



Illustration by Rachel Faulis

# To Those Who Come Behind Us

By Anna Mitchael

When I was 23, I had a workout shirt that said “NO PAIN NO GAIN” in large white letters, with a little Nike swoosh at the bottom. I wore that shirt up and down what felt like every street of Boston while I trained for my first marathon—my only marathon, too, though that’s a different story about knowing what you’re made for and what you’re not. This is a story about simply knowing.

“What’s your shirt say?” an older woman asked me once. Her hair was white and curly, cut close to her head. I was jogging in place at a stoplight by the Pru, so very close to the basement apartment I was renting, but very far from home. It was early fall, but because I had just spent four years at college in Texas, it felt like the beginning of winter to me.

“No pain no gain,” I told her. I’d heard the saying a thousand times and was still very collegiate in how I moved through the world—as though we were all having a shared and similar experience. Yet all signs pointed to this being the woman’s first time hearing the phrase. She cocked her head to the side as though she was thinking this through, a look of concern spreading across her face.

“Do promise,” she finally said to me, “you won’t go through life thinking that’s true.”

I don’t know if I was more surprised by what she said or that she had spoken to me at all. In Texas I

expected to strike conversations anywhere, but my months in Boston had taught me otherwise: More guarded. Less “tell me your life story and I’ll tell you mine” simply because we happened to be standing in the same elevator.

The streetlights changed, and people started to move. She walked on her way and got lost in the crowd. Ultimately, I decided it was a good thing I didn’t promise her anything because I would have broken it in the coming miles. And then continued to break it for the next two decades.

*And so we go on.*

It has to be said now so it’s in the open: Talking about aging is tricky. I am in my forties. When I sit with my grandmother who is 93 and hold her hands, bones in wrinkles, and I listen to her say that she doesn’t very much like being an old lady, that she never even liked being a grown-up to start with, my youth comes and swirls around me like a cloud of ingratitude for the sponginess of my joints, the red in my cheeks, the powerful start and stop ability of my bladder.

The thirty-year-olds in my office often make comments about how “ancient” they feel with every passing birthday. One of my closest friends is 55, and I’ve never thought of her as old a day in my life, yet she

told me a few months ago that hanging out with me sometimes makes her feel that way. My much younger cousin gave me a walking stick for my birthday last year; I pretended I wasn't offended, but I was, and then a couple weeks later, I had to come so close to my indignity I could have French kissed it because I actually needed the stick on a hike that was too long for my tired feet.

Of course, not one of those feelings, dramas, dilemmas, perceptions, or misperceptions changed the amount of sand that slipped to the other side of the hourglass in the time they took place. Or the time it took you to read this paragraph. No thing, no one, no place, no drink, no drug, no shot, no request spoken kindly or yelled with barely repressed aggression, nor hate whispered with visibly evident anger at the injustice of the world can change the sand. It doesn't speed up. It doesn't slow down. I have my hourglass and you have yours and the hourglasses don't always feel fair, but the sand always is.

*And so we go on.*

It was around the time I said goodbye to my twenties that I actually felt the pain of the "gain." I looked around at the people in my orbit and came to the dramatic and depressing conclusion that they all had more concrete things to show for life at that point.

So I dug my heels in. I put all my effort into remaining on the familiar side of 30. It was an impossible task and I knew it, but still I stayed—flexed. Even after the sand slipped through and the hourglass flipped, I kept my heels in the ground.

What was I scared of anyway? If you had asked me to articulate the fear, I wouldn't have been able to tell you. Getting older was another one of those things I'd heard about a thousand times. I had garnered—from movies and books; the mothers, aunts, and grandmothers of everyone I knew well; every moisturizer and sunscreen commercial I'd ever seen; and personal observation of which women were chosen for love and which weren't—that aging was something to avoid. It was like walking into a minefield—there were enough of the bad things around that, eventually, one of them would likely get you. Aging became the Bogeyman of my adult life. A figure I couldn't pin down, but just knew I wanted to avoid.

*And so we go on.*

As it ended up, my biological clock turned on for the third time when I was approaching my forties. In

so many parts of the country and the world, a baby at forty wouldn't be thought of twice. But where I lived, in a rural area in central Texas (twenty minutes from the nearest gas station and thirty from a place where you could buy a fresh piece of fruit), forty years old was considered too old to have a baby.

I didn't think so at all, or at least I told myself I didn't. I noted my heels were still dug in, though. I noted I felt the pangs when people asked if I was going to be too tired to stay up with the baby, or how I would feel when the baby was graduating high school and I was almost sixty. I heard the defensiveness in my reactions, wondering all the while if it was something I'd have to get up close and personal with again, meet mouth-on-mouth with all that self-protection.

Then the baby came, and instead of a boy like my first two, this baby was a girl. As she started to get older and signs of her personality came poking through, I learned she was one of those girls who watched the world around her. Who absorbed behaviors. Who would hear me say something and then in sing-song toddler gibberish would repeat back what sounded an awful lot like my adult sentences. My son, who was seven at the time, called it our daughter's "grownup-schmownup" talk. I laughed at the joke, but all the while I was staring down at the divots in the mud. I was thinking about that shirt I used to wear, and the woman in the street laying advice at my feet, and what we choose to offer to those who come behind us.

The Bogeyman wouldn't just be mine. Eventually it would become hers, too.

*And so I did not go on.*

In his book *Deep Work*, Cal Newport (2016) frequently mentions another writer, Winifred Gallagher, who embarked on years of research after her cancer diagnosis led to some startling realizations about the ways we choose to live:

*We tend to place emphasis on our circumstances, assuming that what happens to us (or fails to happen) determines how we feel. From this perspective, the small-scale details of how you spend your day aren't that important, because what matters are large-scale outcomes, such as whether you get a promotion or move to a newer apartment.*

I read this book through a lens of how to work, but when I was trying to figure out how to change my head about aging—how I could feel less of the pain—this passage came racing back to me, a Bogeyman

“Getting older is a large-scale outcome. I had been so focused on it that I had never even seen the small-scale details.”

buster. Getting older is a large-scale outcome. I had been so focused on it that I had never even seen the small-scale details.

Gallagher believes we put together our worldview based on what we pay attention to. And whether by desire, laziness, peer pressure, or habit, I had only paid attention to what was beautiful about the first half of life. If I wanted to move forward, I needed to see the trees in the forest—to look closely at getting older, understand it, define it, and wrap myself in the beauty of it.

The next time I sat down with a friend at lunch, I asked, “What do you love about being in midlife?”

Immediately, she shut down and said she did not want to spend our lunch hour talking about midlife crisis “crap,” and threatened to cancel our weekly lunch if such depressing talk continued. Not an entirely bad reaction—just a reminder that I was not the only one dodging the Bogeyman in the alley.

The next time I sat down with a friend, I instead asked, “What do you love about your life?” That question didn't come with age attached, but the answers she offered were only possible because of age.

The question worked, so I kept with it. Every time I saw a friend for the following months, I asked the question. Again and again. Some friends were asked three or four times—I always made them give me new answers. Until I had a very detailed list of what to love about getting older:

We slow down. Gain wisdom. There's so much letting go of expectation. There's so much freedom in not worrying about who looks or does not look on the street, not caring who praises your career or does not praise your career, and wondering what it looks like to turn a career away from yourself and toward others.

It goes on and on. With that in hand, I decided I could go on. I keep a couple of my favorites scratched on a paper in my wallet, and if I feel like the Bogeyman is closing in, I pull it out and read it through. I'm always reminding myself of the joy waiting in the details of the day, the concrete, tangible things we hold in our hands—and sometimes, see on our hands—as the actual signs of life.

It's about the way your heart opened when you leaned forward into what was coming, instead of trying to get back.

Then how your daughter saw the joy in you and mimicked that.

How you whisper in her ear the promise of sorts that you are finally qualified to make:

*There doesn't have to be pain to gain, little girl. Remember that. And pass it on.*

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#### REFERENCES

Newport, C. (2016). *Deep Work: Rules for focused success in a distracted world*. Grand Central Publishing.