. I check what's growing, what needs water, what the frost got. It's not a metaphor. Or maybe it is. Either way, it's the truest thing I do.

The second half doesn't come with a map. But it does come with something the first half didn't: the willingness to look at things as they are. Not as you hoped they'd be, or as someone told you they should be, but as they actually, honestly, right now, are.

That's where it starts.

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Sian Simpson is a New Zealand entrepreneur, global podcast host, and investor who explores how people create more joy in their lives, sharing stories and insights from inspiring leaders and everyday people worldwide.

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