life begins at forty

by rebecca blackley

Molly Parker sighed contentedly as she laid down Professor Pitkin's much discussed work which she had been reading with an unusual amount of concentration. She would soon be forty herself. But she didn't mind it now. Only the other day she'd been dreading it, too. Told herself that at last she would definitely have to pass into the hopeless mediocrity of middle age. It was true that she was no longer in the bloom of youth, but forty! Why had it seemed so much more elderly than thirty-nine? But Pitkin said life begins at forty. That it was then that the prime of life life was reached. He was right.

She'd been getting terribly lax lately—had tried to excuse herself by saying that it didn't matter. After all, she was getting along in years, and she had a right to take it easy. But that must all be changed—this last with sudden resolution, as she hoisted herself out of the cozy depth of her capacious chaise longue. She gazed around her room—it was very like her, she suddenly thought with rare honesty—pretty in a faded, pastel way. Nothing really definite about it—a noncommittal sort of room. But that was all over now—must be.

It hadn't taken much training—being Will's wife. She'd been babied by her father and brothers before her marriage, and Will had simply carried it on. Why not? He'd always made a good salary, and there was no necessity for his wife to struggle with household intricacies. And after all, girls in her day hadn't been blue-stockinged—it hadn't been genteel!

"I'll try and rely more upon myself," she said aloud with a determined look which sat incongruously upon her sweet and rather confiding face. I'll not even tell Sonny or Baby about it. Let me see, my birthday isn't for two more months. Why anything can happen in two months. If I start now, I'll be a new woman by then."

And with this declaration, Molly proceeded to throw aside the bonds of dependence. She did many things that would have seemed Herculean in their difficulty a few weeks before. But after all, she was nearly forty, and surely she could think for herself. Of course it wasn't a lot of fun. A woman who has let a man play God in her life finds it pretty hard to get out of the habit after so long a time, but as is usually the case with meek souls, once having made up her mind nothing could budge her.

Time is a wonderful element, and a month can work miracles. This was especially true in Molly's case. Outwardly the same, sweet, helpless wife and mother, she concealed a daily life of utmost duplicity. She had budgeted her time with a Machiavellian ingenuity. Will caught the eight o'clock train to the city. She never breakfasted with him any more, so that was no problem. Junior was in an Eastern prep school—dear Junior—always in some sort of a scrape, but really a loveable boy—his professors just didn't understand him—that was all. And Baby always slept until twelve—poor dear, it was a shame that she had to stay out late, but youth will be youth, and she shouldn't have to miss any good times. At any rate, she was off directly when she did get up, and out all afternoon, so Molly really had the entire day to herself until Will came home on the five-thirty train.

This was her program; up at eight. Breakfast of orange juice, butterless whole-wheat toast, and black coffee. A strenuous twenty-minute bout with Will's rowing machine—it was never
used—hadn’t been, in fact since the time he had practically crippled himself with over-indulgence just before his big squash match at the Club. Molly herself had suffered the tortures of the damned with it the first few days, but she was fired with enthusiasm. A whole inch gone from her hips already! She could actually see the great improvement.

Then a cold shower (Molly’s love of hot baths was almost sybaritic) a hasty toilette, and off for a brisk walk by nine. At ten, she went to Monsieur Gaston’s Salon, where that perfectly divine masseuse—the sympathetic one—gave her one of Gaston’s special facials for the mature woman. They made her feel like a new person. Down to that horrid little Swedish place for lunch. She loathed it with a deadly hate, but they made a special feature of non-fattening meals.

It sometimes seemed to her that nothing she liked was good for her. That terribly rude diet specialist she had consulted had told her that she was flabby and needed more wholesome food. The idea! Why she’d always eaten very wisely—only two lumps of sugar in her coffee when she really wanted four, and never a second helping of candied sweet potatoes when she loved them so! And the awful things he wanted her to eat—spinach and carrots and dried fruits! She would simply die!

But she tried valiantly to live up to her diet chart, and on this particular day ordered butterless spinach with hard boiled egg, lettuce with a mineral dressing, stewed apricots, and black coffee. She felt extremely virtuous, and looked with pained disgust at a perfectly loathsome young creature who was blithely devouring an indigestible mixture of ice cream, chocolate syrup, marshmallow, nuts, cherries, and whipped cream, apparently unaware of the appalling amount of calories she was consuming with such nonchalance and gusto. Molly longed to scream at her the enormity of her offense, but the words stuck in her throat. Her eyes were glued on the Sweetheart Special which was disappearing so rapidly. An evil demon whispered devilish suggestion in her ear, and at length she had to leave precipitately, not even waiting for her own lunch.

An hour later, with a look of frustration on her face, she parked her shining blue coupe directly across the street from the imposing graystone facade of Professor Ivan’s Recreation Center for Ladies. She crossed the street reluctantly, but gaining new resolution, walked up the steps and inside. Ivan himself greeted her.

“Good afternoon, Ivan,” she said with false animation, “and what are we to do today?”

“Ah, Mrs. Parker! We have such an interesting program for you today! You did so well with that bicycle exercise yesterday. I think you are ready for the treadmill. Is that not a big surprise—no?”

“It’s a big surprise, yes,” said Molly with trepidation. “And what may the treadmill be, may I ask? Surely not that endless rubber track Mrs. Perry was working on yesterday?”

“But yes, Mrs. Parker! But I give it only to my most advanced pupils, and I think you are ready for it. Come, dress now! Hurry! I myself will instruct you today!”

Molly groaned inwardly as she went to change into her scanty costume. Everyone knew Ivan was a slave-driver. She had liked Pierre, his young assistant—so kind, and always quick to notice fatigue. Ivan, now, would work her mercilessly. What difference did it make if she were worn out, and her sore muscles screamed their protest? Will would fall in love with her all over again, and they’d have a second honeymoon. At present, she was wearing her old clothes so that the difference wouldn’t be so apparent. She had some stunning new gowns waiting her approval when she should...
have lost ten more pounds, and she could do that easily in the remaining month. She went heroically into the brilliantly-lighted gym. Ivan was waiting there for her—an implacable figure.

Molly was glad that her birthday fell on a Sunday this year. Will always had a late breakfast—played nine holes of golf early in the morning and came home for a ten-thirty meal. Sometimes she resented it, but after all, the poor boy worked hard—he was entitled to his golf once a week. That was one nice custom, they had though. The entire family ate together Sunday morning. True, baby did come down in her pajamas, and yawned throughout the meal—poor lamb, she did need her sleep—but one day in the week wouldn't hurt her to eat with her daddy and mother.

Molly surveyed herself appreciatively in the mirror. Yes, Ivan had done wonders for her—why she was actually inches smaller in the hips. She still felt a little dubious about the dress—she hadn't worn coral for years—and a knitted dress for even longer. But the saleswoman had told her—such a sweet girl she was, too—that it suited her perfectly—yes, it did look nice on her! But it was with a feeling of stage fright that she went downstairs and into the sunny breakfast room.

She was the last one. Will was eating a waffle and reading the sports section of the paper with absorption. Baby was toying with a strip of bacon. She was the first to see the newcomer.

"Happy birthday, darling," she called gaily. "Here's my little offering."

"Good morning, my dear," said Will fondly, "and happy birthday. You're looking as pretty as ever."

Molly was vaguely disappointed. They hadn't looked the least bit surprised. Of course Baby was probably tired, but surely Will would see the difference. To conceal her agitation, she opened Baby's gift—some kid gloves.

"I didn't know what to get you, honey—I was in a terrible rush, and I knew that you could always use another pair of kid gloves, so there they are."

"Thank you, Baby dear," said Molly quietly. "Yes, I can always use another pair of gloves, and these are lovely."

"I'm giving you a check, dear," said Will. "I couldn't think of anything you might like, so you take this and buy a lot of the frills you like."

"Thanks, Will. There are several things I need that this will buy." (This dress, for one thing, she thought privately. And all those other things I got.) "No, Grace, no waffles for me. I'll have some grapefruit and coffee."

"Well, goodbye, parents," said Baby blithely. "I'm off for a tub. I've a date to drive down to Far Rockway with Charlie at twelve. We're going on to the beach from there. Best of birthdays darling!"

"Have a good time, Baby, and don't stay out too late," called Molly after her daughter's rapidly retreating back. She ate her grapefruit in heroic silence, and swallowed the bitter black coffee. Will finished his waffles, folded his paper deliberately, and put it down. Molly held her breath. Surely he would notice then. And he had.

He gazed at her with the look of growing tenderness, and then spoke. "Honey," he said, "aren't you rather glad to be forty? Just think, we're beginning to get along in years now. We needn't mind that nonsense about trying to look like kids any more. We can afford to relax and just be ourselves as we are today. No more worries about our waistlines. I'm glad to see that you haven't any of those foolish notions about dieting. What if you are a little on the plump side? I love you as you are."

Molly listened to him in stunned silence. Pictures raced through her mind as he spoke. Sweetheart...
Specials — spinach — black coffee — stewed fruit — the treadmill — the whole awful round. Kid gloves and a check. Why Will was right! She wasn’t young any more. She was middle-aged and tired. She hated diets and exercise—that was for younger bodies than hers. Will’s voice broke into her train of thought:

“I guess I’ll change for church, dear. I’ll be ready in about half an hour. Are you going to change?”

“I’ll be up in a minute dear. I have some things to tell Grace.”

Will left the breakfast room, and Molly soon heard him go up the stairs whistling in high good humor. She went guiltily towards the kitchen, and peeked her head through the swinging door.

“Grace,” she whispered happily, “make me some waffles, will you? And bring me some sugar and cream for my coffee. I’m forty today, you know.”

“Very good, Madame,” said Grace.

**mr. pomroy goes out**

by *louise dauner*

It wasn’t a particularly nice afternoon. In the park, the sooty statues, the soggily dripping fountains, the worn sagging benches all contributed to the note of fall depression.

Mr. Pomroy sank deeper into his red leather morris chair. Covertly, his bright blue eyes glanced from his new mystery book to note the moving hands of the massive, gold-embossed clock in the corner. They traveled slowly but inevitably, toward the hour of three.

At precisely the same moment, Mrs. Pomroy raised her head from her book, to peer majestically through her lorgnette, at the clock, then in the direction of her husband.

“James!” said Mrs. Pomroy.

“No, my dear.” With a faint but unmistakable sigh.

“It’s time for Flossie’s afternoon walk.”

Abruptly, Mr. Pomroy rose. “Why doesn’t she go once in a while?” he thought resentfully. “Always telling someone else what to do!”

Mr. Pomroy didn’t know it, but his polite submissiveness had almost reached the breaking point. That he, James Pomroy, successful retired business man, should have degenerated into, or been relegated to, the office of Exerciser-in-Chief to a fuzzy white poodle dog!

Mr. Pomroy gave an extra and quite superfluous tweak to the conservative dark blue silk four-in-hand that repose on his immaculate wing collar. He flipped a non-existent speck of dust from his left coat lapel, and settled his soft black hat firmly on his head. He loved that hat; its flappy nonchalance made him feel just a little rakish and devilish. (But all the time, deep down in his heart, he knew that he was only a staid and conventional old man.) And then he picked up the leash that curtailed Flossie’s impatient cavortings.

“Have a nice walk, dear,” said Mrs. Pomroy indulgently, as he went out.

As the front door closed, with just the suggestion of a slam, Mrs. Pomroy returned complacently to her book. First, however, with quiet appreciation she observed the imposing elegance of her black velvet tea-gown; the unimpeachable smoothness of one white, fleshy boneless hand. This pose would make quite a nice oil portrait, she reflected. She must get in touch with that new artist—Peacock—wasn’t that his name? She heard he was very good.

Mr. Pomroy betook himself dully along the regular route to the park. He was in a dangerous mood. More