

Are You There, Angst? It's Me, Quarter-Life Crisis.

by Kristel Yoneda

I sleep on a bed with no frame. The box spring is still wrapped in plastic, and when I roll around too much in my sleep, I wake up with the mattress at least several inches from where it's supposed to be. On those days, I forget where I am.

For the past two weeks, I've been waking up at 3:30am feeling anxious, as though I've forgotten to do something important. I'll tear through my apartment, half-asleep, trying to scratch an itch in my brain that I can't reach. I'll check that the stove is off and then press on my front door to make sure that it's locked properly. Feeling unsatisfied, I'll sort my mail into two piles: bills I have to pay now and bills I really have to pay now. Reminders of my financial irresponsibility flood my tired mind until I feel overwhelmed and nauseous. The sun peeks its way through my blinds before I feel completely defeated, like I should head back to bed. The last thought that enters my head before drifting back off to sleep is always: when am I going to start feeling like an adult?

I've been told this restless panic is "the quarter-life crisis," which will be weighing me down until I'm at least 30. The term, originally coined by writer Abby Wilner, was used to describe her postcollege anxiety after she moved back home and had no idea what to do with her life. A quick Google search brings up an entire website dedicated to my predicament, complete with an ad at the bottom for a job listing site with a picture of smiling women dressed in power suits giving an insincere thumbs-up.

Honestly, though, there is comfort in knowing that there are others suffering right alongside with me. Many of us are so busy reconciling the noticeable gap between our childhood dreams and our not-as-exciting lives that we forget these experiences are not unique but, rather, our rite of passage into adulthood. In high school, we spent our time desperately trying to fit in. In college, most of us reinvented ourselves and shed the high school identities we tried so hard to create (or destroy, depending on who you ask). We strutted around campus like pseudo-adults, high on the possibility that we could change the world and certain we'd have our futures printed on the back of our diplomas like treasure maps. Nobody warned us, however, that postcollege life lacked the structure and routine to which we had become so accustomed. Nobody told us we needed to reshape our childhood dreams into practical goals; we were ill-prepared, thrown out into the world as if from an airplane, clutching onto our dreams as if they were our only parachute.

As a child, I dreamt of being a famous violin player and novelist (for some reason, both were connected in my mind). I had a blurry

vision of my taller self, playing so beautifully I'd bring crowds to tears. After signing autographs, I'd go home and write novels that people wanted to discuss over coffee with friends.

I can assure you at 26, I'm neither of those things. My dreams of becoming a famous violinist fell to the wayside by the time I was eight or nine when I became infatuated with the electric guitar. Now, my lifelong dream of becoming a writer is the only—albeit huge—gap in reality I'm trying to reconcile.

Part of the problem with beating ourselves up over our unaccomplished childhood dreams is that as children we had no real concept of age or responsibility. Being a grownup was an abstract concept. To us, adults were giants who ruled the world, having somehow magically acquired the skills and information to become self-sufficient.

As children, we could not predict the obstacles we would encounter on our way to adulthood. Back then, our biggest concerns were making friends on the playground and finding clever ways to avoid eating our veggies. We were dreamers back then: give us a cheap 'ukulele from Walmart and we wanted to be musicians; give us a Playdoh food set and we wanted to be chefs; give us an empty refrigerator box and we wanted to be Batman and live in a cardboard cave.

I am not suggesting that we abandon our childhood dreams. After all, there are reasons (whether we understand them or not) why we work towards accomplishing these goals, no matter how outrageous they may seem. Even if we don't end up becoming the grownups we originally set out to be—a virtuoso violinist, a best-selling novelist—our childhood fantasies dare us to dream bigger and push ahead (even if we lack direction). Our experiences from childhood are what steer us toward who we are now, filling in the essential markers in our journey, markers that we could not anticipate as children.

Quarter-lifers, we don't give ourselves enough credit for getting this far. We lament over our decision to buy an expensive pair of shoes instead of carefully budgeting our paychecks, wondering when we'll start making responsible adult-like decisions. We are so fixated on waiting for that "adult" light switch in our head to flip that we lose sight of ourselves. We're meant to be in this chaotic limbo between adolescence and adulthood. We're meant to flounder in our new freedom and responsibilities, making the wrong decisions in hopes of eventually learning and making the right ones. We've focused so much on how much we *haven't* accomplished, that we've completely disregarded what we *have* done: survived this far. ❖

