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the PANIC years

Nell Frizzell

dates, doubts and the mother of all decisions

The Panic Years

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Dates, doubts and the mother of all decisions

NELL FRIZZELL



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To Liz, the mother who made me.
And to Nick, who made me a mother.

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Introduction

I woke up on the morning of my twenty-eighth birthday alone, in a single bed, in my mother's spare room and remembered that my boyfriend of six years was no longer my boyfriend. As I lay there, pinned to the bed by the weight of my own heart, I realized that for the first time in a long time, I was alone; unfamiliar, unsure and untethered.

The morning of my thirtieth birthday, I woke up in bed with my best friend. She was five months pregnant, had a mortgage and was engaged. I was single, childless and soon to be made redundant. Looking across at her, the bright December sunshine screaming through the window like a fire alarm, it felt like I was standing on a station platform, watching my friend pull out of view.

The morning of my thirty-third birthday, I woke up in bed beside a man I love, with a two-week-old baby breathing so gently beside me that, for the 578th time in his life I had to reach out a hand and touch his face to check that he was alive. My stomach was wet mud. My eyes were lychees of restless weeping. I hadn't slept

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for more than three straight hours since the last few weeks of my pregnancy, I was wearing a sanitary towel the size of a blow-up mattress and I smelled like fermenting milk. As a pinkish dawn kissed the treetops along the River Lea, I dressed in an XL grey men's tracksuit and my boyfriend's socks, slipped out of my baking one-bedroom flat, crossed the footbridge into Walthamstow Marshes, faced the sun and howled.

In less time than it took my sister to pass her driving test, I had undergone a fundamental life change. I threw away the security of a relationship, confronted the finite nature of my fertility, acted at times with careless depravity and took on, eventually, an entirely new identity. These changes resulted in me having a baby, but whether it's ending a long-term relationship, moving country, changing your career, getting married or having a breakdown, huge things tend to happen to us during this nameless period around our late twenties, thirties and often into our forties, and many of them are irreversible. Becoming a parent is the only decision that comes with a biological deadline, the only one that cannot be reversed: it is therefore the one decision that throws all others into such sharp focus. You can get a new job, move house, make new friends, find new partners, but once you're a parent, you're a parent for life.

And yet this period has no name. Unlike childhood, adolescence, menopause or the mid-life crisis, we have no common term for the tumult of time, hormones, social pressure and maternal hunger that smacks into many women like a train at the end of their twenties and

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early thirties. There is no medical term, no compound German word, nothing in Latin, Arabic or French. Astrology may refer to the seven-year cycles of the Saturn Return, but this nebulous phrase speaks little of the grit and girth, the blood and weeping, the travel and transformation that I have witnessed, in both myself and the people around me. While in the midst of it, you feel as though you are twisting through a web of impossible decisions – about work, money, love, location, career, contraception and commitment – each one pulling like a thread on all the others, impossible to untangle or move through without unravelling the whole thing. In hindsight, many, if not all, of those decisions were rendered so intense by the pulsing, beating, inescapable knowledge that your fertility is finite, that you are running out of eggs and that one day your body will no longer give you the option to have children.

These years are compelled by the eternal question: should I have a baby, and, if so, when, how, why and with whom? That question then creeps into every area of your life. It is the *rat-a-tat* of the tracks beneath your feet. The bassline to everything. Whether you want to be a parent or not, as a person in your late twenties and thirties, perhaps even into your forties, the slow march of unfertilized opportunity brings an urgency to your life that no other period can quite match. You have to decide what you want, now, before your body takes the choice away from you.

That there are several words for adolescence in every major European language and not a single one for this second transformative time in a woman's life speaks of

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two things: that language often lets us down, and that we have never really taken this period seriously. Too often, our journey out of youth, through fertility and into a new emotional maturity is dismissed as broodiness, anxiety or 'merely' the ticking of the biological clock. In fact, it is a complex focal point of every pressure, contradiction and fear faced by western women today, from fertility and finance to love, work and self-worth.

When I lost my relationship, my home and my direction at twenty-eight, nobody told me that this was the start of something. Nobody had a shorthand to explain that out of so much loss would come an entirely new identity; that most of the people around me were also in flux, whether they were in relationships or not. We were all wrestling with the same questions and many of us were also feeling hamstrung by the pressure to make big decisions; in terms of parenthood, an irrevocable decision. As I stood before the great rolling departure board of my future, I had no idea that I was doing so shoulder-to-shoulder with millions of other women on their own journey through the same maternal quandary.

It is because we haven't identified this period with a name that we're not prepared properly for it when it comes, and we haven't developed the tools to navigate it. This is a problem if women are then made to feel that everything that happens during this time is somehow only our responsibility; ours to confront, carry and resolve, alone. By adjusting women's bodies with contraception and allowing men to live as eternal teenagers – uncertain jobs, short-term flings, adolescent hobbies

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– we have placed the burden of whether or not to try for a baby almost entirely at women's feet. We shield men from the reality of fertility, family and female desire, because we have been conditioned to consider them uninteresting or unattractive. Throughout my twenties and into my thirties, I tried desperately to appear casual and carefree, believing that any hint at my true, complicated desires – in my case, for love, commitment, independence, a successful career and ultimately a baby too – would render me single forever. I silenced myself, because I thought it made me more attractive. I tucked my weaknesses, my wants and my womb out of sight.

I spoke to my friends, of course, but not always with total honesty, which meant that they, also, didn't truly open up to me. By putting on a brave face and acting as if we were in control, we all somehow missed the fact that we were on the same train. Without the common shorthand of language and labels to communicate our experience, we became fragmented, uncertain, anxious and embarrassed. Well, no more. I am here to crack my neck, unhook my bra and give this thing a name.

I've come up with plenty of suggestions along the way, formal and informal. Firstly, the jokes: fecund choice, egg roulette, whore crux, ova panic. There are the rural possibilities: winnowing, as in the sorting of grain; lacuna, a gap or space in bone; Rubicon, a river that appears impossible to cross; the dimmet, that magical time between daylight and twilight. There are the Latin ideas: *reortempus* – the time of decision, *procogravidum* – to be heavy with doubt, *quasitinciens* – to be

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pregnant with questions. Then there are the Germanic options: *Schwangerfast* – to be almost pregnant, *Wechselperiode* – the changing period, *Trockenlegen* – to adapt and dry out. All apt, all better than nothing, but none bringing to mind the choking, creeping, bewildering nature of the beast. In the end, like the classification of some newly recognized flower or virulent weed, I'm calling it the Flux: a physical and emotional transformation found growing in the soil of the Panic Years. In the landscape, 'flux' means the flowing of water; in our bodies it is the discharge of blood; in physics, the state of constant change. The Flux is the gap between adolescence and midlife, during which women lose that constructed artifice of control over their lives, confront their fertility and build themselves new identities. The Flux is a specific process, provoked by biology, society and politics, that drives so many of us through the Panic Years like, well, women possessed.

This is an anatomy of my own Panic Years. It is not a guide to finding the right man, getting your ideal job, learning to love yourself, how to get pregnant or the best way to raise a child. It is about what happens when you're heading towards the grown-up cutlery and matching sheets of adult life, and wondering if you should have a baby, if you only want one because you were brought up to want one, or if you'd even be able to have one if you tried. It is about trying to establish a career before you disappear into maternity leave; it is about wanting stability while your friendship group splinters into the parents and the not-parents; it's about not just looking for a boyfriend or girlfriend, but a

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potential parent for your theoretical child; it is about fertility, gender inequality and social stigma. It is about why you find yourself doing The Panicked Maths: that if you meet someone, and you date for a year, and if it takes two years to get pregnant, but if you were to aim for this job, and if your period started at thirteen, and your mum's eggs ran out at forty . . . until suddenly you're not doing maths any more but asking something bald and blank and unending: who am I and what do I want from life?

It is about a second adolescence, not of new bleeding and breasts, but of self-awareness, maturity and seriousness. So, in order to make the broader point that this period deserves recognition, I am making the personal point of relaying mine, as it happened and is still happening. I am describing how I went from a single, commitment-phobic flatmate to full-blown, flat-booted mother, via heartbreak, press-ups, the smell of boot polish, a trip to a nunnery, summer in Berlin, pregnancy, labour, one very unfortunate bus window and much, much more. I will explain how the Flux affected my friendships, my relationship, my environment, my mind, my work, my very ability to move my body. For the first time, I am giving the Flux a name and walking through it, step by step.

In my case, the Panic Years began at a house party visiting my friends in Liverpool, wearing a silver dress, standing in the disintegrating kitchen of a dead landlady whose lodger had put her ashes in a corner cupboard and thrown rugs over the rotten floorboards. My period was a month overdue and I was waking at four

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thirty most mornings with my mouth full of fear and sickness. I'd left my boyfriend behind to come and visit my friends. As I looked around that green kitchen I was gripped with a thought that had been quietly lying under everything for weeks: I might be pregnant. I didn't want to be pregnant. Not like this, not now. I didn't want to be trapped that way. I knew it then with a clarity that frightened me. My body was telling me, before my mind had even realized, that I was unhappy. My womb had let off an emergency flare and, duly, I watched it burn. A month later, I was single, not actually pregnant after all, sitting in a greasy spoon in Walthamstow and marking my twenty-eighth birthday, alone, over a cup of instant coffee.

Without the anchor of a partner, I spun into a world of work, parties, sweat, deadlines, running, travel and cigarettes. Without the counterweight of love, and with the explosive ambition of a young journalist, I discovered that I could say yes to anything, everything. In fact, the more I said yes, the less I had to think. For a whole year my one professional rule was to say yes to absolutely every commission that came my way. I also went camping, had sex with men who couldn't love me and who I couldn't love, pitched articles to newspapers I'd looked up to all my life, swam on windy beaches, wrote my heart out, asked myself if I really wanted a baby after all, cried for days before my period, made clothes, went on the radio, cut my hair and listened to my records.

One morning, in the speckled grey of early consciousness, I woke up with the tang of something familiar in my mouth, like the snatches of a song you

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used to sing at school. In my own bedroom, under my own pictures, under my own bedding smelling of my own washing powder, I was finally recalling who I was.

Which is all very well, but by this point I was thirty, and my female friends, who until that moment had been eating toast and drinking tea with me, ripping through their heartstrings and laughing in the face of time, suddenly grabbed their bags and were off: boyfriends, houses, engagement rings, weddings, pregnancies, babies. The race was on – against time, against our bodies, against the half-life of sperm and, inevitably, against each other. I knew, because I'd been there when it had happened, that my mother got the menopause early – at forty – and so I had probably inherited less time than my peers; I was facing a shorter deadline. As a result, my Panic Years were particularly intense, my sprint for security more acute, my need to get my shit together relatively extreme. And yet somehow, I hadn't heard the announcement, hadn't even bought my ticket. The people I loved most were slipping away from me, while I was left behind, staggering in their wake.

Less than two years later, I was in love. This man, with his shoulders like scaffolding and chin like a peat shovel, arrived into my life unexpected, unpredicted and unannounced. Just like that, I had boarded the train. I didn't know the destination but I knew I was going somewhere. And yet, what I'd imagined to be the solution to my disquiet turned out to just be the doorway to more questions. Big questions. For any woman entering a new relationship during the Panic Years, the future is pockmarked by the sort of existential decisions

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that can bring you to your knees. What does it mean for a working woman in an unaffordable country facing a climate disaster to commit to a partner, let alone the future of a child? How do you react when your best friend announces that she is pregnant? Is yours a different path? What if your partner doesn't want children? What if they want children but just not yet, not now, not like this? Is this the time to move country, change career, buy an insanely expensive coat, fuck it all up and sleep with somebody's brother, buy a house somewhere cheap and go freelance? Should you buy a dog?

Like your teeth being cracked out of your jaw so the cold wind can rush over your every exposed nerve, you realize that you have lost control again. Your body is held, suspended by contraception in a state of false infertility, while your mind races through the futures being lost. You may be on the train but you forgot, somehow, to check the destination and now, fists clenched and eyes burning, the world is sliding past you in a liquid blur. Love cannot stem the flow of eggs leaving your body, a warm bed doesn't help you decide what you want to do for a career, a partner doesn't end the civil war between brain and womb, a plus-one doesn't necessarily make you feel whole. Three years since leaving my last relationship I realized once again something painful and something true: the Panic Years do not end with sex or shared towels; they aren't simply quieted by the weight of another body in your bed.

As I careened around my life, ending relationships, trying to earn more money, sharing my rented flat with friends I loved, going to therapy, strengthening my body and having sex with increasingly kind people,

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I saw absolutely nothing tying those decisions together. As I move into my mid-thirties and away from all the dust and drama that blinded me to the long view, I see that the prospect of motherhood had been hovering over me all along. It had been my engine, preparing me for launch. Of course. Throughout the Panic Years, my body and my mind were unconsciously breaking up my old life in order to pave the way for a new one, one in which I could decide, if I wanted, to try for a baby. As Luke Turner writes, in his beautiful memoir *Out Of The Woods*: 'The decision to dynamite the foundations of a life will always throw rubble in unexpected directions.' Because, as reluctant as I have been to recognize it, and admit it to the people that mattered, I probably always wanted a baby.

As I sit here, typing on a laptop balanced on my baby's changing table, I know that, in many ways, I am writing this book for the Nell at twenty-eight, who stood in that kitchen in Liverpool, in her silver dress, beside another woman's urn and felt sick with panic at what might happen. But really, I'm writing this book for everyone: those embarking on their Flux, those in the midst of the disorientation, those who are curious about motherhood whether they see themselves doing it or not, those who have been through it all and are looking for recognition, and for the men and women who just want to know what the Panic Years are like. I am not pretending to be a gin-swilling party mess, I am not writing an academic treatise, I am not using experimental literary forms to prove that mothers can be creative too. I am simply showing, as honestly and as meaningfully as I can, what this time can be like: why a

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thirtieth birthday party can seem like a one-woman wedding, what it's like to be the only single person at a dinner party, how to cope with being sexually rejected in a very small tent, why you might start accidentally crying when your boss asks where you see yourself in five years' time, how it feels to get your period after wondering if you're pregnant, the fever that descends when you decide you want to try for a baby, what it's like to imagine throwing that baby against the wall.

This book will celebrate the thundering libido of the thirty-year-old as she drags herself up a mountain with a conspiracy theorist and his receding hairline. What it's like to wade through your own ambivalence about what might be the biggest decision of your life. To describe the lace-edged hell of other people's baby showers. To relate how it feels to piss on a stick in a dripping toilet and hold your entire future in four centimetres of acidic paper. It will stand on the shoulders of those moments to ask: where are we and how did we get here? How do we liberate ourselves from our social conditioning, why do relationships end, why do people still get married, when does a foetus become a baby, what is the right salary, what is a family, how significant is turning thirty-five and how should we allocate the responsibility for contraception? As the weight of all these questions, and more, comes crashing down on the shoulders of women in their twenties, thirties and forties, it's time to start looking for answers.

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1

Suddenly Single

I am lying on my grandmother's bed, listening to church bells and Noel Edmonds.

Of course, it's not really my grandmother's bed. It's not the place where I unwrapped my stocking on Christmas mornings – the stocking that was, in fact, a pair of my grandmother's old support tights, in a shade of 'mink' or 'bamboo'.

No, this is another bed – a single bed the colour of prosthetic limbs, tucked away in a small room in the attic of her care home. After decades of farming, livestock, Labradors, apple trees and open streams, my grandmother has come to live in a single room, overlooking slate roofs, surrounded by bricks. She is spending the last few years of her life living in a town – something she has never done in all her ninety-four years of existence. It's great for me: I can come on the train, have lunch in a market cafe and pop out to Savers

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to buy her yet more Nivea talcum powder. Not that I am doing any of these things today.

Today, I am lying on her bed. I am lying, curled on my side, staring at her white wardrobe full of tweed pleated skirts, cream satin blouses and fluffy, discarded slippers. *Deal or No Deal* blasts out of the small corner television like a boiling kettle. There is a bowl full of satsumas on a tray, beside a pile of unread *Shropshire Star*s, weekend newspaper supplements and a book about the Royal Family. In the room below me, a man the shape of a deck chair is wheezing to the door, his tracksuit bottoms sagging down withered buttocks to expose white, infantile pants. In the kitchen, the cook is spooning out mashed potato beside an egg and cress salad, listening to Magic FM. In the drawing room, two women in cardigans and tapered trousers doze in front of the television as a cookery show transforms, magically, into an old black and white musical. In the garden, one of the younger residents smokes a cigarette the length of a drinking straw and watches a robin pecking at a fat ball.

I am not crying. I have entered that hollow state of pure numbness where you can simply stare, like a stagnant pond, at nothing. I shall lie here, I think, forever. My muscles will atrophy, I will grow whiskers, someone will come from time to time and put me in a clean nightie, I will eat custard and drink sherry. I will lie in my grandmother's bedroom like the layer of talc and tissues that lines the inside of her handbag. I will stay here until it's all better, all over, all finished.

Two weeks earlier, I lay in bed with my boyfriend of six years while he gently and thoroughly broke through

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my denial about the state of our relationship like a handful of sticks.

'If we weren't going out, I don't know how much time we'd actually spend together any more,' he says.

Snap.

'You're always busy.'

Snap.

'I don't think you want to be with me.'

Snap.

The night holds its breath as I lie, awake, feeling as exposed as if all my skin had been peeled off. Suddenly touching this man, this bear in a human suit, feels illicit, like a violation, like putting your hand in someone else's pocket. So I lie still. After six years of looking after me here he is, helping me again. Only this time, he's helping me to break up with him. He tells me to take a couple of days, not to worry, that it'll be all right, but to think about whether I want to break up with him. In the morning, I cling to him like a life raft, crying, terrified, promising that I don't want anything to change. All the while, a small voice inside is spreading out like a drop of ink in a glass of water, telling me that it already has. In those next two days we are closer than we have been for months: talking, sitting together, eating the same meals, folding each other's washing. I look at his back – the size of a mattress – as he washes up.

I tell him that I love him, but I'm not excited. I think I want something but I don't know what.

He looks down. 'Of course I'm not exciting,' he says. 'I'm the man you bought a washing machine with. Nobody's excited by that guy.'

My heart falls apart like a dandelion in the rain.

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And so we break up. Of course we do. I have never yet met an 'are we breaking up?' conversation that doesn't end with 'yes'. Without knowing it, I was falling through a rip in the fabric of what was suddenly my old life and entering headlong and high speed into something new: the Flux. Like so many thousands of children after a break up, I go to stay with my mother while he packs up his things. In my case, that means three stops down the 48 bus route to the other side of the River Lea. On my way in to work, I actually cycle past our flat and see that he has taken down all his pictures and piled them up on the floor. The flat looks ripped bare, impersonal and unbearably sad.

When you have spent your entire twenties with another person – first as friends, then as lovers, then as companions – it can come as a bit of a shock to realize that you have absolutely no idea who you actually are without them. What you eat, when you sleep, who you know, what you own, how you talk, what you watch, where the hoover lives, what time you wake up, what you'll do for your birthday, what you find funny, whether you like your cutlery, if you can fix your bike, how you do your job, how you dress, who you trust, what you listen to, what you remember, even just what you like – you don't know any of it any more. You have no idea who you are because, for the greater part of your adult life, you have been with another person. Their tastes became your tastes became theirs became yours became you became them. I had been an independent, working woman for all of about six months before I got together with my boyfriend. I was unbaked clay. So when, smack bang on my twenty-eighth

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birthday, we broke up, I had little-to-no adult self to return to, to draw on or take comfort in. I was years behind, years out of touch. No wonder I felt paralysed, stunned and untethered: I was lost.

But it wasn't just me that I'd lost. Oh no. I'd lost his family – his elderly aunt with her mantelpiece full of birds and his wonder-knitting mother with her taste for sixties Motown – I'd lost his friends, I'd lost his skills, his help, his tools and towels and foot massages, I'd lost his version of me and I'd lost all the futures we'd laid out together. In breaking up with the man I assumed I'd have a family with, I'd lost my potential children too. When you're a 28-year-old woman whose mother got her menopause at forty you know, better than most, in both your body and in your brain, that there is a finite window in which to have children. That is bearable when you have a partner because, even if they're not quite ready yet, or you're not quite sure, at least you can tell yourself that you have all the equipment ready for when it comes to decision time. You can wait. For a bit. But if you're a 28-year-old woman pulling herself through the burning metal of heartbreak into the great empty plains of single life, then that finite time suddenly becomes a very different prospect. It can feel daunting. It can feel deadly. And the maths that lies across the horizon becomes incredibly important.

If, like my mother, I was going to get the menopause at forty then my fertility might start to notably decrease from any time in my mid-thirties. That meant I probably needed to start trying for a baby – to find out if I was even fertile – before I was thirty-five. If I had problems, that still gave me a couple of years to try the

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alternatives. But, wait, if I wanted to start trying for a baby before I turned thirty-five, then that meant I needed to meet someone, specifically someone who would fall in love with me and want to start a family with me, by the time I was, what, thirty-two? That would give us a few years to enjoy together as a couple before we started shagging with intent. It would give us some memories to harvest later when we were sleep-deprived, stretched and full of resentment. But wait, it had taken me seventeen years to get my first boyfriend and three and a half years to meet my second. If that was anything to go by then I had at least three years of being single ahead of me. That brought me to, what, twenty-nine? But, hold on, almost everyone had at least a couple of years living independently, sleeping with people, concentrating on work before they started 'dating' dating. The maths told me I should have broken up with my boyfriend at twenty-seven. I was going to have to grieve a six-year relationship when I was already a year behind. Somehow I needed to be able to live my life, be independent, have sex with someone without crying into their mouth, fall in love and wait for them to be ready to try for a family, and I needed to do it all right now or I would run out of time and never have the choice: my body and its finite eggs would take the decision away from me before I'd even had a chance to try.

Since that weekend, it has been my strong belief that all heartbroken women, but particularly those entering their Flux, should get a week's stay in an institution where everyone else is simply too old and too jaded to talk about babies, love or heartbreak. We should

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immediately be checked into a large, semi-municipal building where the proximity of death makes a mockery of heartache and where the gentle rhythm of soap, pads, meals, naps and bed can take us over completely. During break ups there is a time for analysis and a time for paralysis: those first few weeks belong almost entirely to the latter. You are not yet ready to pick over the bones of what went wrong: all you can really do is hold your seams together and listen to your pulse. There is time enough to digest, discuss and disassemble the end of a relationship later, with friends, family, perhaps even with a professional listener. You cannot swallow the thing whole, so in the beginning why not just lick your wounds? Why not take some time to escape your real life? And where better to take care of yourself than a care home?

You may wonder why I, a newly single, London-living woman would take such comfort in the pastel curtains, bathroom disinfectant, hair curlers, local radio, paperbacks, pleated skirts, grandfather clocks and surgical stockings of a provincial care home. Why I was so ready to succumb to the steady, slow schedule of mealtimes, nap times, singalongs and pill dispensing. Why I felt such profound calm as I sank onto the boil-washed bedding of my indefatigable grandmother or looked out across the unwalked lawn. The answer is simple: for everyone else in that great red-brick house on the hill, the dreadful, urgent pulse of possibility and fertility had been silenced. Their biological clocks had stopped. They no longer had the option. Their work had been retired. Their friends were falling away. Their Flux was

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long since spent. Those women had either had their children or they had not. They had loved, bled, sweated, leaked and lost, and now they were coming into their final age. Their bodies were drying, turning pale, thinning to nothing. Their crepe-like skin, white hair, thick toenails and crumbling teeth were the tangible manifestations of time, inarguable and unstoppable. I may have felt a rising tide of hopelessness against my ribs as I thought of the future, the family and the theoretical life I had just lost, but it was nothing these people had not been able to manage. My heartbreak was not unique, not unprecedented, not world-changing. I was simply following along the broken path of so many people before me, trying to step from love to love without too much mud along the way.

Which is not to say those women were unkind or unsympathetic. Some of them were wonderful. During a weekend visit a few months later, as I passed through the dining room between sherry time and lunch, a 92-year-old Latvian woman called Elsa suddenly grabbed me by the waist.

'My dear!' she exclaimed, her dark blue eyes fixing me like pins. 'You remind me of the gypsy women I used to draw naked at art school!'

I was flattered. Elsa, I later found out, had been a fine art student in 1920s Paris – a time when it was considered unseemly for respectable women to pose naked. In her long life she had been a food writer, had been married, had given birth to two sons, had made dresses, spoken three languages and held great dinner parties. Her body may have been collapsing like a soufflé but this woman was absolutely stiff with life,

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with humour and with joy at the world. To look into her animated cinnamon bun of a face and try to explain that I felt hollowed out by the loss of love, security and my twenties seemed like trying to whinge at a cliff face about the wind.

In a certain kind of film, pop song or novel – 'I Will Survive', *Muriel's Wedding* – breaking up with an unsuitable partner is where the narrative ends. Single life, freedom and independence is the happy ending for everyone, from 20-something graduates to 68-year-old divorcees. We strive for a life untethered. But for women in the Flux, a break up is often just the beginning of the story, and freedom is just another word for nothing left to lose. As my friend, the author Amy Liptrot, once put it to me in a brilliantly caps-heavy text: 'I remember when I broke up with my Berlin boyfriend and a (younger) friend tried to console me by saying, "You're not weighed down any more." I was like, "I WANT TO BE WEIGHED DOWN. BRING ME THE WEIGHTS. I'M READY."'

I knew exactly what she meant. As I slid towards my early thirties like mud off a trowel, I wasn't single because I wasn't ready for commitment. I had ended an imperfect relationship precisely because I wanted to find the person who would commit to me and my intentions entirely. However deeply I had repressed it in the name of self-protection, I wanted to be weighed down by love, plans for the future, co-ownership and someone else's dysfunctional family. I wanted to buy a sofa together, to walk in the mountains together, to put my passport in a box file bought specifically for the purpose. I wanted a grown-up relationship with

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someone who felt ready to be a grown-up. Of course, at the time all I thought I wanted was to date someone who drank tea, did the crossword, had a pneumatic sex drive and worked in a full-time job. In hindsight, those characteristics are still a pretty good pencil sketch of my ideal life partner and co-parent. While my mind may have been sifting through the chaff of heartbreak, loneliness and female panic, my body and my unconscious were cooking up a kind of master plan.

'I remember thinking, "I don't want to get to thirty-four and still be having really dysfunctional relationships,"' says Dolly Alderton, one warm July morning as I sit in her perfect flat, like something out of a French New Wave film, and lightly grill her about the year in which she stopped having sex. Dolly's bestselling book *Everything I Know About Love* was an honest, lyrical and funny look at life, love, friendship and your twenties. She has also written, with wit and wisdom, about her decision, at twenty-nine, to stop dating, stop having sex, stop texting men, even – wherever possible – stop masturbating. Who better to ask about sex, heartbreak and the beginning of the Flux?

'Until I changed my attitude to sex and men, I wasn't going to be in a place where I could have a loving, working partnership and create a family,' she says, biting into one of the bagels I'd turned up with, as a peace-offering-cum-bribe. 'It was like that room had been so disproportionately busy and glaring with light that I just needed to close the door, put the key in my pocket and know I could revisit it later.'

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When she turned twenty-eight – a fundamental year in so many women's Panic Years – Dolly had just come out of a relationship, was in therapy, stopped dating, stopped having sex, wrote her book, moved out of flat-shares and started living on her own. All in six months.

'I thought it was a breakdown,' she laughs. 'I did a lot of reading about sex addiction, made amends with exes, spent a lot of time with the women I loved and rebuilt a relationship with my family. It was my way of rebuilding a sense of self, really,' she explains.

How much of that work was, I wonder, directly related to the desire to become a mother?

'I definitely was thinking of babies, in the sense that I knew I had to get this sorted before the next stage,' she says, articulating with frightening accuracy a feeling I have only recently come to understand. 'Lots of women I know basically treated their late twenties as a sort of convalescence between their twenties and the next period of their life.'

It may seem counterintuitive to stop having sex because you want babies and yet, as Dolly argues, in order to form the kind of solid relationship you need to be able to survive those early years of having a kid, you might need to stop having the kind of sex you've previously been, ahem, hammering away at. Was she ever worried about running out of time?

'No. Not then,' she says, looking me straight in the eye. 'But I'm really worried about it now. Fertility is such a difficult feminist issue because our biology hasn't caught up with our politics. I would love to be able to say, "I don't need a man, I don't need to date, I can just

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focus on myself, click my fingers when I'm forty and have a baby then!" But it just doesn't work like that.'

Alas, it does not.

Of course, not every Flux begins with a break up. For many women, the Flux is ushered in midway through a relationship or during their single years by some other significant event – moving country, changing or losing your job, watching a colleague get promoted, getting engaged, discovering you have endometriosis, watching your best friends have babies or buying a house, to name just the big-ticket items. But, of course, very often people do break up with a long-term partner at the end of their twenties. A survey carried out by Nationwide building society, of all people, showed that the average relationship in your twenties lasts 4.2 years – a statistic I read in 2017 and have carried around ever since like the NHS number and sexual health centre appointment card folded into my purse.

During that late twenties crunch time when jobs become careers, renting becomes buying, lovers become partners, and friends become parents, there is often a mini earthquake of break ups, as people roll the dice one last time before making a big commitment. We may drift apart, we may argue or cheat; we may despair over snoring, drinking, socks in the kitchen, buying toilet roll, sulking at dinner, making plans, not making plans, hating to make plans. But sometimes all we're really doing is standing in front of another person and realizing, with a cold, blank and unavoidable sadness, that we were wrong. That we both made a bad call. Under those circumstances, ending a relationship isn't

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