

A Premonition...

For the most part, I never saw my menopausal crisis coming. Sure, there were signs that I was heading for some sort of midlife breakdown and, to be honest, plenty of reasons why I should have had one as well. After all, I had arrived at this time of my life carrying so much extra baggage, emotional baggage that had been haunting me in one way or another for decades. Still, since I had managed to hold back any sort of serious undoing for this long, for nearly half a century, why would I think everything would suddenly start coming apart just because I was going through menopause? What was there to make me think this time of my life was going to be so different from any other?

Dream, from a few months before my crisis...

I'm driving along a country road in Columbia County, New York. It's a long, straight road with vast expanses of farmland stretching out in all directions. Off to the west, the Catskill Mountains rise up boldly into a cloud-cluttered sky. As I'm driving, I suddenly become aware of a tornado approaching—some ominous force of intense, swirling energy powerful enough to tear up everything within this peaceful scene and smash it to bits. Frightened, I stop my car and start running toward a group of nearby homes while several other people on the road do the same. After rushing inside one of the houses, a small white one, I hurry into the kitchen and start down the stairs into the basement. Just as I'm about to begin my descent, my left hand firmly on the railing, I turn to someone

next to me and say, “As long as I’m able to survive, I can do this. I have to be here for my sons. My sons need me. I have to make it out alive for my sons...”

July~

It was a night in mid-July 2005 around 2 a.m. when I woke up to use the bathroom. I have to admit, it was a pleasant surprise to discover I had been sleeping so soundly. So many other nights that summer the stirrings of menopause would not allow for that kind of luxury, wet pajamas and damp sheets waking me often into a chilly sweat. Truth be told, there had been countless other nights throughout my life when insomnia had me in such a tight grasp it was a struggle to get even an hour of sleep. Ah, but this night was different. This night, I was sleeping.

But no sooner had I opened my eyes in those wee hours of that July night than I could sense I wasn't going to be going back to sleep anytime soon—some sort of shakiness inside... nervousness...something. Throwing off the covers, I hurried into the bathroom when, all of a sudden, I could feel my whole body beginning to shake: my arms, my legs, even my feet—my mind filling with wild and senseless fear. That's when the worst of it started.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Out of nowhere, my heart began pounding so hard and so fast that I could feel it in nearly every cell of my body. Not knowing what to do, I ran out into the kitchen.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

What was happening? Was I having a heart attack? Was my heart about to explode? Since I'd already had plenty of panic attacks over the years, I knew right away that this was something much, much different. It was far more frantic than anything I'd experienced before, far more frantic and far more insistent.

Bam! Bam! Bam! BAM!

Something was wrong. Something was definitely wrong and getting worse with each terrifying “BAM” I could feel inside my chest. Alone with only my two fifteen year-old sons asleep in the house, I did something I never would have dreamed of doing before—I picked up the phone and dialed. In the middle of the night, the voice at the other end was a true comfort.

“911. What is the nature of your emergency?”

My mind racing, my hands shaking so violently I could hardly hold a glass of water, I tried to relate to the dispatcher the nature of my emergency, an emergency I could neither identify nor explain.

“M...m...my heart is pounding. A...a...and my hands are shaking...my whole body is shaking. I think it must be something I ate...the meat...something.”

“Do you want us to send an ambulance?” the dispatcher asked.

I hesitated, stalled, all the while struggling to figure out what I should do next.

What do I do? I thought, clinging to the phone. *My heart is beating so fast! What do I do?*

Not wanting to frighten my sons with ambulances and late-night sirens, I finally decided not to have the paramedics come and, instead, to try and tough it out alone. With a husband who spent much of his time traveling for business, I was used to toughing things out alone and figured, once I was able to pull myself together, I’d be able to manage this as well.

So, after gathering all the consolation I could from the dispatcher, I took a deep, shaky breath and reluctantly hung up the phone. By this time, the pounding in my chest had begun to slow into a somewhat more familiar pulse and although the shaking was still there, that too seemed to be subsiding.

Still dazed, I crawled back into bed, armed with a glass of water and high hopes that the episode had passed. Unfortunately, these hopes were all too quickly dashed as the instant I tried to lie down, the instant I tried to lay my head on the pillow so I could get some rest, my body became filled with feelings of such haunting agitation, I couldn't lay still. Again and again, I changed my position, and, again and again, the agitation, the intense restlessness returned. It was as if an explosion had occurred inside me and now all the little pieces of debris were floating around inside my body, looking for a place to land or be released. Finally, after stacking enough pillows under my head to make my body more vertical than horizontal, I curled up into the tightest fetal position I could, closed my eyes, and did my best to go back to sleep, only managing to doze off for a few minutes before the buzz of the alarm told me it was morning.

Never before that night would I have thought that menopause, or more specifically perimenopause (the eight or so years before a woman's menstrual cycles cease) could bring on such intense bodily symptoms. Actually, what I believed about The Change was that I'd simply sweat a few times, change my pj's once or twice, and then be done with the whole process. Since I'd been having some pretty intense hot flashes and night sweats in the weeks before my episode, however, I couldn't help but wonder if the two events could be related. Ever the consummate researcher, the next day I sat down at my computer, logged onto the internet and typed the words "perimenopause and night panic" into the search engine. I don't think I really expected to find anything but figured a few minutes of web surfing was worth the effort of trying to put my mind and body at ease. I could hardly believe my eyes when, with one small click of the mouse, not just one but several websites came up, one that astounded me. On the website, I

discovered pages and pages of posts where dozens of other midlife women were writing about their experiences with perimenopausal night terror and panic, about their middle-of-the-night trips to the emergency room and the various dosages of Xanax many of them needed to get through the night.

Oh, my gosh, I thought. If it's only perimenopause, I'll be fine. I'll be ready for it the next time and won't let it throw me off kilter so much.

I was so relieved to learn that my middle-of-the-night panic was nothing more than a normal symptom of perimenopause that I even started joking about it later that afternoon with my sons.

“Hey, could you imagine someone a little more high strung like your aunt having one of these episodes?” I chuckled. “She’d be running around the house in a panic screaming, ‘Oh, my God! Oh, my God!’”

Unfortunately, that hilarious moment of heckling didn’t last long. A few days later, I was on my way home after dropping my sons off at drama camp. It was a warm, sunny day so I had the car windows open and was actually whistling, certain I had this whole perimenopause thing under control. All in all, I was feeling quite pleased with myself when, all of a sudden—

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Determined not to panic this time, I held tight to the steering wheel and pulled into a nearby diner.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Relax, I thought. It's only perimenopause!

Hands shaking and mind reeling, I reached into my purse, took out my cell phone and slipped it into the cup holder, just in case I did need to call the paramedics.

Bam! Bam! Bam! BAM!

Come on, Lynda...steady now! Breathe...Breathe!

But no matter how hard I tried to relax, no matter how hard I tried to calm myself down with some of the relaxation techniques I'd learned in my yoga training, the pounding would not let up, the pounding or the panic. As I sat there, wondering what to do next, deep inside I could feel wave after wave of monstrous terror welling up from some far away time and place, each one threatening to wash me away in the undertow.

Should I call the hospital? I wondered, my hand already on the cell phone. *Oh, my God! Oh, my God!*