

BY BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL

his midlife

crisis: what to look for, what it means, and what to do about it

(without laughing!)

I'VE LEARNED TO TAKE IT AS A rule of thumb that just when you think you've got the world by the tail, life turns around and gives you a kick in the pants. And nowhere is this more true than in your love life.

Just when you think you've worked the kinks out of your relationship, just when you and the man you love have come to terms with the fact that you don't agree on practically anything, when your fights last merely for hours instead of days, when you're beginning to think that, after all, it really *wasn't* an unmitigated disaster that you ever met—just then a new wrinkle appears, throwing everything out of kilter. And *wrinkle* is the operative word here, because age, or more precisely *aging*, for many couples precipitates a particularly bumpy stretch on the unsmooth course of true love.

One of the most infamous hazards along this stretch is a phenomenon that has come to be known as the midlife crisis. This is an unstable emotional episode to which men seem particularly prone and to which your own partner could very easily succumb. Experts explain male midlife crisis as a state of profound anxiety produced by the realization that time is marching on as inexorably as did the Huns and that the chances are that his unfulfilled adolescent fantasies will outlast both his hair and his teeth.

Should he find himself in the grip of such a powerful emotional upheaval, your partner might do some very strange things, even stranger than the things he usually does. And his behavior could have serious repercussions on your life as a couple. But you can minimize the dam-



age if you (1) recognize the signs of male midlife crisis, (2) understand what it means, and (3) learn the most effective ways to deal with it. Do so and, when the crisis is over, maybe your relationship won't be.

1. what to look for

Unless you are suffering from severe sensory impairment—in a coma, say, or under general anesthesia—you will hardly

be able to miss the signs of your partner's age-related difficulties. Traumatized by the fact that people he sees as his contemporaries are suddenly beginning to call him "sir," he is likely to exhibit certain fairly predictable and obvious behavioral symptoms, which you will be hard put to ignore. (In fact, it's the very blatancy of its symptoms that enables you to tell the difference between a midlife crisis and an affair: one your partner has right in front

of you, the other he has behind your back. Make sure *he* knows the difference and where to draw the line.)

The scenario might go like this: On a morning like any other, the love of your life comes rushing out of the bathroom as if pursued by demons and angrily tells you to get rid of the bathroom scale, which, he announces, is as irreparably unbalanced as your sister. Then, instead of the usual coffee and English muffin for breakfast, he demands fiber and lots of it. (And he's serious; he doesn't laugh when you offer to serve him your shirt.) After breakfast, he goes out and buys a running outfit and shoes, which he proceeds to put on at an ungodly hour the next morning. As you pry your eyelids open, you see him race by your bedroom window as if the Grim Reaper himself were behind him, scythe in hand. That night he tells you he has altered your vacation plans; instead of lying on a beach in Mexico, he has made plans for the two of you to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro.

Or take a slightly more sinister scenario: One day this man, who has always taken himself as completely for granted as he has taken *you*, studies his face in the mirror with the same intensity you imagine Elizabeth Taylor might employ to study hers. While inspecting his teeth and practically counting the hairs on his head (which takes a lot less time than it used to), he starts grumbling the oaths he usually reserves for those occasions when you have lost his car keys or his wallet. He then rifles through all the clothes in his closet, making faces showing deep displeasure and mumbling words like *boring*. Saying his own wardrobe looks exactly like that of his 80-year-old Uncle Al, he stamps out of the house, only to come home later with an assortment of new shirts whose designs prompt you to ask if he has changed his profession from attorney to Mafia hit man. Wearing one of these snappy numbers open to his pectorals, he announces his intention of turning in the old Chevy for a Porsche.

2. what it means

In both of the above scenarios, what you've got is a man who is resisting, with every fiber of his being and his breakfast cereal, the fact that he is growing older. In the first he is working from the inside out, in the second from the outside in, to counter the effects of time. (He is hoping either to outrun or disguise them.) Both attempts signal a man who is in all likelihood overreacting to the fact that his stomach feels less like the hard rock of yesteryear and more like a Beautyrest, who sees in his slightly softened body the specter of senility and impotence. In other words, what you've got on your hands is a man who's coming face-to-face with his own mortality, and he's finding it

even more frightening than coming face-to-face with his urologist.

3. what to do

First of all, keep in mind that your partner is not fully responsible for his actions, and resolve not to take any of his behavior personally, even when it disrupts your life together. This means that when he won't go out to dinner with you because he says restaurant food will devastate his cholesterol count, you should *not* accuse him of being ashamed to be seen with you. And when, for the same reason, he berates you for cooking him an omelet, you should resist the temptation to make him wear it as a hat.

Keep reminding yourself that he is in a crisis and that he needs your support, not your ridicule. He may very well look slightly foolish running around the block, his shorts flapping about his skinny thighs, but don't compare his running style with that of your toddler nephew, and don't suggest that in order to undo the years of neglect to his leg muscles he'd have to run nonstop to China. Likewise, keep your disparaging comments about his new clothes to yourself. (If you really can't live with some of his newly acquired shirts, you can always see that they meet with terrible mishaps, like falling into bubbling vats of chili con carne or being accidentally used as ink blotters.) If he comes home with an entire line of male beauty aids—skin toner, bronzer cream, hair thickener—resist the urge to offer him the use of your lipstick.

Being supportive means applauding his attempts at holding off Father Time with a tennis racquet, even if you find the effort ludicrous and the weapon pathetic. Tell him *you* don't think it's ridiculous of him to dress like a man half his age, though everybody else thinks so. When he takes half an inch off his middle, respond as enthusiastically as if he'd won an Oscar. You might even try joining him in his efforts, offering, perhaps, to drive your car alongside him when he jogs,

so that you can clock his mileage and make sure he isn't bothered by any female runners.

You might also attempt to inject a note of reality into his fantasy of imminent decrepitude. Point out all the virile and powerful older men in the world, men like Ronald Reagan, the Pope, and Lloyd Bridges. Lie if you must: tell him he is sexier now than he was the day you met him. If you don't choke on that one, tell him you think he looks *better* with a higher forehead—more intelligent, sort of like Adlai Stevenson.

However, make sure you put limits on how far you're prepared to go to humor your partner's not-so-youthful rebellion. It's one thing if he wants to fill his closet with younger-looking clothes; it's quite another if he wants to fill his bed with younger-looking women. You may also point out that buying a sports car with a standard shift, which you can't drive, means that *he* will have to take you to your mother's every week.

Finally, bear in mind that these efforts to prevent your partner's antics from shredding your relationship will eventually be rewarded and even reciprocated. His midlife crisis will pass and you will have assured your ability to resume a normal life together, assuming that you had a normal life to begin with. And, having been provided with an exemplary model of behavior, he'll know what to do on that morning in the not-too-distant future when you suddenly wake up convinced that next to you Rose Kennedy looks like an ingenue, and that your only hope is to fly to Switzerland immediately and have yourself injected with the cells of sheep fetuses. After that, with both your crises behind you, you and your partner can turn your efforts in another direction: toward purchasing a retirement condominium, perhaps, and learning golf. Now, isn't *that* something to look forward to? □

Bette-Jane Raphael writes regularly about male-female relationships.

