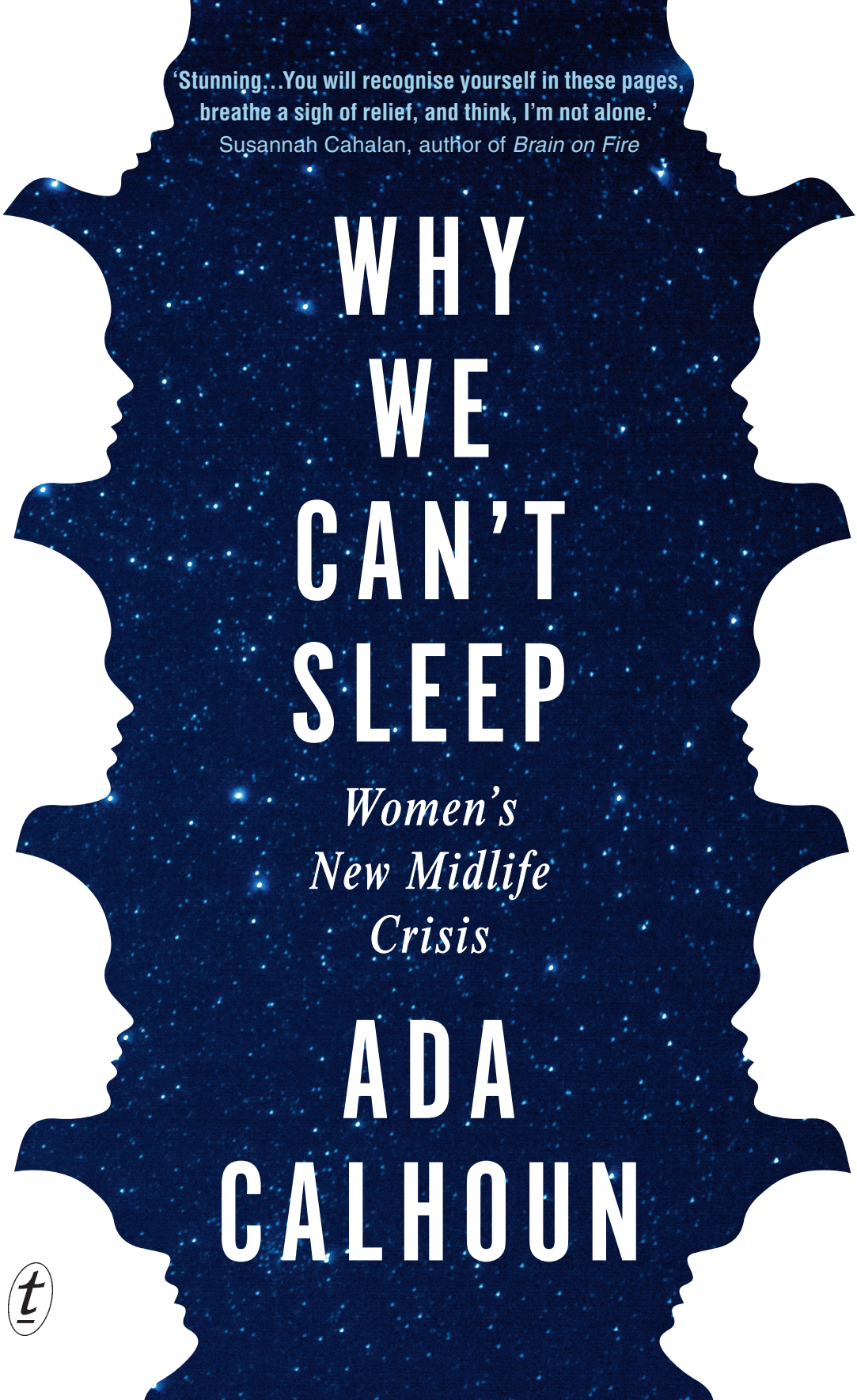

'Stunning…You will recognise yourself in these pages, breathe a sigh of relief, and think, I'm not alone.'
Susannah Cahalan, author of *Brain on Fire*
WHY WE CAN'T SLEEP
Women's New Midlife Crisis
ADA CALHOUN

1
Possibilities Create Pressure

"If you said you wanted to be a nurse, everyone would say, 'Why not a doctor?'"

When Kelly was a little girl growing up in the 1970s, she believed that girls could do anything. The daughter of blue-collar parents in the northern New Jersey suburbs, Kelly was the first in her immediate family to finish college.

Kelly and her friends played a game called Mary Tyler Moore, inspired by the 1970s TV show. They would play-act being spunky, independent women living in the city on their own. Rather than pretending to be a cowgirl or a princess, Kelly would be "this young, working single woman who was out to conquer everything." She loved the theme song: "You're going to make it after *allllll*!" And she loved the cap toss. And she loved the way that Mary found her tribe at work.

Kelly went through school in the first flush of Title IX, the federal law passed in 1972 that said boys and girls must be treated equally when it came to federally funded educational

programs and activities. No longer could schools legally discriminate when it came to financial assistance, recruitment, admissions, or athletics.[1] The playing field would be more level, and girls, everyone predicted, would flourish.

The thwarted ambitions of Kelly's own mother raised the stakes: "She was living through my life. There was always the fear: what if she was disappointed?"

This was happening all over the country. First-wave feminists had fought for the right to vote at the turn of the nineteenth century. Second-wave feminists who'd been fighting for women's rights starting in the early 1960s were now raising their daughters to receive the torch and to reach new levels of success: becoming doctors, not nurses; professors, not grade-school teachers; CEOs, not secretaries. If our grandparents worked the land and our parents toiled in middle management, we would get the corner office—and, of course, have a family, a nice house, and a social life. Echoing in our ears was the second-wave mother's mantra: "Girls can grow up to be anything—even president!"

One midwestern woman I know wanted to go to school locally, but her own mother, who hadn't been allowed to go away to school herself, insisted her daughter leave her home state for college. The family got a second mortgage to pay the out-of-state tuition. "I spent all spring and then thirteen hours in a car driving there trying to figure out how to say I didn't want to go," the woman, now in her late forties, recalled. "My poor mother. The minute we started unpacking—which she was so excited about—I burst into tears."

"A lot of the media at that time," Kelly told me, "said, 'You can bring home the bacon, and fry it up . . .'" Kelly hummed

the notorious commercial for Enjoli perfume[2] that many of us still keep in our psychic filing cabinet along with "Mikey likes it!"

In the 1980 Enjoli ad, set to the 1962 hit "I'm a Woman,"[3] a blonde woman sings that she can bring home the bacon and fry it up in a pan—and never let you forget you're a man. In the course of one day—during which her perfume, we are assured, never fades—she wears a business suit in which to make money, a collared shirt and pants in which to cook, and a cocktail dress and sultry pout in which to seduce. Tagline: "The eight-hour perfume for your twenty-four-hour woman."

So successful is the woman in the ad that while she is reading a book to off-camera children, an off-camera man's voice says, "Tonight *I'm* gonna cook for the kids." She responds with a coy, pleasantly surprised smile. I guess on this one special day she gets to be a twenty-three-hour woman.

Kelly, like many young girls watching that ad, saw the actress going from office to kitchen to bedroom not as an absurd, regressive fantasy directed at men to make them buy their wives Enjoli perfume but as a blueprint for a full life. *Looks doable,* thought many young women. *I'll go to work and come home and make dinner and be sexy the whole time, just the way I doubled up on AP classes while serving as captain of the volleyball team and editor of the yearbook and teasing my bangs with just the right amount of hair spray.*

When Geraldine Ferraro ran for vice president in 1984, Kelly was enthusiastic but not surprised—because of course women were smashing glass ceilings. It was only a matter of time, she thought, before women ran companies and eventually the country, too.

The opening montage of 1987's *Baby Boom* showed shoulder-padded women proudly marching into corporate offices. In the film *Working Girl* (1988), Melanie Griffith's character says to Harrison Ford's: "I've got a head for business and a bod' for sin. Is there anything wrong with that?"[4] (Flustered, he says no.)

Kelly and her friends dreamed big, and they went on to higher education. Supplied with both heads and bods, they assumed that in addition to conquering the business world they would one day acquire their own Harrison Fords.

Post–*Mary Tyler Moore Show*, the TV show *Murphy Brown*, starring a sardonic Candice Bergen, became Kelly's lodestar. When Brown became a single mother in the 1992 season 4 finale, while holding down a powerful newsroom job, Kelly again got the message. Women could have a life rich in both love and achievement. All you needed to make it all work was a good work ethic, supportive friends, and maybe a wacky house painter-turned-nanny named Eldin to watch your baby while you worked.

This was the plan. But once Kelly became an adult, reality intervened. While at college in Washington, DC, she started noticing that the promised land was not quite as easy to reach as she'd been told it would be. One of the main problems in making dreams come true? They cost money.

Halfway through college, Kelly realized she would need a master's degree to achieve what she wanted to in the field of psychology. Her parents wouldn't pay for more school. She was already accumulating a lot of debt from her undergraduate degree and was "terrified," she said, of ending up broke and having to move back home. She resolved to get a job and

pay off what she owed. Later, she would find a way to get her advanced degree and make a career change.

She couldn't. Kelly graduated into a bad economy and had a hard time finding any job. After a long search, she wound up settling for an administrative position with scant opportunity for growth. As soon as she was able to switch, she moved to the insurance industry, then the field of human resources. She worked long hours and felt rather less than fulfilled, but it was steady work. Still, the grad school money never materialized.

A few years of dating later, she married at twenty-eight. She had her first daughter at thirty-one, at which point she stopped working full-time. She had another baby two years later, and planned to return to work once both children were in school. Two years before that could happen, though, when her younger child was three, the family was in a car wreck. Her daughter suffered a traumatic brain injury. There was a lot of caregiving to do, and there was never a question of Kelly's husband staying home.

Many women told me their careers were derailed by family responsibilities or medical problems—whether their own or a family member's. For our generation, the odds of having a child diagnosed with an intellectual disability or a developmental delay have increased. The number of teenagers thought to have attention deficit disorders went up by 43 percent between 2003 and 2011.[5] Autism spectrum disorder diagnoses surged from ten per ten thousand children in the year 2000 to fifty per ten thousand by 2010.

Even parents of children without this sort of difficulty can struggle to find good support. One single mother told me she returned from a business trip and discovered that her babysitter

had neglected her baby; he had developed a severe rash. She didn't want to travel for work after that, and a few months later she was laid off for this lack of commitment.

"Plenty of women saw themselves in Dan Quayle's description of Murphy as 'a character who supposedly epitomizes today's intelligent, highly paid, professional woman,'" wrote Caryn James in 1992 in the *New York Times*.[6] "They were able to think, 'Murphy Brown, c'est moi,' until it occurred to them to ask, 'Where's Eldin?'"

That could be a bumper sticker for our generation: "Where's Eldin?"

Kelly had another child, who is now ten. She has never returned to work.

"I haven't worked full-time for almost twenty-two years," said Kelly, sounding embarrassed. Now that she no longer has young children at home and her injured daughter is stable, she knows she could go back, and she knows she probably has at least fifteen or twenty years left before retirement. But who will hire her? She's been out of the business world long enough that she no longer has viable connections, and she didn't love the HR industry in the first place.

"How do you go back, and what do you do, and is it going to be satisfying?" she said. "I also worry that I'm going to be too old. I have a sister-in-law who's two years older than I am. She's had a career, but she got laid off. It was really bad. She's had a really hard time finding permanent employment. And she feels it's her age, so she took the year she graduated off her résumé."

Kelly fantasizes about doing something creative. She and her husband have partially written a book about their experience

raising a disabled child, though they haven't made much headway on edits or trying to get it published.

She says she's lucky to have the chance to think about these things, not to have to go to an office every day and support the family. Yet deep down, she considers her husband the luckier one. He gets to be off on his own all day. He has downtime during which he can go out to lunch or daydream. She feels she can never catch up to her own thoughts, because her more routine obligations—doctor appointments and driving the kids around, filling out forms and cleaning and cooking—never let up. "There are times," she says, "when I get *resentful*."[7]

Kelly's oldest daughter, when she was about eleven or twelve, said to Kelly one day while they were driving in the car: "No offense, but I don't want to be a stay-at-home mom."

Kelly replied: "I'm not offended. I want you to do whatever makes you happy. And if you want to have a job and be a mom, that's fine. If you don't want to be a mom, that's fine. If you don't want to get married, that's fine. Whatever you want to make you happy, that's all I want for you: to be healthy and happy."

She's given her daughter the gift of lower expectations, but she still can't permit herself the same. Every day, Kelly wakes up feeling that she should be looking for a job, writing a book, being more productive. And every day she worries that even if everyone rallied in support of her dreams now, it would be too late.

Deborah Luepnitz, a Boomer psychotherapist practicing in Philadelphia, said, "What I see in my Gen X patients is total exhaustion. They feel guilty for complaining, because it's wonderful to have had choices that our mothers didn't have, but choices don't make life easier. Possibilities create pressure."

We kept hearing again and again that we could be anything we wanted to be. We had supportive mothers insisting we would accomplish more than they had. Title IX made sure our after-school classes were as good as the boys'. We saw women on television who had families and fun careers. So, if we happened to fail, why was that? The only thing left to blame was ourselves.

One day in an email after we'd met for lunch, my friend Caroline Miller, a Boomer who started in journalism as a newspaper reporter in 1976 and went on to be editor in chief of *Seventeen* and *New York* magazine, said, "It seems unfair that the wave I got to ride through my forties, not just the economic boom but the exhilaration of finding our way as 'liberated' women, isn't there anymore. Exceeding expectations was so much easier when there basically were no expectations. Whatever you managed to do was more of a win. It's as if the idea of stress hadn't been invented yet when I was your age."

If I had to pick an onset date for Generation X stress, I'd put it in the mid-1970s. Nostalgic tributes to the '70s and '80s usually ignore the fact that in many ways it was a rough time to be a kid. Crime spiked. The economy tanked. There was an "infinite tolerance" policy when it came to bullying and a conviction that kids should fight their own battles.

One Gen X friend from New Jersey recalls her high school guidance counselor telling her that she had been "raised wrong" and was going nowhere. Another friend tells me her counselor had a public meltdown in their Philly school's lunchroom—yelling at the kids that none of them would amount to anything.

When I hear stories like that, it makes me glad that my own school administrators were largely AWOL. My friend Asia had what for the time was an extended conversation with our principal. This was their exchange:

"Asia, why did you punch that boy?"

"Because he was picking on little Eric Lee."

"Oh," the principal said. "That's okay then. Good job standing up for your friend. When you go out there, tell everyone I yelled at you."

That was a good part of the laissez-faire approach to children back then: the freedom. A bad part: without adult protection, we were more vulnerable to harassment.

At my middle school, the boys made a sport out of snapping girls' bras in the hallway. Plenty of times that happened in front of teachers, and no one ever did anything about it.

Armed with the catchphrase "Stranger danger!"—and perhaps a key sticking out from between clenched fingers on especially menacing blocks—we roamed free. We were known as latchkey kids, and we were given independence early, even though at lunch every day, we were confronted with other children's photos on our milk cartons, accompanied by the caption: MISSING. The image of Etan Patz, who lived not far from me in New York City and had vanished in 1979 at the age of six, spread nationwide. Adults told us that he'd probably been kidnapped and murdered (many years later, this was proved to have been true). Back then, nothing was sugarcoated—except our food.

As a little girl growing up in the outskirts of Springfield, Illinois, in the 1980s, Valarie loved riding her bike, playing in the corn and soybean fields across the street, climbing trees in the sparse

woods, watching the three TV channels on a giant wood-console-encased TV set, and reading Stephen King books.

Gen X childhoods were lived in a haze of secondhand smoke, including in restaurants and on planes. We played without realizing what peril we were in. Some of Valarie's fondest memories of her childhood are of riding in the back of a pickup truck, biking with no helmet, and lying out in the sun with no sunscreen. (One woman I know said another name for Gen X could be "the Coppertone Generation.")

"My parents would leave me in the car all the time," said Valarie. "Can you imagine leaving a kid in the car now? Stores literally have signs reminding you to check and make sure you didn't leave your child."

When Valerie was ten, her father left her mother. She says she believes it was, in part, because her mother was overweight in spite of endless dieting with Sweet n' Low and Tab—which Valarie thinks led to her own battles with food.

Financially, divorce devastated many Gen X children and their mothers.[8] When a couple divorced in the 1980s, children almost always went to live with their mother, and a child's household income dropped dramatically—according to one study, by an average of 42 percent.[9] While some female-led households eventually came back strong, many never recovered anything like their former wealth.[10]

Meanwhile, the country faced stagflation, Watergate, gas station lines, steel mills closing, and President Jimmy Carter wearing a sweater on TV, encouraging austerity.[11]

"Rampant divorce, a wobbly economy, soaring crime rates, and swinging-singles culture," wrote Jean M. Twenge in *Generation Me*,[12] "made the 1970s a difficult time to be a kid."

Children of divorce might become mini confessors for their parents' anxieties and dating problems—treated not so much as kids but as small people who could hear and see with adult ears and eyes.

The emergence of Russia in the post-2016 headlines has given many members of Generation X flashbacks to the aggressively anti-Russian entertainment of our childhoods. In 1983's *War Games*, a teen hacker played by Matthew Broderick has to save the planet from a thermonuclear war that he inadvertently started when he broke into a military computer. That same year, 100 million people tuned in to watch the ABC TV movie *The Day After*, in which a nuclear war between the Soviet Union and the United States leaves millions dead and society in ruins.[13] In 1984's *Red Dawn*, Russian and Cuban soldiers invade a Colorado town and start killing or reeducating the townspeople. A small group of young people—played by, among others, Patrick Swayze, Charlie Sheen, Lea Thompson, and Jennifer Grey—mount a brutal armed resistance.

One Gen X woman told me that as a little girl she wrote to President Ronald Reagan to beg him to avert nuclear war. By return mail she received, in place of reassurance, an age-inappropriate packet of detailed information about the nuclear threat.

Until 1991, it was a major theme of our newscasts and our entertainment that with no warning we could all be incinerated. The partial meltdown at the Three Mile Island reactor in Pennsylvania in 1979 and the Chernobyl nuclear power plant explosion in 1986 helped make nuclear destruction feel plausible. Psychological studies in the 1980s found that the threat of nuclear war led to high anxiety in children. The silver lining,

according to one journal article, was that we didn't stew for long, because: "cynicism and apathy set in rapidly."[14]

That, and we came to assume that the very survival of the planet was iffy.

"Every night," Valarie told me, "I would send out a whispered request to the universe that the apocalypse wouldn't happen. Sometimes I tried reverse psychology." Convinced that the universe would deny her what she said she wanted, she would murmur, lying there in the dark, "I hope the world gets blown up."

When it came to TV and movies, the problem was not just that a lot of it was terrifying but also that we consumed so *much* of it. I started watching TV when I got home from school and kept at it until bedtime. For me those years are a blur of *Inspector Gadget, The Price Is Right, Head of the Class, MacGyver, Cheers, Family Ties, Family Feud, Knight Rider, Night Court, The Jeffersons, Laverne and Shirley, Small Wonder*, *The Woody Woodpecker Show*, and *Benson*—with a bit of *Reading Rainbow* thrown in for culture. The saddest day of the week was Sunday, when the only things broadcasting were football, church shows, and news.

According to the Gen X "mind-set list," "The higher their parents' educational level, the more likely they were to come home at 4 p.m. to an empty house—except for the microwave and MTV."[15] When it launched on August 1, 1981, with "Video Killed the Radio Star" by the Buggles, MTV would become always-on, must-see TV for those in middle or high school at the time. Friends of mine who grew up outside major urban centers in places where MTV wasn't widely available (in one place I know of, the town banned it as satanic), VHS tapes of

120 Minutes were passed around like notes about where to meet after school.

This was before the age of DVR and Netflix, so much of what we saw was advertising. Research from 2017 found that 83 percent of Gen X—more than any other generation—trust ads they see on TV.[16] Gen X has been described as both repulsed by materialism and deeply materialistic, and there may be something to that. Those of us whose formative years were the 1980s were steeped in a bath of greed and gluttony: the yuppies' BMW and Armani fetishes, sports car posters, *Wall Street*. We may have rebelled against it later by buying secondhand clothes, but we're inculcated, deep down, with wanting a lot of *stuff*.

I wonder, again, whether our acquisitiveness is not a sign of bad character so much as the inevitable result of a *Clockwork Orange*–style conditioning campaign. Every second of the day, no matter what else was going on, my brain was looping: "It's Slinky! It's Slinky! For fun, it's a wonderful toy! It's Slinky! It's Slinky! It's fun for a girl and a boy!"[17] I will never, ever forget that chocolate is scrunchous when it crunches, that Mentos is the "fresh maker," and that only I can prevent forest fires. Until I die, my bologna will bear the first name O-S-C-A-R.

If you raise children in a culture of economic precariousness while showing them a thousand commercials a week for Sit N' Spin, Big Wheel, Garanimals, and Hungry Hungry Hippos—not to mention product placements, as in 1982's *E.T.* (Reese's Pieces) and, self-consciously, with a slew of products in 1992's *Wayne's World*—can you blame them for feeling, years later, a deep sense of pleasure in the aisles of a big-box store

or a cavalier attitude toward chucking hardcover books, face serums, and children's pajamas into their Amazon Prime cart?

The messages we received from the fire-hose spray of advertising, news, and entertainment could be weird and confusing, particularly with regard to sex and drugs.

When many of the Boomers were teenagers, they had Woodstock and the British Invasion. But for Gen X, there was no consequence-free indulgence.

While late Boomers enjoyed an air of permission around booze and, in many places, a drinking age of eighteen—which could mean fourteen in a small town where a friendly barkeep would give you a rum and Coke if you showed up with an older sibling—for most Gen Xers there was never an illusion that drinking could be purely a fun recreational activity. Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) formed in 1980. Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) was founded in 1983. In 1984, the National Minimum Drinking Age Act encouraged states to adopt a uniform minimum drinking age of twenty-one. IDs became harder to forge. Drunk driving laws became stricter. Younger Gen Xers were the "clean-up crew for parties we were too young to attend," Kevin Gilbert sang in the 1995 song "Goodness Gracious."[18]

When the Pill was introduced in the early 1960s, sex for anything other than procreation became far less scary—until the AIDS crisis hit, twenty or so years later. Older members of Generation X were adults by the time they knew about AIDS, which meant they faced a retroactive rather than an anticipatory panic. For younger Gen Xers, AIDS destroyed any hope of sexual liberty without danger, just in time for us to become sexually active. In 1987, the World Health Organization launched

its campaign to curb the disease's spread. By 1993, there would be more than 2.5 million AIDS cases globally. My school's sex ed in the early 1990s featured graphic photographs of STD rashes. My friends and I carried condoms in our backpacks and were convinced that if we didn't use them we would die.

Younger Gen Xers received an anti–sex ed lesson from Anita Hill's 1991 "Coke can" testimony about Clarence Thomas's sexual harassment (complete with patronizing questions from senators about whether she was "a scorned woman")—and, of course, from *The Starr Report*. Published in 1998, the document described in prurient detail President Clinton's sexual encounters with Monica Lewinsky, with cold-shower lines like "Ms. Lewinsky turned over the dress that proved to bear traces of the President's semen."[19] Evidently, when sexual activity wasn't killing you, it was threatening the political stability of the most powerful country in the world.

I learned about underwear as outerwear from Madonna's gyrations to "Like a Virgin" on TV in 1984, when I was eight,[20] and about romance from Alex P. Keaton and Ellen Reed on *Family Ties* when I was nine. Finally, at age thirteen, I gathered from *Dirty Dancing* that I should only be so lucky, when I turned seventeen, to meet a twenty-five-year-old dance instructor who would school me in both sex and the merengue.

As a bookish pre-internet adolescent, I found an ancient book at the library that told me vaginal orgasms were superior to clitoral ones. I finished the book with no clear sense of how one might achieve either. I saw ejaculate onscreen for the first time when a prisoner threw cum at Jodie Foster in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). My other information on the subject came from Cynthia Heimel's satirical *Sex Tips for Girls*, which said

you should swallow sperm, because spitting it out is "not considered sporting."[21]

"Remember when it was a fun thing for kids to go see a dirty movie?" my friend Rebecca said recently as we checked Common Sense Media to see if a certain PG-13 film would be okay for our middle schoolers. "You'd say you wanted to go to *Porky's* and they'd say, 'Oh, *okay*,' as if they were giving you an extra piece of candy."

In the 1990s, third-wave feminism filled in some sex-educational gaps. Many Gen X women gradually embraced sex positivity as a way to counteract the anxiety instilled in us by AIDS. There was *Sassy* magazine, and there were often photocopied, stapled zines by women at record stores and bookstores. Writers and artists like Susie Bright, Annie Sprinkle, bell hooks, and members of the Riot Grrrl movement offered more interesting approaches to sex in all its risk and promise. Liz Phair's vital 1993 album, *Exile in Guyville,* was a refreshing and relevant combination of sexual enthusiasm and romantic disillusionment.

In 1994, *Esquire* described leaders of the third-wave movement as "Do Me" feminists. The title: "Yes." It was followed by: "That's the message from a new generation of women thinkers, who are embracing sex (and men!) . . . But can they save the penis from the grassy field of American history?"[22] Because of course that's the aim of feminism: to save the endangered penis.

"Girl Power"—a Riot Grrrl mantra—was co-opted by the Spice Girls as a demand for the right to wear miniskirts and crop tops while singing about female friendship. In 1993, *Saturday Night Live* mocked the Sexual Offense Prevention Policy of

Antioch College—a program that was created in the wake of sexual violence on campus and designed to create a culture of explicit consent. In a vicious game show skit called "Is It Date Rape?" one of the contestants, played by Shannen Doherty, was a girl with a hyphenated last name who was majoring in victimization studies and won the game by calling almost every scenario date rape.[23]

That same year, my high school English literature teacher screened *The Accused*, which had come out a few years earlier, for our class. In the film, Jodie Foster's character is raped on a pool table while other men in the bar cheer. Partway through the scene, a girl in my class turned pale and ran out of the room.

Mötley Crüe made it clear how they wanted us with songs like "She Goes Down," "Slice of Your Pie," and "Girls Girls Girls." We might have slow-danced to Poison's "Every Rose Has Its Thorn" in middle school, but then we listened to their other songs, like "I Want Action," in which Bret Michaels vows not to give up until the girl gives in. If she's not willing, he will "take her and make her." The original cover of Guns N' Roses' 1987 album, *Appetite for Destruction,* featured a cartoon of a ravished woman and what appeared to be her *robot rapist*.

Those bands seemed indifferent to women who were not there to sleep with them—and sometimes they snubbed even those who were. In the video for the romantic ballad "Patience," baby-faced Axl sways and sings while Slash, holding a large snake on a hotel bed—this was not a subtle era—ignores one lingerie-clad groupie after another.[24]

Gen X girls grew up aware that we were vulnerable while being told that we were infinitely powerful. Meanwhile, Gen

X boys and girls both learned early that whatever hurts we suffered, we would need to soothe ourselves.

On January 28, 1986, an announcement came over the crackly loudspeaker system of my school. Usually, the intercom was reserved for either the Pledge of Allegiance or the cryptic proclamation "The eagle has landed," which we eventually learned meant that the teachers' paychecks were ready to be picked up in the office. But on this day, the office had, for us, far more exciting news: the intercom lady told us, the pride in her voice evident through the static, that it was finally time for the *Challenger* launch.

My fifth-grade science teacher, Mrs. Morledge, wheeled a big boxy TV into her classroom as we settled in to watch the space shuttle take off.

In that year, the oldest Gen Xers were college-age and the youngest ones were not long out of diapers. Those of us in the white-hot generational center were in our formative childhood years. I was ten.

NASA was trying to get kids more excited about space, and the hype was intense, with lessons planned around the launch and daily briefings both from our teachers and on the news. Rumor had it that a substitute teacher at our school had been "in the running" for the program. (I have reason to believe that this same tale circulated at nearly every elementary school in America.)

There had been talks, we knew, about shooting Big Bird into space. That plan was scrapped. The man behind Big Bird, Caroll Spinney, said it may have had something to do with the

capsule's compactness and the fact that Big Bird was more than eight feet tall.[25]

Instead, a cheerful and enthusiastic New Hampshire teacher named Christa McAuliffe, winner of the NASA Teacher in Space Project, would be the first civilian to take part in a space mission. We had all seen innumerable pictures of her. We knew she had two little kids at home, one of whom was about my age.

The launch had been delayed several times, but this was the real thing. On our TV screen, we saw the live video of the Kennedy Space Center.[26] T minus fifteen seconds . . . We counted down from ten . . . "And liftoff!"

We cheered. For a minute or so, we watched the *Challenger* climb into the sky.

And then, while the announcer commented on the delays that had preceded the launch, the screen lit up.

The boosters forked in two directions. In between, where the rocket should have been, we saw only a trail of smoke that looked a little like a bunched straw "snake" expanded rapidly by a drop of liquid. Where was the shuttle?

The announcer stopped talking. We stared at the screen, waiting for an explanation of what we were seeing. Seconds ticked by.

No, really: Where was the shuttle? Had it zapped into warp speed?

We looked at our teacher. We looked at the TV. We looked at one another.

Twenty-five seconds passed before the announcer said anything. Twenty-five seconds in which millions of kids across

America stared at their classroom TVs, slowly beginning to wonder if that kind, happy teacher had really just died in a fireball—if her own children had, with us, witnessed her violent death.

The anchor returned to say, in far too casual a voice: "Looks like a couple of the solid rocket boosters, uh, blew away from the side of the shuttle, in an explosion."

Long pause. Another voice: "Flight controllers here looking very carefully at the situation. Obviously, a major malfunction."

A major malfunction.

That woman—that *mom*—whom they'd taught us to love and root for, had just been blown up, along with other people whose faces we'd come to know. The grown-ups had made us watch. And now they were using weird language like "major malfunction." Twenty-five seconds of silence. And silence after that, too. I don't remember what Mrs. Morledge said, if anything, except that it was time for lunch.

My son's New York City public school, after what feels like every major news event or school shooting anywhere in the country, has a group discussion. The school counselor is available for questions. The dance teacher has them *dance* about it.

Gen X mothers, too, are all about processing when it comes to their own kids. Here is a message I received from a Kansas City woman I was scheduled to interview: "Hi, Ada, hoping we can reschedule our talk today. Our dog was run over by a school bus yesterday. My daughter saw it happen right in front of our house. All pretty traumatic. I've got the kids home from school today and we are hunkering down. I would really love to be interviewed for your book. I just want to be in the right headspace and that is not today."

There was little "hunkering down" with family in the 1970s and '80s. Back then, it was not seen as the adults' job to help children understand and process their fears, disappointments, and sorrows. Fitness buffs did calisthenics, not yoga. Teachers in many states spanked students.[27]

I checked in recently with some former elementary school classmates to ask if there had been an assembly or something after the *Challenger* disaster. They, too, remembered little but silence. One said that when the explosion happened on the TV in his classroom, his second-grade teacher started crying, turned off the TV, and distracted the class with an activity. Another remembers his teacher saying to first-grade students who hadn't heard the news yet, "By the way, the shuttle exploded," and then laughing nervously.

Our generation is mocked for helicopter parenting our children. We hear that we don't let them fail enough, that our swaddling them in protective gear has left them unprepared for life. This may be true. But, if so, it may well stem from traumas like that morning of January 28, 1986.

For some of us, the message of that day became: *This is what happens when you care sincerely about something.* Absent parental or administrative guidance, we tried to make sense of the *Challenger* on our own. Within weeks, the catastrophe became fodder for sick jokes. I remember a kid on the playground flicking a lit match skyward.

"What's that?" he asked.

"I don't know, what?" I said.

"The *Challenger*."

It wasn't funny, but at least it related to what we'd seen. Not knowing how to handle the horror, we found ways to pretend

we didn't mind so much. It would become a penchant of ours, and a style: self-soothing through dark humor. Garbage Pail Kids. *Mad* magazine. *Gremlins*. (Only now does a telling detail of that kid's *Challenger* joke occur to me: he was *playing with matches at school*.)

We came by our defense mechanisms honestly. The murder rate reached a new nationwide high in 1974 and continued to break new records until the early 1990s.[28] The number of substantiated child sexual abuse claims rose steadily from 1977 through 1992. This may have had more to do with the rise in reporting thanks to the 1977 Protection of Children Against Sexual Exploitation Act and the expansion of Child Protective Services.[29] Or it may be a sign that more children were being abused. Nearly every Gen X woman I know has a story of being groped, flashed, sexually assaulted, or outright raped.[30]

When it came to race, too, we couldn't fail to notice a disconnect between what we were hearing and what we saw. Local Jim Crow laws were superseded by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, so Gen X grew up in the wake of desegregation. Black History Month was first recognized in 1976 by Gerald Ford. But, looking around, we saw racial injustice everywhere. In the 1980s and '90s, the news was dominated by stories like those of the Central Park Five, Rodney King, and Amadou Diallo.

For members of Generation X, once again, there was a stark contrast between what we were taught (racism was defeated by the Freedom Riders) and what we witnessed (rampant racism in society, racial tension in our schools). Yet again, there was no reckoning with the distance between our parents' ideals and our reality.

With the Berlin Wall's breaching in 1989 and the end of the USSR in 1991, the prospect of World War III seemed to vanish overnight. Our Boomer parents, who more even than we do own the Cold War as a cultural touchstone, celebrated. My father was in Germany around this time and made a pilgrimage to chip a piece of the wall away to bring home as a souvenir.

Why didn't Gen X rejoice, relieved of childhood fears? Maybe it's because we didn't fully appreciate the historical context. Maybe it's because by then we were automatically suspicious of any supposedly good news. Or maybe it's because we'd been made to worry for so long that anytime we were told we didn't have to worry anymore, we didn't know how to stop. Instead of reveling, we doubled down on world-weariness.

When we hit voting age, Gen X was labeled "the most politically disengaged in American history," with "unprecedented levels of absenteeism" at the ballot box.[31] Rock the Vote, fronted by stars like Queen Latifah, was meant to get Gen Xers to register, but in 1996, the youth vote hit its lowest point since eighteen-year-olds won the right in 1971.[32]

There were a few Gen X–specific groups fighting for change, like Lead or Leave and its sister organization, Third Millennium. The latter, founded in 1993, fought to address the poor prospects of Generation X and future generations, a result of what they saw as Boomers' destruction of the planet. The group circulated a manifesto that began: "Like Wile E. Coyote waiting for a twenty-ton Acme anvil to fall on his head, our generation labors in the expanding shadow of monstrous national debt."[33] The group might be best known for its 1994 survey showing that a higher percentage of young adults believed in UFOs than

that Social Security would still exist when they retired. None of the Gen X groups appear to have amassed many followers or wielded much influence. In 1996, an NPR story declared, "Lead or Leave Has Left."[34]

In 2000, some Gen Xers attended protests as the group of bipartisan cynics "Billionaires for Bush (or Gore)." At the Republican and Democratic conventions that year, the group dressed up in rich-people drag and chanted, "Bush . . . Gore . . . Bush . . . Gore . . . We don't care who you vote for. We've already bought them."[35]

"The institutions that had been the foundation of middle-class democracy, from public schools and secure jobs to flourishing newspapers and functioning legislatures, were set on the course of a long decline," wrote George Packer in his 2013 book, *The Unwinding*. He cited 1978—a median Gen X birth year—as the approximate turning point in America's character.[36]

From 1995 to 1997, the health care organization Kaiser Permanente conducted one of the largest-ever investigations into the effect of childhood abuse and neglect on health and well-being later in life: the CDC–Kaiser Permanente Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. At their annual physical exams, more than 17,000 subjects filled out questionnaires asking which, if any, "adverse childhood experiences," or ACEs, they had experienced—for example, physical abuse, emotional neglect, or domestic violence.[37]

When the researchers looked at the patients' ACE scores alongside their medical records, they discovered something shocking: the higher the ACE score, the higher the risk for

physical and emotional problems in adulthood, including depression and autoimmune disorders.

No studies to date compare ACEs between the generations. It's impossible to say whether childhood trauma was more acute for Gen X.[38] (And frankly it feels a little creepy to engage in a competition about who was more neglected and abused.) Still, I find compelling the idea that some of our problems now may be connected with the damage we incurred back then.

When I reached out to a community of ACE experts, several said that some connection between high rates of childhood stress and high rates of midlife psychological and physical issues made sense. Kimberly Konkel, a childhood-trauma expert in the field of public health, told me that Generation X may well be the "least-parented" generation—more than other generations, left to fend for itself without clear rules, community support, or adult supervision.[39] She believes the stress that resulted could be connected to some of our struggles now: "Our suicide rates, liver cancer death rates, et cetera, indicate that something is significantly wrong with the generation. I think we might find that Gen X has higher rates of reactive-attachment." Reactive attachment disorder—also known by the ironic acronym RAD—involves trouble forming loving relationships as a result of not having had basic needs for caring and affection met.

Today, suicide rates are soaring among middle-aged women.[40] For women ages forty-five to fifty-four, it is now the seventh most frequent cause of death, ahead of diabetes, influenza, and pneumonia; for white women in that age group, it's

number five.[41] Again, there is no proof of a connection here, but I find it interesting that women are more likely than men to have had four or more adverse childhood experiences.[42] With a score of four or higher, you are 460 percent more prone to depression and 1,220 percent more likely to attempt suicide than someone with a score of zero.[43]

In *A Generation Alone*, about Generation X's spiritual life, authors William Mahedy and Janet Bernardi employ "aloneness" as "the term that best describes the emotional, attitudinal and spiritual space Generation X occupies . . . In aloneness, one's life is filled with nothing but the clutter and busyness of activity and, all too often, the painful memories of one's own past."[44]

Women in particular seem to gravitate to the clutter and the busyness. We work so hard because we have to, for money, and very likely because we're scared.

The background static of danger in the 1970s and 1980s took its toll. We went on high alert, convinced that with enough hard work and creativity, we could keep ourselves safe from predators and diseases and other threats—could even keep the whole world safe, with the right mental effort. In midlife, we must reconcile the two primary messages of our childhood: One: "Reach for the stars." Two: "You're on your own."

Marketers have taken notice. One report on selling to us features this strategic analysis: "Life has not been stable. Gen Xers were the children of divorce and dual incomes, and were latchkey kids who grew up by themselves. Selling point: Convince them that your organization is reliable and will simplify rather than complicate their lives."[45]

Perhaps the era's insecurity is why so many Gen X girls obsessed over *Little House on the Prairie*. It was so unlike most 1970s childhoods, with the big, loving family uniting to cope with hardship.

That show's father, played by Michael Landon, was a stoic, nurturing voice. In my memory, there was only one man on television more calming, more trustworthy: Mister Rogers.

When tragedy struck, Mister Rogers advised children, "look for the helpers."[46] At the 1969 Senate hearing about public television he said his show aimed to teach children that "feelings are mentionable and manageable."[47] He never condescended. He leveled with us but without saying too much. He didn't frame things in the clunky, overearnest manner of ABC Afterschool Specials. That series ran from 1972 through 1997 and brought us such contrived, melodramatic classics as *Don't Touch,* about molestation; and *A Desperate Exit*, about suicide.

Mister Rogers, by contrast, advised parents to have clear, honest conversations with children when bad things happened: "When children bring up something frightening, it's helpful right away to ask them what they know about it . . . What children probably need to hear most from us adults is that they can talk with us about anything, and that we will do all we can to keep them safe, in any scary time."[48]

Mister Rogers was a welcome antidote to the rest of our lives back then. I wonder if that's why we are fascinated with him now. The 2018 biography *The Good Neighbor: The Life and Work of Fred Rogers* hit the *New York Times* bestseller list. The documentary *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* was a sleeper hit in the summer of 2018, when it was announced that preproduction

had begun on *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood*, with national treasure Tom Hanks to play Mister Rogers.

Valarie, who as a child fretted about nuclear annihilation, is now forty-four. She has been trying to do a "look for the helpers" re-examination of her life—counting her blessings, identifying her strengths. Still, she has been crying a lot. She's not quite sure why. She likes her neighborhood in Anchorage, where she returned after completing a BA and an MFA. She recently adopted a dog that she dotes on.[49] She works as a grant writer and bought her own house in an up-and-coming historic neighborhood. She has good friends. So why is she finding it all so hard?

Is it the clinical depression she's been battling the past twenty years? Is it that she gave up her early creative dreams? Is it that she's approaching menopause and her hormones are all over the place? Is it the responsibility of caring for her ailing mother? The stresses of her job? The work she has to do on her house? The fact that she'll still be paying off student loans at age sixty-five? Is it that she's been diagnosed with a thyroid disorder? Because she's gained weight? Is it that she envies the friends she sees on Instagram who are able to afford trips and eating out? Or is it simply that she's older and nothing feels quite the way she'd hoped it would? These thoughts swirl in her head as she drives to and from work and as she looks out her office window on dark winter afternoons in Alaska.

"I'm forty-four," Valarie says. "And I feel like, *What did I do? Have I made any impact?* I certainly haven't done everything that I thought I was going to do when I was a kid. [Mind-over-matter advice book] *The Secret* aside, I don't think that I'm going to be able to make some of those things happen before I die. I'm

trying to come to terms with the fact that we can't all make that huge impact, and of course we can't get all the dreams that we want."

The problem feels not so much psychological as existential. "I've pretty much given up on anybody, other than my friends, ever knowing my name," she told me. She feels invisible, but she doesn't talk about it a lot because she doesn't want to be seen as an ingrate. "Because we're women, we're always going to be seen as complaining. We can't say anything that has a negative tone to it without being told that we should just appreciate how good things are. So we do what we can. Dye our hair. Try a winged eyeliner. Try to be present, then feel that inevitable letdown when people look right past you."

She's trying to look on the positive side, to see her parents' divorce and her lifelong financial struggles as something that ultimately gave her strength and resilience.

"We were raised with more uncertainty than generations now are, but at the same time we were also tasked with taking care of ourselves. So we knew what would and wouldn't kill us. We understood consequences more than children these days, with everything in Bubble Wrap . . . Women in their forties now have it a lot better than women in their forties in 1903. Technology has made our lives a lot easier. We don't quite look like the Crypt Keeper anymore when we hit forty."

She sounds like someone trying to talk herself into feeling fine about being in her forties, when the truth is that she feels anything but fine.

There's a phrase I can't get out of my head. At a regular poker game I play in, whenever there's a junky hand showing in

seven-card stud, the dealer says, upon turning over the latest lousy card: "No visible means of support."

It's a term used in vagrancy statutes and a silly thing to say during a game. But that is exactly what's in the cards laid out before so many Gen X women: anxiety, family and work responsibilities, and a sense that time is running out. There could be good cards on the way, but with so many bad cards showing, they might not be good enough.

Valarie bought a house with her own money. She has a job helping people. She's a loyal daughter.

Kelly, too, has much to be proud of: she's raised three children, including one with a brain injury. She has a successful marriage.

And yet both women—raised with unrealistic expectations and running up against countless obstacles—see only what isn't there. They were taking care of family but didn't have a career. Or they had a career but never found a partner. They hadn't lost enough weight, they hadn't saved enough for retirement, they hadn't made a significant impact on the world.

It should be plenty to raise children or to have a career—or, frankly, just not to become a serial killer. Yet somehow for this generation of women, the belief that girls could do anything morphed into a directive that they must do everything.

One Gen X woman told me that the motto of the elite women's college she attended was: "Educating women of promise for lives of distinction." Ever since, she's wondered if she was living up to the promise, if her life is sufficiently distinct.

In a TED talk on vulnerability, Brené Brown, professor of social work at the University of Houston, describes the

message we were given as little girls and its effect on us: "For women, shame is: do it all. Do it perfectly. And never let them see you sweat. I don't know how much perfume that [Enjoli] commercial sold, but I guarantee you it moved a lot of antidepressants and antianxiety meds."[50]

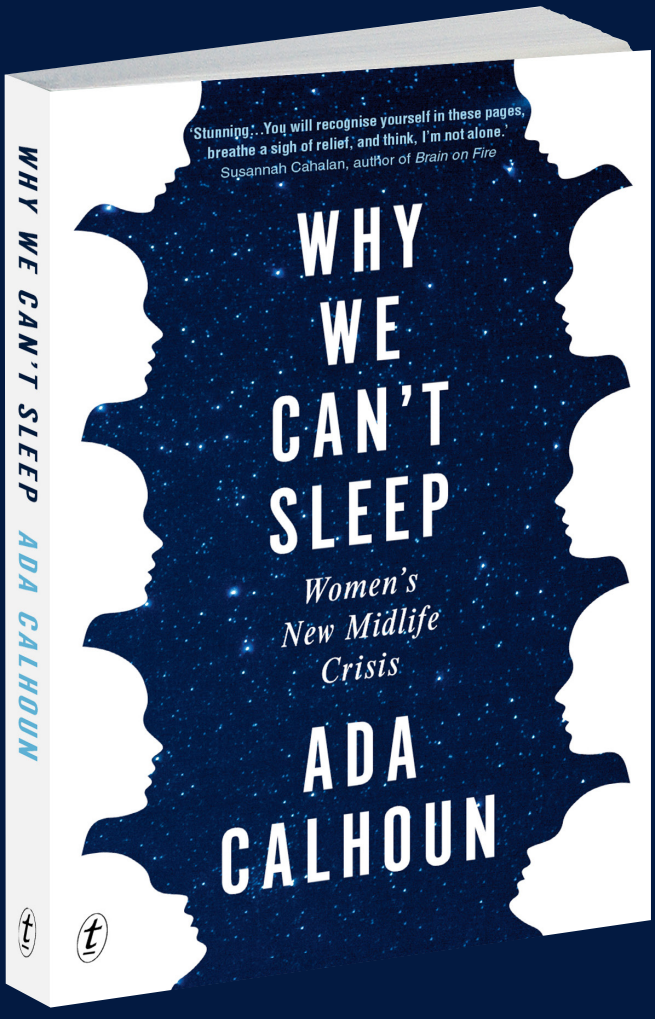
In any era, "not-enough-ness" is a challenge for women, says Bryn Chafin,[51] a therapist with Brookwood Center for Psychotherapy in Atlanta.

"'Middle child' is an extremely poignant metaphor," Chafin said of Gen X. "You can get lost and don't have a lot of support." Chafin said many women in midlife are "worried all the time." Gen X triggers might be family of origin, society at large, social media, politics, and aging. The result: judgment, guilt, and shame.

"When women feel shame," said Chafin, referencing Brené Brown's work on "shame shields," "they often either overfunction, shrink back, or lash out." Those who overfunction may become type A, anxious women who are always trying to fit it all in and usually "with a tinge of self-judgment that they are failing to do everything well. It becomes a vicious cycle, where they work harder to escape the shame and then they fail and feel more shame, and so on."

Chafin has these women ask themselves questions designed to give them a sense of freedom from obligation: "Can you do anything to change this situation? Can you look at it a different way? Can you accept it for how it is? And just let it go?"

One of the goals she encourages women to pursue is what's known as "radical acceptance"—finding a way to take life as it is, not as you thought it would be. "It's one of the hardest things," Chafin says, "to radically accept what's in front of you."



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