

The **Five-oh** (*OH Oh oh oh oh*)

By Jan **Bartelli**

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Turning 50, like turning 21, is a rite of passage in North American culture, except that 50 is the down side of 21. No matter how many facials, sit ups or colour rinses we all know deep down the Big Five Oh is going to win out every time over our precariously constructed fantasies of who we are (or think we are). Every one handles this existential crisis differently and we liked Bartelli's drolly self-deprecating, quietly humourous and ultimately truthful approach-- I cannot reinvent myself – I can change, I can grow, but I cannot reinvent the wheel that is my 50-year-old soul-- to midlife stocktaking. If there's an upside to this woeful reminder of our mortality, it's probably reminding yourself turning 60 is ten years away!*

The Five-Oh

I know what you're be thinking: "Wow! You don't look 50!! Really???" That's what you're thinking.

And if that's not what you're thinking ... well, fuck you.

50 prompts inventory.

And I see that the years of expensive skin care, the regular exercise, the good genes – they do not fool the 50-year-old me.

Do not fool my belly, with its strange new indentation below the belly button, flanked by two small pouches of fat.

Do not fool my waist, which has sprouted an unfashionable fleshy "peplum" that

folds over my uncomfortable jeans.

***Do not fool my hair*, ever thinner and responsive if at all only to special salon gloss and expensive volumizing shampoos.**

***Do not fool my skin*, encroached by spider veins that weave around my thighs and the back of my knees.**

***Do not fool my legs*, that grow slower thicker, edging toward that shapeless stolid look that sends hemlines plummeting.**

Do not fool my bones...

At 40, newly divorced, I went to law school. Suddenly single and surrounded by hundreds of 20-somethings, I wanted to be 20-something, too, with 20-something lovers and a 20-something's toned body - or as close as a lucky and disciplined 40-something could get.

A classmate – a nice guy, but slutty – refused to believe I was 40 and said, “If you’re 40, then I’m a virgin.”

A law school friend got married recently. I ate sparingly in the week before her wedding, bought a pretty dress and had my hair cut and my nails manicured. The nice-but-slutty guy eyed me up and down, shook his head and said: “You are a real piece of ass.”

It made the 50-year-old me happy. I danced with abandon and drank lots of champagne. My dancing grew delirious and soon, I was a laughing, dancing dervish... then, was a strange pop in my knee.

I limped gingerly back to my seat.

Do not fool my bones.

At 50, even my dreams have changed. There are no more effortless runs, arabesque leaps, or soaring flights through the clouds under my own power (I was partial to the breaststroke). I loved those dreams – the air rushing toward my body and the pleasure of pushing through it. My dreams these days are dull, heady affairs – full of talking, thinking, feeling. And I no longer fly – though on a good night, I can still hover a bit above the ground.

I see breach-able distance between the old and me. I will grow simultaneously both rough and fragile – the skin coarsened, the hair thinner. It will become harder and harder to believe that I was ever one of those creatures with buttery skin gliding over strong bone, and hair that needed to be tamed and gathered.

There are still times – increasingly rare – when I feel my young, supple self. Then there is a moment or two of glee – followed quickly by anxious worry. Am I deluded? Pathetic? Is this how the self-deception begins: believing that I can still strut my stuff even as I apply lipstick clownlike around thin lips and paint two red circles on my cheeks?

I fear that as grace and dignity grow ever more important, I will only manage ridiculous exaggeration.

This is all very distressing. But it is not the worst.

This is the worst: from now on, it's about what remains. At 49, life was the helm; now it's the stern.

I saw possibilities; I see eulogies.

Major purchases may last my lifetime.

I can no longer make life-long friends, only long-term ones.

I might share my life with someone, but we will not build our lives together.

If I attain a major success, it will be viewed as the surprising achievement of the late bloomer.

I cannot reinvent myself – I can change, I can grow, but I cannot reinvent the wheel that is my 50-year-old soul.

Single and without children, I feel edged toward the outline. At the center, are the “meaningful” events in other people’s lives – the engagements, weddings, baby showers, bar mitzvahs and college graduations. I celebrate these meaningful events; at work, especially, I keep celebrating, expensively marking the celebrations in my colleagues’ lives.

“I will be 50,” I told our office manager, shortly before my birthday. “And you people better buy me a big, fucking present.”

They did.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I turned 50 seething with indignation and self-pity, and the embarrassing realization that – despite professional and personal successes – I had relied heavily on my youth and appearance for purchase in the world. Of course, the signs that I was no longer a sexy, young thing did not suddenly appear on my 50th birthday, but they were suddenly very visible to me.*

Faced with that vision, I floundered. Where to safely hang my identity hat? I was neither parent nor significant other, as I was constantly reminded by the familial celebrations around me. My colleagues were (mostly) lovely people – but it is hard when you realize that the “+1” is you.

Years later, I still easily recall my panic. But it has been a very long time since I placed such power in youth and beauty. Granted, a few (hard-boiled) eggs still roll around in that

basket.

But just a few.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Jan Bartelli lives in a tiny town in upstate New York and for many years lived in a very big city in downstate New York. She is a former journalist and, maybe, retired attorney (depends who's asking). Her CNF has been published in *82 Review, Sad Girls Club, The Dewdrop ("Isolation Shorts"), and elsewhere.