

psyche that uses this number—no different from 39 or 41 except in its cadence—to mark a milestone. “Hey, I turned 40. Let’s go on a trek to the Himalayas.” Or throw a party. Or even fly 40 close friends for a birthday bash by the pyramids.

Forty is the age when the ferocious ambition of youth eases out into relaxed acceptance; when the treadmill of life slows down. Forty is when your relatives stop harassing you with questions about the next step—college, job, marriage, baby. Forty is when you have figured out who you are; or should have. Turning 40 is beautiful, because it liberates you from societal and familial pressure. You stop being defined by others and instead, choose to define yourself.

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Some of us run a marathon or climb a mountain to defy the inevitable creep of age. We raft down the Ganga or go bungee jumping, just to prove to ourselves that we can; that we still have it in us. Some of us take trips with girlfriends to bond at a molecular level. We go to Chiva Som, Machu Picchu or Milan to get massages, marvel at history or merely shop. Some of us try Botox for the first time, to see what it does and how it feels. We go for medical check-ups because our mothers nag us to. We discover a thyroid issue perhaps, a fibroid, an iron deficiency. “Forty is when you understand the importance of health, vitamin D and its great relationship with calcium,” chuckles Urvashi.

(I might as well tell you now. I will be referring to all the women I quote in this article by their first names—their given names sans the appendage from their father or spouse. At 40, let’s say they’ve earned it.)

Forty is when we realise that the fountain of youth we took so much for granted during our cigarette-smoking, partying days might dry out. We heed the clarion call of advertisements for anti-ageing creams. La Prairie, Sisley and Crème de la Mer seem suddenly

appealing. We experiment with hair dyes, wrinkle removers, massage oils, microdermabrasion, derma rolling and Fraxel. We buy ourselves things that we have long coveted, whether it’s an Hermès Jypsiere bag, Anne Fontaine shirt, Yves Saint Laurent Cabas Chyc tote or Prada patent-leather sling-backs. We invest in an Audemars Piguet Millenary 4101 because, well, because we can; because we are worth it; because we have earned it.

Kalpna Mehra Penfold took photos of herself in the buff when she turned 40. Recently separated, she moved from London to Delhi with her three cats; and got semi-permanent make-up tattooed by a Lebanese woman who used to work for Bobbi Brown. Now her eyes have black liner above and

below. Her lips are coloured a light pink. “I wake up looking pretty every morning,” she laughs mischievously. This is a woman who attended a friend’s 30th birthday party wearing a pink wig, “just to show her how to age disgracefully.”

For her portraits, Kalpna chose a photographer whose work she really admired. She loved how he used light and knew that he would create a “natural and safe environment” for her. “I knew that he wouldn’t sexualise me or turn me into someone I wasn’t. I didn’t want to pretty-fy myself,” says Kalpna. “I am not skinny. I don’t have the body that today’s media glorifies. I am very voluptuous and have no problem with that. I wanted a record of how I look now. I didn’t want to look back on the photos and not recognise myself.”

They worked together: artist and subject. Beautiful photographs emerged, some black-and-white and others in colour: images of Kalpna with a dupatta, talking on the telephone, petting the neighbour’s dog. “It is a record of what I do during the day, except that I had no clothes on,” she laughs.

For Kalpna, as for many of us, the catalyst was a routine medical check-

up, when she discovered “lots of nig-gles”, as she calls them. “I had the start of old people’s illnesses, and mentally I was 16.” The photographs are a reminder of a time “when everything worked, when all was well with my body.” She plans to take another set when she turns 50. This fear—of ageing, of death—hits us all at different times, even those who live by anthropologist Ashley Montagu’s dictum: “The idea is to die young as late as possible.”

If death is one end of the spectrum, making meaning out of life is another: coming to terms with who we are, shrugging away external expectations, following our bliss. Vijaya Pastala had her son, Yohan, at 39 and discovered that she wanted a better work-life balance. She started Under The Mango Tree, which links rural beekeepers with urban consumers, and produces some amazing honey. One Kashmiri woman went to Saudi Arabia to undertake the Hajj pilgrimage quietly, without telling anyone. Another quit a high-paying, high-flying job with McKinsey to figure out if she wanted to start an NGO. Yet another did the opposite—she went to the White House.

Sonal Shah got inducted into Barack Obama’s transition team when she was 40. An eminent economist, Sonal had worked at Goldman Sachs, and was leading Google’s global development efforts when the Obama campaign called her in. “It was an amazing experience to work for a president who wanted to do the right thing,” she says. Sonal worked through the Obama-Biden transition, set up the Office for Social Innovation and Civic Participation in the White House, and became its first head. Three years later, she walked away. She wanted to reflect on her life and career. She came to India, where she and her two siblings—Roopal and Anand—had set up Indicorps, a fellowship programme for Indian-Americans who want to live and work in the social sector of India for a year. “I don’t have to prove myself any more,” she says. “In your twenties, you work out all your insecurities, and in your forties, you accept who you are.”

I met Sonal, who is single, for dinner when she had just returned from

SVYASA, a yoga retreat outside Bangalore. Clad in a simple cotton salwar-kameez, she looked like Madhuri Dixit. She has friends in the government and corporate worlds, including key people in Hillary Clinton’s staff. If Hillary decides to run for president, Sonal could get tapped for a position in her administration. “It would be great to see a woman in the White House,” says Sonal. “She is an incredible leader and has been an amazing secretary of state.” But for now, Sonal wants to work “in the space between the public, private and non-profit.”

This in-between space is a magnet for many of us because it plays to the natural talents of women, as anthropologist Helen Fisher points out in her book, *The First Sex*. Tomorrow belongs to the women, she asserts, pointing to our skills in communication, nurturing and being comfortable with ambiguity. All these aspects, she says, are great strengths in fields like education, medicine, media and philanthropy, among others.

Some develop new skills; others follow their heart. Nandini Kamath started taking Bharatanatyam lessons at 40 and gave her Arangetram eight years later. She joined a music group, Sunaad, where she performs and choreographs. Lots of women I know become yoga teachers, or just teachers. Divorce rates climb in the forties, both for men and women. We walk away from loveless marriages to find happiness elsewhere or by ourselves. Some of us officially eschew the institution altogether.

Priya Haji decided to have a baby on her own—without marriage, spouse or even boyfriend. The San Francisco-based serial entrepreneur was a born do-gooder thanks to a Gandhian grandmother and a doctor father. Priya graduated from Stanford, and started and sold a company to eBay. Then she turned 40 and realised that she really wanted to have a child. “In the conventional world, especially for Indians, as an unmarried woman, that would not be possible. But in the modern world of science it was a clear path, using a donor bank and IVF.”

Priya knows a few details about the sperm donor—that he is a 6ft2in Punjabi—but not his identity. There are

records for her son, Zen, to discover his biological father if he wants to. But for now, Priya, with the help of a Nepali nanny, is a working mother. Last year, as she was pregnant, she also started another company, SaveUp. She told six investors that she planned to have a baby alone and take time off to be a mother. “Not one of them walked away,” she says in delight. Instead, they gave her \$2 million in funding. Priya also has a group of friends and family who meet regularly for dinner with wine and roses and support for her as she raises little Zen.

It isn’t just in Silicon Valley, though. Indian adoption agencies report a spike in the number of couples wanting to adopt babies as they near 40. One Delhi-based woman I know decided to have two babies using two different surrogates. After years of telling her friends that she and her husband were happy as a childless couple, she turned 40 and all façades dropped. She wanted kids, desperately. Today, she has two.

As for me, I wish I could tell you that I underwent something life-changing when I turned 40. I started writing a weekly column, something I had never done before. I embraced my natural frugality instead of trying to overcome it; became comfortable in my own skin; tried coloured contact lenses; chose not to blow-dry my curly hair. Most of all, I gained that elusive quality we call wisdom. It truly does come with age. Gratitude, for instance, doesn’t come easy when you are 21 and feel entitled. It is only after frustration and failure that you value friendships. When we are first faced with spiteful colleagues, the instinct is to hit back, to play hardball. When faced with malicious ‘friends’ or a tyrannical boss, many of us spend sleepless nights feeling bitter and betrayed. It is only later that you take a deep breath, exhale, and decide to forgive them their sins; and then realise how light you feel. In forgiving them, you free yourself. This is wisdom. It only took me 40 years, and I am not there yet. But this is my time, ladies; *our* time. Seize the day. Seize the decade. ■



FEARLESS FORTIES

Five women who have glided so gracefully through this decade, we just can’t help loving them

JK Rowling, 47

The ultimate broke-to-billionaire story—we love the creator of Harry Potter for making us believe in magic again.



Kiran Desai, 40

The Booker-winner put the spotlight back squarely on Indian literary talent.



Sanjana Kapoor, 45

After heading Prithvi theatre for 19 years, the ‘drama queen’ has a new passion: Junoon, for touring theatre.



Tina Fey, 42

She had us at *Mean Girls*; then *30 Rock* proved that she may be the funniest woman alive.



Jennifer Aniston, 43

That impossibly shiny hair, that impossibly toned body. We still can’t believe Rachel is all grown up.