

Woman

X

Turns Thirty

Myths, Mysteries and
Mental Meltdowns

Heidi Rehmman

Woman X Turns Thirty

Myths, Mysteries and Mental Meltdowns

Heidi E. D. Rehmann

*Woman X Turns Thirty:
Myths, Mysteries and Mental Meltdowns*

Copyright © 2000 Heidi E. D. Rehmann
All rights reserved.

Universal Publishers/uPUBLISH.com
USA • 2000

ISBN: 1-58112-736-7

www.upublish.com/books/rehmann.htm

Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Generation X woman for sharing your life experience, for adding the disclaimer to previous opinion, and for giving hope for the future.

Thank you to my amazing husband, Bill Rehmann, who takes every opportunity to set me up for success. With your insight, analysis, and literal mind, you are my perfect complement. You unselfishly give me the inspiration and courage to do what I must do. You suffer my temperament and rejoice when I succeed.

Thank you to my dear, true friend, Margi Charette, the quintessential 30-something woman, for your wisdom, laughter, critiques, and criticisms. You understand innately what I need to write and, with commiseration, validate the workings of my brain. On second thought, perhaps your greatest attribute is that you will *always* be older than I am.

This book is dedicated to every woman who ever turned
thirty and lived through it.

Contents

Preface	xi
The Twenties in Review	11
Snapshots of Thirty	
The Campus Catharsis	19
Living Single and Sane	27
Sex	35
Ophelia Plays Hockey	41
Stressed Out	47
Food Fantastic	55
The Family Album	63
Mortality	67
Beauty and Fashion at Thirty Is Not an Oxymoron	71
Surviving the Big One	77
Now What?	85

Preface

I am Woman X. My biography reveals that I am 32, educated, married and a stepmother. While I am an individual, a huge part of my identity is dependent upon the fact that I am a member of a cohort group called Generation X. We are many. Over half of us are female, and we are turning thirty. Some, like me, have lived through it already.

I have decided to give voice to the notion of turning thirty. This is, for me, and hopefully will be for others in the same proverbial boat, an internal reflection, an exaltation-- a comedic look, in regards to entering and surviving the third decade of life.

I look to my cohorts, we babies of the Baby Boomers, and wonder why they call us Generation X. Yes, yes, we're the brand name generation. We have no grand cause. But it goes deeper than that. The first time I heard and mentally registered the term "X" I was in my sophomore year in college. I was flattered, then, that my generation at last had a name. Almost. X. But this shallow brand has evolved to have a larger meaning. It refers to a generational deletion, a mistake, an error, a revision needed, and I am offended.

We members of a generation who are tagged with an X have been branded to be not too much at all. We were expected to be lazy, unmotivated, non-contributing members of society. In truth, we were predicted to become materialistic clones of a materialistic society created for us, not by us. I don't think I am uncommon nor are my circle of thirty-somethings. We are educators, social workers, business owners, parents, spouses, lawyers and doctors. I wouldn't call us unmotivated or lazy or non-contributors.

It is important to remember that we lived our formative years in the eighties. It was when movies like Wall Street rose as metaphors of success and greed. Rather than perpetuate the actions of our predecessors, we have, quietly, without fuss and without need for recognition, assumed an attitude, a *personal* cause. We have calmly and

intentionally decided to do what we can with the space of earth we inhabit and return to society what “they” told us we would forsake.

The world has not yet noticed our momentum or us for we have just begun. We are just now coming into our strengths and recognizing our power. Turning thirty is a time when insecurities, though still evident, begin to dissolve. Internal liberation, though visible, is not completely visualized. We see it. We can feel it. We can taste it. We’d make love to it if we could, to own it completely and to take it in through every nerve. To turn thirty is exciting, frightening, agonizing, and sometimes downright hilarious. We laugh at ourselves and cry with one another and love every second of it. Life is being served and we will eat every bite.

I think of the lifetime of conversations with women of my age and with those who have seen their thirties come and go. All, nearly, have agreed that to turn thirty is the hardest of all. Their voices are intermingled with mine, typed in these pages as I recall them either through conversations or pointed questionnaires. Though I use my “I” to tell the stories, they are speaking, too. They offer their voices and are glad to be asked how they feel. They are surprised someone wants to know and that their lives are of interest. It’s about time someone asked.

I look to the women of my decade with respect and pride. I look to the women in their forties, our mothers in their fifties and sixties, and gracefully older women with awe. Women beyond their thirties laugh at us who fight the passing of our twenties. They think us silly. They say things like, “You must be kidding, thirty? Wait until you hit fifty!” But they always concede. It’s true. Thirty was a tough one.

So, it is in celebration, anxiety, and wonder that I discuss this phenomenon, thirty. As our bodies shift and hair begins to grow in inconvenient places, we swear, “But I still feel like I’m twenty-one,” and then admit, “most of the time.”

The Twenties in Review

“Time sneaks up on you like a windshield on a bug.”

Jon Lithgow

It is a chronological fact that every living thing is aging. With every passing moment, our bodies grow that much older. In the time it takes you to read this page, you will have aged a minute or so, depending on how quickly you absorb information. Those minutes and seconds become part of the past forever.

As if that’s a news flash, right? The sun rises. The sun sets. Another day passes. The passage of time is a relatively easy concept to grasp. Yet, no matter how intelligent we women are we prefer to think that time ravages all things in nature but selectively leaves us untouched. Wrong. Time is neither kind nor selective as it marches across our bodies. It steps hard and leaves footprints easy to track.

There was a time when the concept of aging was unfathomable to us. It was the time of our eternal youth—the time when we believed we would not only live forever, we would be young forever. We were invincible. We moved through our days in blissful naivete, knowing rationally that we became older, but never believing that we would stop being youthful or beautiful.

We waited our whole lives to be twenty-one, the perfect age. Then, we wished to grow no older. The world became our playground because we had, at long last, arrived. Finally, we were legal to do anything we wanted. We broke out of college, or out of our parent's house, and blasted into the world to make it all ours. No one, no man, no nothing would get in our way because we knew everything there is in the world to know except one thing . . .

THE BODY WE HAD AT TWENTY-ONE WAS THE BEST BODY WE WOULD EVER HAVE AND WE WERE TOO STUPID TO REALIZE IT.

In such ignorance we complained about our thighs and wished for bigger or firmer breasts or a more elegant nose. But, the irony of it was that our bodies would not only get no better, in a few short years they would begin to deteriorate. (Jane Fonda is one exception, but she is a freak mutation of nature so she can't be counted as an example. You can hope to be like her, but don't hold your breath). Sadly, we had our most potentially perfect bodies as twenty-one. We never considered they would eventually forsake us.

Looking back, we realize we should not have eaten all that chocolate. We should have started an exercise program then, when we were still impressionable and trainable. And we should have made love a heck of a lot more often. (The good thing here is you should still make love as often as possible, but you now have a thirty-year-old body to do it with. This dilemma will be discussed later in the chapter titled, appropriately, SEX). If we could only have that body back for a day we'd jazzercise in the morning, buy clothes all afternoon because the size we think we are would actually fit, and we would have electric sex all night. Well, we can dream about it, anyway.

But, since those days are gone, our twenties I mean, we can only reminisce and rue the fact that we did not appreciate how easy those bodies were to maintain. And, as we are in the mode of recalling, we can also look back and recognize that there were some prophetic signs along the

way of our twenties that forecasted the change of our youth to womanhood. This metamorphosis was gradual, sequential, and silent.

TWENTY-SIX. For me, that was the telltale age. Change rushed in on an instant. One day I had my twenty-one-year-old figure and the next . . . I saw it in a full-length mirror in JC Penny's. I had no full-length mirror in my house for self-esteem preservation, denial if you will. I saw that my butt had shifted, spread, and fallen. It seemed to me that I should have felt such an event, like an avalanche barreling down the side of a mountain and crushing the earth beneath its mass. I should have heard nature's rumblings and taken precautionary measures maybe set up some barrier fencing. I had no warning and no reason to think my drifts would head South. Needless to say, there was a continental shift and I was left with an altered landscape. My youthful curves had become womanly mountains. I was full, thick, and voluminous. I had cellulite.

I once heard that biology or physiology or some other thing that prepares the female body for childbirth causes this physical transformation. The hips widen—I'll say—in preparation for prime childbearing years. The only thing I was primed for was liposuction when I saw it happen to me. I used to think women of the thirties condition were exaggerating when they discussed the mysteries of tidal change. Surely, they just had to get off their mushy butts and exercise more. Now that it has happened to me, however, I have changed my attitude. I think they all looked pretty good.

TWENTY-EIGHT. This age uncovered a disturbing development. One day I was looking in the mirror (Yes, again. If you admit it, you look at yourself in the mirror quite a few times a day, too). It was in the early morning and I was preparing my face for work. As I applied my make-up, the vanity light hit my chin and I saw a hair there. Thinking that one of the hairs from my head had fallen there I touched my chin to flick the hair away.

It stayed.

I grabbed it between my thumb and forefinger and pulled.

It stuck.

Facial hair? Good God, Almighty, facial hair! What was happening to me? I thought that happened to only very old women. It's natural somehow for old women to have whiskers. After they've lived thirty years beyond menopause, the balance between testosterone and estrogen is a little askew by then. I was convinced that I was abnormal. Granted, there was only one hair, but it was an inch and a half long!

I rummaged for the tweezers and gave the unwanted hair a good yank. Then I held it over the toilet, dropped it in and flushed away the evidence of my aging. I spoke to no one of my discovery.

A few weeks later I was watching the Oprah Winfrey Show as twenty-gazillion women do every day when they're not flipping back and forth to Rosie O'Donnell. Oprah's topic focussed on the stages of female development and covered the life span. The first stage I heard dealt with the onset of puberty and the physical changes that accompany it. Then I heard about the late teens and then the twenties. I nodded and answered the television set, "Mmm, hmm that's right, sister. Been there." None of this was news to me.

Then Oprah's guest went on to talk about the thirties. The television screen displayed a checklist of what to watch for, what was normal. I can't remember on darn thing they said about the thirty sub-group except—Facial Hair. The dreaded stray hair or two that seem to sprout instantaneously from invisible to two inches long overnight. I could relate, all too well, but I was only twenty-eight! How could this be? I was not only aging, but prematurely at that.

The horror. The horror.

The next day I selected Rosie O'Donnell's show instead. I couldn't bear any more enlightenment from Oprah for at least a week or two. I needed a break from reality.

But what I watched brought no consolation. In the opening segment, Rosie pulled proudly on a three-inch hair that grew from underneath her chin. She said she was going to put a bead on the end of it and let it grow real long.

That took guts as far as I was concerned. But Rosie was older than thirty, after all. It was *time* for her to have facial hair. At twenty-eight I was devastated. I always had been an early bloomer. It was cool to have to wear a bra in the fifth grade, but I didn't think this early development stuff was funny any longer.

I'll probably have age spots by the time I'm thirty-seven. I'll let you know.

Now I have two chin hairs. One gray, one black, that grow right next to each other on the very end of my chin. Indeed, I pluck them at first sign of stubble. Every once in a while I catch myself feeling my chin with the tip of my forefinger. I can be in the middle of a face to face conversation and I subconsciously run my finger over the spot to make sure it's all clear.

TWENTY-NINE. What comforting word can be said about this impending, uninspiring age? Sometimes I wonder if twenty-nine isn't actually worse than thirty. It's the signal that chimes the coming of the big one. It's a twelve-month sentence. They should make a movie about it: **TWENTY-NINE-YEAR-OLD WOMAN WALKING.** When you hit this age, you realize you have only three hundred sixty-five days left of your twenties. With every passing day you come closer to the inevitable. No matter how you wish otherwise or pray for a miracle, there is no clemency.

My husband is fourteen years older than I am. As I lead the front line of Generation X turning thirty, he brings up the tail end of the Baby Boomers. I find that ironic. Some time before we were married he said to me, "One day you wake up and you say to yourself, 'I'm never going to be in the Olympics.'"

I asked him what he meant. He told me there was no way to explain it. Either you understand or you don't. But I would know when I got there.

SNAPSHOTS OF THIRTY

LOOKING THROUGH THE
PEEPHOLE FOR A GLIMPSE
AT THE
OTHER SIDE

The College Catharsis

“Personally I am always ready to learn, although I do not always like being taught.”

Sir Winston Churchill

There is a definitive idealism that encompasses a college campus. It is made up of the search for truth, the American Dream, standards of excellence and the promise of eternal youth. New blood, in the form of freshmen, arrives each fall and brings new energy and promise to the institution, perpetuating that idealism. Youth is reborn and sustained in those who come to learn at a non-traditional age. This mid-life ivory tower zest for life through learning challenges the saying that you cannot teach an old dog new tricks. The university opens its doors to all who wish to enter the realm of academia and challenges the mind.

So, what does this have to do with turning thirty? The college campus is perhaps the number one destination that any self-respecting woman should avoid as she approaches thirty. Once she gets beyond thirty, closer to forty, then it's okay. But, why, you dear readers may wonder, does this woman say something so ludicrous as a college campus is a dangerous place for a woman turning thirty? It's not the education I'm concerned about, here. I am simply giving a sincere warning to cushion the fall. Here's why:

We Generation X women are astoundingly well trained and well educated. We place importance on

exercising our brains and being self-sufficient. We have the education and the determination to make our way and leave our mark on the world. And, we have balanced that ivory tower idealism with the understanding that no one is going to guarantee our success, so we had better be prepared to create our own.

Ahh . . .we have fond memories of our college days, which are not so far behind us. When our college football team plays the long-time rival we turn on the television to watch. We take personal pride in a win and hold sorely a loss. We call the other team names and insult its academic programs. Certainly our alma mater is superior to that university wanna be. We stand true and loyal to the colors and know the fight song. With a warm heart we hold to the memory of the old days and the camaraderie we have with all of those who attended before us and all who attend after.

Strangely, we have a picture in our minds that we look exactly the same way at twenty-nine as we did the day we entered college. We never consider that as our lives evolve and we become more knowledgeable and even stronger women, our bodies do the same. We do not think for a second that the current freshman class just might think us out of touch and way out of fashion. Oh, but we are a bit out of touch with our younger sisters.

We are thirty.

They are eighteen.

Think about it. Really think about it and you will realize how different you are now than when you were eighteen. And thank heavens you are! You may wish you could roll back time and look like “her” again, but take my word for it, time has moved on and left you in the eighties. Return to a college campus, now, nearly a decade after you left it, and you will see the truth with a brutal eye.

After graduating from Central Michigan University in 1990, I moved to a small, Northern Michigan town. I took my first teaching job. Although I was only a few years older than some of my students, I maintained that student/teacher

relationship, while I felt I could still relate to their world. I did not feel at all out of touch.

Years passed and I developed my career and then took another position. I then began my Master's degree. I took classes on weekends and summers at extension sites. I came into contact with students like me: professional people who were working on higher degrees. We socialized and intellectualized in our own "milieu". I don't think I laid eyes on more than ten undergraduates during that time. And even though I was older and wiser and established, I still figured I looked the same way I did so many years ago. No one had told me otherwise.

This denial of aging is actually a mental protective process. You know it's like when you are in a car accident and everything goes into hyper slow motion. Your senses are heightened and super keen to what is happening. Mercifully, they are dulled to the pain until it's all over. Afterward you look around yourself and see the damage and feel the throbbing pain in your head.

Returning to a college campus when you are thirty years old does the same thing to you. You've been going along just fine, and then suddenly you are blind-sided by a time warped semi truck. After the initial shock you stand in the center of the mess with your mouth hanging open because you can't believe you have become a casualty of time.

This is, however, normal. Unfortunately, all of the things you will be experiencing as you turn thirty fall within normal limits of life playing really dirty tricks on you. Whether it's the mirror in JC Penny's, the onset of facial hair, or the perfectly formed college freshman, there are constant indicators that prevent the denial from going on unreasonably long. Most of the time, these wake-up calls are brutal. I'm not trying to be a pessimist. I'm only telling you the truth now so these things won't come as such a surprise. Things will get better as you slowly come to acceptance.

I'll never forget the day that I experienced the college campus syndrome. I had recently moved back to my old college town to finish up the last few classes of my Master's degree. My new job was forty minutes away and I thought it made sense to commute to work and live close to graduate school. To be honest, I was ecstatic to be able to move back to my old familiar place. Ecstasy turned sourly to angst when I stepped my first foot on campus the day "they" flocked back for the fall semester.

I was with a co-worker who happens to be two years younger than I am. We were headed for the student union to find the Career Placement office. I figured it was time to start looking for administrative positions, so I was on a mission to sign up for the Job Bulletin.

As we pulled onto campus I remembered the good old days. I mentally relived the excitement of returning to campus in late summer and rekindling friendships put on hold over the summer months. It was tradition for my roommates and me to sit on the balcony of our apartment complex the first few nights back and sip cold beer. We listened to U2, Depeche Mode, the B-52's, Modern English and REM on cassette tape.

Hey, I still have LP records for crying out loud. But, I'm hip now. I have a 3-CD changer and a nice disk collection, too.

Anyway, my co-worker and I pulled into a parking space. I put a quarter in the meter for twenty minutes of time. I held my head high and thought of how good I looked and of all the things I had accomplished since 1990. At that time I was beginning my seventh year of teaching. I was nearly finished with the first degree of graduate school and I was engaged to the most wonderful man in the world who, by the way, graduated from Michigan State University in 1971!

My confidence was short-lived. Were these college students I saw before me? They were clones of the high school students I had left an hour before. They were more

trendy, but they were essentially the same—children, really. Had I ever looked like them? They had perfect posteriors and rock hard thighs. They wore earth sandals and fashionably tight retro-seventies clothes. Polyester, ochre-colored, zipper-front shirts and striped pants with wide cuffs. I thought to myself, “Holy, Moly, they’re wearing the same clothes I wore when I was in the third grade!”

They called this fashion? I have a picture of myself wearing a similar outfit now tucked away in the bottom of a box. The difference is that when I dressed like that I was seven years old and I didn’t necessarily like it. In the picture I recall I had pink sponge rollers in my hair as well. These people before me were too young to have lived that fashion hell the first time. They thought it was cool.

It wasn’t so much the clothing that shocked me. What took my breath away were the perfectly formed bodies underneath. There was not a trace of cellulite on those thighs. And the fleshy pouches of round that form on the hips of real women were not to be seen. Everyone seemed to glow. They were sexy angels and quite unaware of their beauty. They were the chosen ones who took it for granted, but thought nothing of it at the same time. Everything smelled of peppermint. Clean and fresh. Animal attraction. I was immobilized by my frumpiness. I stuck out like a pimple on the prom queen’s chin.

I turned to my co-worker and asked, “Will we ever have legs like that again?”

She tactfully returned, “Honey, we never had legs like that. These people are into *fitness* and things.”

She spat the word “fitness” like it was a disease.

“We were into hair,” she said, “BIG hair, remember?”

I sure did. We had the 80’s big bangs. I shuddered and shook it off.

We made our way through the masses of beautiful people and reached the student union door. Stenciled on the glass was a notice:

NO ROLLERBLADES ALLOWED

“This is too much,” I said. “Let’s make it quick.”

By the time we reached the Placement Office my shoulders sagged and I walked with a marked reduction in confidence. I wondered if the students around me were thinking the same thing that I used to think when I saw an “older” student on campus.

Not another non-traditional. Man, are they out of it. Don’t they make you crazy in class? They always sit in the front row and do all of the talking like they know so much.

I made a mental note that when I start my Specialist’s degree I’ll sit in at least the second row.

We finished our business and slithered back to the parking lot. I walked the row of reckoning, ashamed. By the time we reached the car my face dragged on the ground. I turned the ignition key, brushed the gravel from my face and said, “That was weird.”

My co-worker drew a cigarette from her purse, lit it, took a very long drag and said, “That’s for sure.” She glanced through the window at her reflection in the side view mirror. She shook her head and squinted her eyes shut as if to file the image in another place where she could think about it later. Then she said, “Let’s go. My kids will be getting off the bus in a few minutes.”

We drove across town in silence. We had both been humbled and we grieved our past a little bit. Although we sat in the same proverbial boat, it was just as difficult to row. I decided to make an appointment at the tanner for the next day.

When I dropped my passenger at her driveway, her children ran up to her chiming, “Mamma’s home!” They threw their arms around her thighs and held on tight. They didn’t care that she had developed a little cellulite.

I drove home and locked the doors to my sporty red car. I entered the house and looked around at all the nice