

I'm Too Young  
to Be This Old

Poppy Smith



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### **I'm Too Young to Be This Old**

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To my husband, Jim,  
and our two children, Malaika and Elliot.  
Your interest in this project delights me.  
I appreciate your sense of humor and your  
willingness to let me write honestly  
about life at our house.



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## Chapter One

# What's Happening to Me?

What are those things under my eyes?" I wailed, peering into the bathroom mirror.

"Festoons," Jim, my doctor-husband, pronounced matter-of-factly. "That's the medical term for those bags under your eyes. They happen to women your age."

"How sweet of you," I muttered, stalking out and leaving him grinning at his early morning humor.

Waking up and finding bags under my eyes no longer shocks me. I've learned to live with it. I also take seriously a bit of advice from an aging movie star—sleep sitting upright or, failing that, on your back with at least two pillows. When I forget and sleep on my side, in the morning I discover that my face needs ironing.

Of course, other clues tell me something is happening to me. But like most emotionally healthy women, I try to ignore them. I'm amazed at how grown-up my children look. They're clearly too old to be mine. Something is wrong with my friends as well—they seem to be aging prematurely. And even though my husband is ten years older than I am, it scares me when he utters words like *retirement* and *home all day*.

Help! What's going on?

Actually, I know what's happening. I'm in the muddled middle years. I have joined the ranks of millions of forty- and fiftysomething women who respond to aging by cunningly disguising gravity-prone figures and slathering on antiwrinkle creams, enjoying a state of denial for as long as possible.

Recognize yourself here?

If you do, you are likely in what I call the *reluctant passage*, a season of life few women, if any, enter willingly.

When does this season begin? There's no particular birthday that, when reached, uniformly plunges a woman into midlife. We're as individual as our DNA. Most of us, however, sense changes taking place anytime from our late thirties to midforties.

Not long after I noticed these beginning signs, I frequently found myself deeply absorbed in thought, staring out of windows or gazing at blank walls. Often I'd drive without noticing where I was going, brooding about my life. *Had I made wise choices? Had I put God and my family first? Was I someone who could be useful in the years ahead?* The answers depended largely on my mood.

In my mind, I peered cautiously at what lay ahead, sensing the beginning of a long journey across a pivotal life-bridge. I couldn't imagine myself or anyone else my age crossing this bridge with giant, eager strides. Instead, I envisioned myself leaving youth's familiar territory and cautiously moving forward in a step-by-step exploration of the unknown.

The forties and fifties are a major turning point in life, taking us from the old age of youth into the youth of old age. We can't dig in our heels and say, "I'm not crossing over," nor can we detour around this part of our journey. We can, however, choose what attitude we will have about it.

## Cringing at the Thought

Most of us cringe at the thought of entering midlife. At least I did. We laugh at "over the hill" and midlife jokes, so long as they are aimed at someone else. But we bristle when anyone implies we might be in any sort of crisis.

As we set foot on the *reluctant passage* we wonder if our marriage will hold together. Or if our children will stay in touch. Outdated stereotypes like "menopause makes you crazy," "life is over at forty," and "dress to suit your age" (why don't they just go ahead and say "dowdy"?) flash through our minds, causing fear and dread.

Thinking about the future can be fraught with questions: Will I be lonely? What about the dreams I still harbor? Are they forever out of



reach? Am I going to feel aimless—even useless? In the throes of these dark thoughts, aided by my bent for the dramatic, I began to visualize aging as a prelude to decay and dependence, ending in death. My overactive imagination left no room for God's promise to never leave us—to never leave *me*.

After a time of wallowing in the midlife blues, I decided to look at the truth. Although an increasing number of marriages break up on the rocks of midlife, the majority stay together.<sup>1</sup> Most children love their parents, despite occasional hot words to the contrary. They also keep in touch, though less often than we'd like.

Nor does life have to be lonely or aimless. By shedding outdated stereotypes of what you can and can't do in midlife and daring to act on your dreams, the years ahead can be the richest you have known. As for decay, dependence, and death, the key to fulfilling years ahead lies in exchanging a mentality of doom and gloom for a spirit of hopefulness. Take care of your body, deepen your dependence on God, and don't die before your actual date of decease.

Instead of cringing at the thought of being in the *reluctant passage*, boldly grasp your new identity as a more mature, improved model of your younger self. True, the packaging is slightly wrinkled and maybe a bit lumpy, but what does that matter?

Well, let's be truthful. For some of us, it matters a great deal.

## Accepting a New Identity

Because of the age difference between my husband and me, I've lived a long time with the illusion of being permanently young. When we went to parties or social events with people Jim's age, I always felt like the young wife of an older man. Much as I wanted to hold on to my illusion, I've had to admit the truth. Being a young wife had become a figment of my imagination.

Letting go of my youthful identity and coming to grips with one less valued by our culture—"middle-aged wife"—didn't happen quickly or easily. Watching the effect that slim, alluring, eyelash-batting women twenty years my junior had on men, though, brought reality home. I realized few women my age could hope to have the same impact. Musing

about growing older, I began to wonder, *Maybe building a new sense of identity based on inner beauty would make aging easier to accept.*

Midlife transition takes time. Driving across a bridge from the United States into Canada is an instant transition from one country to another. Moving from one perception of self to another is a slow process. For a while our eyes keep straying to life's rearview mirror. We are gripped by a sense of loss and a longing to go back in time.

Moving through this passage, strange and wild ideas came to me, like getting pregnant again. I thought a lot about the joys of having a chubby little baby cooing away in its crib. This image had powerful appeal until I thought of my adult children gasping, "You're *what?*"

It's all right to look back and allow ourselves to experience feelings of loss, but eventually we have to look ahead or else miss the adventure God has waiting for us.

For some women, awareness and acceptance of the midlife transition is like traversing gently rolling hills that gradually take us into an exciting new land. Some find the journey uncomfortable but manageable. Others feel like travelers trying to scale formidable mountains. As they face changes in status, roles, health, or finances, each step brings a new crisis.

## **Growing Through Crisis**

My friend Becky saw her shaky twenty-eight-year marriage collapse when her oldest son married. He had been her emotional prop. After her husband divorced her, Becky careened from one catastrophe to another. She became a single mother with no money. Her deep hurts were made more painful by divided loyalties among her children and the loss of former friends. Her pastor told her to stop teaching Sunday school and singing in the choir. Becky survived these disastrous years by turning to God for help in her battle with hurt and resentment. Today she is discovering His fresh path for her life.

With God's help, crisis and change act like fertilizer—like growth-granules. Sprinkled on the ground of our midlife years, they spur us to grow and blossom into the person God knows we can become.

Whatever the impact of our daily struggles, we confront numerous changes in this season of life. We also plunge into a wide-ranging

assessment of our lives. We emerge, eventually, on the threshold of new horizons.

## Face-to-Face with Change

### Your Body... What's Next?

After age forty, my body seemed to take fiendish delight in regularly presenting me with new problems. A line from an old hymn, "Change and decay in all around I see," became not a theological statement but daily reality.

Most obviously, midlife brings physical changes. In the middle years, we not only go through menopause but our susceptibility to illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease, and cancer climbs. Seeing early warning signs of what could lie ahead, I've stopped lying in bed idly looking at my Nordic-Track standing two steps away. For years, I had asked myself if I felt like exercising. My answer was no. Now, whether I feel like it or not, I haul myself out of bed and daily (well, almost daily) huff and puff my way to better health. (My slimmer hips are a great incentive too.)

### Your Memory

Some days you're sure your mind has lost a few computer chips. Don't worry. This is normal. Not only is your body changing but, it seems, so is your mind.

Not long ago, I was late for a meeting and hurriedly backed the car out of the driveway. Suddenly I thought, *Did I brush my teeth?* I couldn't remember! I quickly set the brake, dashed into the house, and brushed my teeth just in case. And then I wondered, *What is happening to me?*

Walking into a room and wondering why I'm there or staring into the refrigerator and trying to remember what I'm looking for is all part of the package. All my best friends do it. So is swallowing a pill and five minutes later asking myself, *Did I or didn't I?*

### Your Emotions

Your emotions are also apt to misbehave. Instead of sensibly taking orders from your brain, they decide to run wild and be uncooperative, like some petulant child.

Battling the blues is common. So is wondering, *What is the matter with me?* because you cry at the least provocation. Your family is probably as baffled as you are by your emotional ups and downs. Be patient with yourself. Emotional swings are part of the muddled middle years.

### **Your Children**

As if the changes *you* are experiencing weren't enough, your family is also changing. Your delightful little boy is now a strapping six-footer, hand extended for cash and stomach growling for food like a bear out of hibernation. When you weren't looking, the little girl you tearfully waved off to college may have boomeranged back and be cozily curled up in her old room.

Now, instead of confidently issuing time-honored "Mom" commands, you have to swallow what's on the tip of your tongue. Yes, you are their parent, but time has marched on. Whether their behavior affirms it or not, they are now adults.

### **Your Parents**

With our parents living longer than ever before, long-distance conferences between siblings about what to do for Mom and Dad is a reality for many. So is crisscrossing the country racking up frequent flyer miles to give support, get the old homestead ready for sale, figure out finances, and persuade parents to move into a safe environment.

Watching their decline and sensing the inevitable loss can be a wrenching part of the middle years. But by choosing to lovingly parent our parents, we have a special opportunity to return their devotion.

### **Your Marriage**

If you are married, your perception of your spouse can also undergo a radical change. Some enchanted evening you will look across your living room and see a stranger. Actually, it's the man you married. Out of nowhere the question will pop into your mind, *What happened to that amorous man I married? Who is this aging male snoring in the recliner?*

At the same time, your husband probably looks at you when he's in a more pensive mood and wonders, *What happened to her? Where is that cute little thing I married?* This too is normal.

## **Your View of Yourself**

The most far-reaching changes are taking place in the unseen chambers of our minds. There, a slow yet unstoppable transformation occurs in our self-perception, erupting in questions that tumble out on top of one another in a demanding frenzy:

- Who am I now that I've grown up?
- What do I want to do with the rest of my life?
- Is it all downhill from here?
- How do I find meaning and purpose in the years ahead?

As both outer and inner changes carry us along, we plunge into the turbulent waters of assessing all we previously took for granted.

## **Plunged into Assessment**

### **Relationships**

Midlife produces a lot of self-examination. But it isn't navel-gazing. It's not wasted time.

Some singles wonder if they will be able to attract a man as the years take their toll.

Liz's husband left her with two small sons when she was in her early thirties. "I dread every birthday," she admits, "because the older I get the less likely I'll be to remarry." Facing reality isn't easy, but hiding from the truth would keep her from preparing for the future.

Marge, a would-be mom, anxiously questions her chances of conceiving and giving birth as her reproductive clock marches toward midnight.

As a menopausal wife, Jean wonders if she is losing interest in sex or if her husband will lose interest in her.

Like most mothers, Yvonne looks at her nearly adult children and asks, "Was I a good mom?"

### **Accomplishments**

Whether we've spent our years in the home or in the workplace, we wonder if we have accomplished anything worthwhile and whether it's too late to begin something new.

At forty, when I left my teaching position with Bible Study Fellowship, the midlife evaluation process hit me full force. Who was I now that my title and job description were gone? Did I still have value? Rattling around in my mind was the nagging question, *What am I going to do with the second half of my life? Run off to a tropical island? Find another occupation? Conquer academia? Aimlessly wander the malls?*

### **Purpose and Meaning**

We midlifers resemble two-year-olds. In this ruminating state we badger our inner parent with endless questions, all beginning with *why*:

- *Why* am I doing what I'm doing?
- *Why* am I staying in this marriage, this friendship, this job?
- *Why* am I serving Thanksgiving dinner *again*?
- *Why* am I doing this for my church?
- *Why* am I doing this for my children?
- *Why* aren't I receiving any satisfaction or support?

Tell your two-year-old self to calm down. You are in a process, and the answers will come.

### **Self-Awareness**

Discovering who you are, now that you've grown up, is also part of working through the *reluctant passage*. You might be surprised at what you find.

Cocooned in my private chariot, I can safely indulge my passion for pounding music, turning up the car stereo as loud as my ears can stand. I steal an occasional glance at the driver in the lane beside me. Can they hear it? Can they see my car shaking on its shocks? Or do they simply see a silly middle-aged woman slapping the steering wheel in time to music they can't hear?

Midlife can make you do things totally out of character. A few years ago I put on dangling earrings for the first time. I immediately felt ten years younger. Arriving at a casual-dress summer meeting in leggings, a short skirt, plus my earrings, I happily announced to my astounded (middle-aged) friends, "I'm having a midlife breakout!"

I'm now addicted to dangling earrings.

If the mold you've poured yourself into over the years no longer fits, smash it. Or at least ease yourself out of it.

Realizing you don't fit the old mold—or have to—can be scary. It can also scare your spouse or anyone else who has assumed you would never change. Discovering who you are *now*, and where you want to go from here, is an essential element of successfully moving through the *reluctant passage* and arriving whole on the other side.

To do this, you need *wisdom*.

But where can you find the wisdom you need or know what path to take so that you ultimately accomplish God's purposes for you? Proverbs says a reverent relationship with the Lord is where we find knowledge for life.<sup>2</sup> Ask God to show you who you are now, muse over His shaping of your life, and pray over His plans for your future. As you do, answers will begin to take shape. The result can be a glimpse of exciting new horizons.

## Ready for New Horizons

### Seeker Questions

In contrast to the two-year-old inside who questions with strident tones and demands to know *why*, seeker questions float soft and deep, pensively searching for down-to-earth, definitive answers.

- What brings me a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction?
- Where do my spiritual gifts and natural talents lie?
- How has God shaped me through life's experiences?
- How have those experiences equipped me for the future?
- What stimulates me, moves me to tears, stirs me to passion?

Seeker questions bring out answers previously hidden from view. In time, these form the outline of a new life map.

### A New Life Map

Karen, an experienced kindergarten teacher, tutor, and workshop presenter on childhood issues, planned to earn her master's degree in

special education. “My goal had been shaped over several years,” she says. “I was in charge of a special Sunday school class at my church for disabled children and saw how much the parents were helped by this ministry.”

The midlife passage, however, brought its own set of stress factors. Instead of going to graduate school, Karen found herself hospitalized for severe depression. Long repressed anguish from an abusive childhood savaged her sanity and left her suicidal.

“After my breakdown,” she said, “I was helped enormously by a Christian therapist. That experience made me evaluate my previous goals and radically change my direction in life. As I prayed for guidance, God led me to reconsider my previous goals and be open to a new life map. I still plan on going to graduate school, but now my passion is to become a family counselor and work with children and their parents.”

Carol, a vivacious, snowy-haired seventy-year-old, also found new direction in midlife. When I asked about her training as a marriage counselor, she said, “I didn’t begin college until I was fifty-five years old.”

“Why did you wait so long?” I asked.

“Because I didn’t think I could do the math at my age. Then one day I thought, *How do I know if I never try? Maybe God has given me more ability than I’ve recognized so far.* So I went to college and to my delight got through the math. I realized it’s never too late to do what you want to do, so I pushed on to get my master’s degree, beginning my counseling practice at sixty-two.”

### **Shedding Stereotypes**

Ken Dychtwald, president of Age Wave, a company that serves the needs of the aging population, says of midlife: “It’s the most powerful and glorious segment of a person’s life.”<sup>3</sup> Coming to terms with the end of youth releases you to take a fresh look at the possibilities ahead.

In a poll of its readers, *Good Housekeeping* magazine discovered that women over forty were consistently the most admired.<sup>4</sup> Women who are seasoned politicians, diplomats, executives, high-ranking military officers, scientists, university professors, and rulers of countries or commerce are invariably in midlife or older. It’s a mistake to believe that life is a steady descent into uselessness once you’re over the hill—unless you choose to waste the most powerful and glorious years available to you.



Stereotypes are self-imposed cages. The sooner you discard them and allow yourself freedom to dream, the better off you will be. If there was nothing to hinder you, what would you do? What would you like to do?

- Get additional schooling?
- Find a more challenging job?
- Learn a new language?
- Fight human trafficking?
- Stretch yourself in a new ministry?

In today's society, no woman is too old to go after her dreams or to get involved in issues that matter deeply to her.

Used wisely, midlife can be your launching pad for personal and spiritual expansion.

### ***Personal and Spiritual Expansion***

After leaving a hectic yet intensely satisfying teaching ministry, I found myself free to do something else that mattered a great deal to me—helping women in trouble. Even though I had no personal exposure to domestic violence, as soon as I saw an appeal for volunteers to help in a women's shelter, I knew it was something I wanted to do.

At first, I answered phones and helped in whatever way I could. Later, because of my background in leading small groups, I was asked to facilitate a support group for the women. Reading stacks of books on the issues involved in domestic violence and hearing one woman after another share her story of abuse left me shaken.

Stepping into this foreign world forced me to grow. I heard language I'd never heard before. I found myself drawn to broken-hearted prostitutes and drug addicts who longed to be loved and cherished by someone.

Shattering the still-present myth that Christian men never batter their wives, a trembling sister-believer told me of her husband's repeated threats to kill her. Numb with outrage, I could only wrap my arms around her as she described his abusive behavior.

In that shelter for women wounded in body and spirit, God's love for a lost world and for me took on new meaning. Confronted by these women and the devastation sin had brought into their lives, the wonder

and comfort of Christ offering Himself up as a sacrifice for sin stirred me anew. As I drove to and from the shelter each week, my private chariot no longer reverberated to pulsating music. My car now became a meeting place with God, a private sanctuary where my emotions found release through prayer and worship.

When Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full,"<sup>5</sup> He gave us the power to live life to the fullest no matter what age we are. God's purposes and plans are not stamped "past expiration date" once you cross into the second half of life. Instead, He urges you to use your talents, expand your horizons, plunge into opportunities to grow, and break through fears and stereotypes that hold you back.

To do that, let's begin to explore together some of the challenges we face in our muddled middle years.

## Reflections

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The following questions are for your own reflection or to use as a basis for group discussion.

1. What words jump into your mind when you hear the term *midlife*?
2. How do you feel about being in this season of life? What scares you? Excites you?
3. The word *crisis* is often linked to midlife. Why do you think this is the case? Would you use it to describe your own experience?
4. How does your relationship with God affect the way you deal with change?
5. What helpful lessons for midlife do you find in the following Scriptures: Psalm 27:13-14; Isaiah 40:28-31; Philippians 3:13-14; Colossians 3:1-4; Hebrews 13:8.