



HARRY WILSON

Readers Write

TURNING THIRTY

I'D BEEN DIVORCED FOR SIX MONTHS, my ex-husband was planning to marry a former friend of mine, and I'd put my cat to sleep at Christmas. The night before I turned thirty, I affixed a temporary tattoo of a zebra above my left breast, threw a party, and danced until past midnight. The next day, for my birthday, I went snowboarding for the first time and fell so hard

on my tailbone that my nose started to bleed. Then my father was diagnosed with lymphoma. And my great-aunt Charlotte was buried.

Charlotte was seventy when I was born, and she was widowed for the second time before I became a teenager. A pioneer among the women in my family, she led an adventurous life of travel and

art, but she never quite recovered from the death of her first husband. Her second marriage was companionable rather than passionate.

When I was thirteen, Charlotte's youngest brother, my grandfather, committed suicide by jumping off the cliff at Land's End in San Francisco. Heartbroken, Charlotte packed up and moved to a retirement home in Indiana, more than a thousand miles away. Seventeen years later, I drove there to visit her on her deathbed.

Charlotte's hair was white and wild, and her eyes were bright. Despite her experience with tragedy, she'd managed to live a century. During a pause in our conversation, she turned to me and asked, "Do you believe in the Lord?"

I wasn't sure. This had been the most difficult year of my life.

"Yes," I said hesitantly.

"Good," she said, and patted my hand.

I drove home in tears. It would take me nearly a year to pick myself up and start anew.

For all that died in my thirtieth year, Charlotte's faith grew inside me. She knew life was about having faith and loving everybody: the janitor, the night nurse, the depressed niece who drove all the way to Indiana in a white vw to say goodbye. And it's faith I've been riding on ever since.

*Deborah Crook
Mill Valley, California*

EARLY ON THE MORNING OF MY THIRTIETH birthday, I strolled through a department store and deftly swept lipsticks and mascaras into my handbag. I stopped to touch a blue cologne bottle. It would look lovely next to the red perfume vial from the week before. Its weight felt good in my hand, and in my pocket.

I'd been "collecting" for months. I had a lovely array of crystal atomizers and more than thirty lipsticks, none of which I used. I liked to rearrange my collection on the dresser, recalling the excitement of acquiring each item.

At thirty I had frown lines on my forehead, tiny wrinkles in the corners of my eyes, and a bulge at my waistline. Depressed and bored with my mundane life and office-manager job, I needed chal-

lenge and excitement — just for a while, until I got past this birthday. I swore that today would mark the end of my bad habit.

At noon, my mother came to pick me up for lunch at a ritzy restaurant. She walked through my house as though she had never seen it before and paused to sniff my colognes and sort through the shades of lipstick. “Where did you find these wonderful cosmetics?” she asked.

“Here and there,” I said. I wondered if she was suspicious. Maybe I should have put them away before she arrived. I ran my fingers up and down the etched surface of my cut-crystal atomizer. Then I generously sprayed its sandalwood perfume on my neck; I knew where I could get more.

What I didn’t know was that three of my treasures were in my mother’s purse.

*Fran K.
Rancho Mirage, California*

I HAD WANTED TO GREET THIRTY AT the door of my very own house, wearing a sleeveless linen dress and holding a glass of pinot noir. “Please, come in,” I’d say, and smile warmly. “I’ve been expecting you.”

Thirty and I would glide across my pristine hardwood floors, sit down on the couch, and laugh together over the worst parts of my life. As we rehashed each devastating incident, all the pain would miraculously be gone, replaced by a calm acceptance and quiet thankfulness.

“I’m glad all *that’s* behind me,” I would say, pouring myself another glass of wine.

I turn thirty in a few months. The reality is: I rent an apartment. I look awful in dresses, and until I lose thirty pounds, sleeves are an absolute necessity. My hardwood floors are scarred and spotted with suspicious dark patches. Sometimes I take Polaroids of the patches, to make sure they aren’t getting bigger.

I have no master plan. I worry. I get depressed. I am anxious much of the time. I wish I could earn a living and still manage to exercise, eat vegetables, be creative, practice yoga, meditate, volunteer, socialize, relax. At the very least, I’d like to be able to get up when my alarm

goes off. Why do I drink so much, when it gives me such bad headaches? When am I finally going to switch careers? Why, after I’ve spent so many years in therapy, can one call from my mother send me into a weeklong depression?

When I think back on the worst parts of my life, I don’t laugh. The humiliation burns bright, and I still feel the pain.

*J.L.
Los Angeles, California*

THE FRIDAY BEFORE I TURNED THIRTY was the last day of my corporate job. I stretched my going-away/birthday party into a solid ninety minutes, and at twenty till five I just walked out. It was late June, and the air was rosy and sticky and full of the sound of crickets. I didn’t have to go to New York on Monday for the sales convention. I was free.

On Monday, my birthday, I got out of bed at 9:30, put on my bikini, and took some bong hits on the porch. Then I soaked in the sun and read a D.H. Law-

rence novel I’d never finished. Around eleven I masturbated, and after lunch I took a nap.

I’d been at that job eighteen months — my longest employment ever. My boss had told me that, with some “grooming,” I could go as far as I wanted in the corporation.

I also ate one meal a day and sometimes threw that up. I couldn’t sleep. I dreaded the monthly sales trips. I was starting to drink too much. Even the weekends didn’t feel like they were mine.

That Monday was a glorious summer day: hot and bright blue. I walked in the woods near my apartment and heard no cars, no telephones, no faxes — just birds and the wind and the neighbor’s retriever baying at squirrels. My skin was office pale, but the bikini fit just right. Somewhere, someone who wasn’t me was busily replacing toner cartridges. I was unemployed with no prospects. It was the best birthday I’d ever had.

Name Withheld

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| UPCOMING TOPICS | DEADLINE | PUBLICATION DATE |
|-----------------|------------|------------------|
| Stepfamilies | February 1 | July 2004 |
| Hard Work | March 1 | August 2004 |
| Fitting In | April 1 | September 2004 |
| Weddings | May 1 | October 2004 |
| Coming Clean | June 1 | November 2004 |
| Letters | July 1 | December 2004 |

TWO YEARS AGO MY YOUNGER BROTHER turned thirty. I didn't live close enough to celebrate with him, but I sent him a copy of one of my favorite books, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*, and I told him I loved him. Five months later, he committed suicide.

While going through the files on his computer, I found a letter in which he lamented turning thirty and having "absolutely nothing to fucking show for it." He believed that thirty was the age by which one should be settled and accomplished. Instead his employment and finances were unstable, and he couldn't propose to his girlfriend because of it.

I wish I could read to him from *The Little Prince*, to remind him that life is "a matter of consequence," whereas turning thirty is not.

*Stephanie D.
Bozeman, Montana*

AFTER COLLEGE I BEGAN TO WONDER when I would feel like an adult. I set milestones, assuring myself that after I reached each one, I would finally be "grown-up": I found an apartment and a job. I got married. I began a teaching career. I had a daughter, then a son. But through it all I felt as if I were playacting.

At twenty-nine, I found myself unexpectedly pregnant with a third child. When I was about four months along, Tom, my former mentor and the director of the writing program at my old high school, called. He was retiring, and he wanted me to apply for his job.

This was the position I had dreamed about. So what if it meant moving my family from Los Angeles to New Orleans? I was sure my husband, who had just begun a dream job of his own, would find something to do.

I agonized about the interview: what if they found someone better, someone who had published more, someone who wasn't pregnant? They didn't. I was offered the job.

Then reality set in. The school system in New Orleans was a mess. My daughter would be starting kindergarten, and we had missed the magnet-school-lottery deadlines. My husband had graciously sent out his résumé and made myriad phone calls, but had found no reasonable

job prospects. Our new baby was due the week before school started. Tom tried to find somebody who could take the first semester and let me begin in January, but no one was available.

The night before my thirtieth birthday, I realized that the only person who would possibly benefit from my taking the job was me. The next morning I turned the position down.

After that I never again felt like an imposter in the adult world.

*Caitlin Cross-Barnet
Los Angeles, California*

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NICOLE BLAISDELL