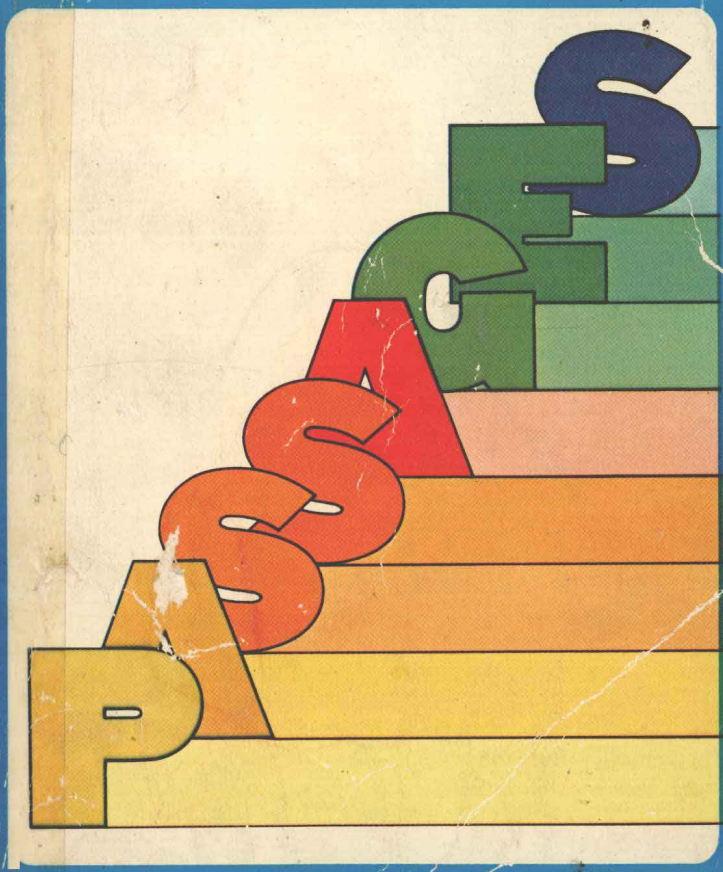
#1 FROM COAST TO COAST



PREDICTABLE CRISES OF ADULT LIFE

BY GAIL SHEEHY

PASSAGES

Predictable Crises of Adult Life

GAIL SHEEHY

This low-priced Bantam Book has been completely reset in a type face designed for easy reading, and was printed from new plates. It contains the complete text of the original hard-cover edition.
NOT ONE WORD AS BEEN OMITTED.

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To my mother and my father

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New York, N.Y. —GAIL SHEEHY
February 1976

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What web is this
Of will be, is, and was?
—JORGE LUIS BORGES

1

MADNESS AND METHOD

Without warning, in the middle of my thirties, I had a breakdown of nerve. It never occurred to me that while winging along in my happiest and most productive stage, all of a sudden simply staying afloat would require a massive exertion of will. Or of some power greater than will.

I was talking to a young boy in Northern Ireland where I was on assignment for a magazine when a bullet blew his face off. That was how fast it all changed. We were standing side by side in the sun, relaxed and triumphant after a civil rights march by the Catholics of Derry. We had been met by soldiers at the barricade; we had vomited tear gas and dragged those dented by rubber bullets back to safety. Now we were surveying the crowd from a balcony.

"How do the paratroopers fire those gas canisters so far?" I asked.

"See them jammin' their rifle butts against the ground?" the boy was saying when the steel slug tore into his mouth and ripped up the bridge of his nose and left of his face nothing but ground bone meal.

"My God," I said dumbly, "they're real bullets." I tried to think how to put his face back together again.

Up to that moment in my life I thought everything could be mended.

Below the balcony, British armoured cars began to plow into the crowd. Paratroopers jackknifed out of them with high-velocity rifles. They sprayed us with steel.

The boy without a face fell on top of me. An older man, walloped on the back of the neck with a rifle butt, stumbled up the stairs and collapsed upon us. More dazed bodies pressed in until we were like a human caterpillar, inching on our bellies up the steps of the exposed outdoor staircase.

"Can't we get into somebody's house!" I shouted. We crawled up eight floors but all the doors to the flats were bolted. Someone would have to crawl out on the balcony in open fire to bang on the nearest door. Another boy howled from below: "Jesus, I'm hit!" His voice propelled me across the balcony, trembling but still insulated by some soft-walled childhood sac that I thought provided for my own indestructibility. A moment later, a bullet passed a few feet in front of my nose. I hurled myself against the nearest door and we were all taken in.

The closets of the flat were already filled with mothers and their clinging children. For nearly an hour the bullets kept coming. From the window I saw three boys rise from behind a barricade to make a run for it. They were cut down like dummies in a shooting gallery. So was the priest who followed them, waving a white handkerchief, and the old man who bent to say a prayer over them. A wounded man we had dragged upstairs asked if anyone had seen his younger brother. "Shot dead," was the report.

Something like this had happened to my own brother in Vietnam. But the funeral took place in the bland Connecticut countryside, and I was a few years younger. So neatly had the honor guard tricornered the victim's flag, it looked like a souvenir sofa pillow. People had patted my hands and said, "We know how

you must feel." It made me think of the strangers who were always confiding in me that they were scheduled for surgery or "taking it easy" after a heart attack. All I had for their pain were the same words: "I know how you must feel." I had known nothing of the sort.

After the surprise massacre, I was one among trapped thousands cringing in the paper-walled bungalows of the Catholic ghetto. All exits from the city were sealed. Waiting was the only occupation. Waiting for the British army to perform a house-to-house search.

"What will you do if the soldiers come in here firing?" I asked the old woman who was harboring me.

"Lie on me stomach!" she said.

Another woman was using the telephone to confirm the names of the dead. Once upon a time I was a Protestant of strong faith; I tried to pray. But that silly game of childhood kept running through my mind . . . *if you had one wish in the whole world* . . . I decided to call my love. He would say the magic words to make the danger go away.

"Hi! How are you?" His voice was absurdly breezy; he was in bed in New York.

"I'm alive."

"Good, how's the story coming?"

"I almost wasn't alive. Thirteen people were murdered here today."

"Hold on. CBS News is talking about Londonderry right now—"

"It's called Bloody Sunday."

"Can you speak up?"

"It's not over. A mother of fourteen children was just run down by an armoured car."

"Now look, you don't have to get in the front lines. You're doing a story on Irish women, remember that. Just stick with the women and stay out of trouble. Okay, honey?"

From the moment I hung up on that nonconversation, my head went numb. My scalp shrank. Some dark switch was thrown, and a series of weights began to

roll across my brain like steel balls. I had squandered my one wish to be saved. The world was negligent. Thirteen could perish, or thirteen thousand, I could perish, and tomorrow it would all be beside the point.

As I joined the people lying on their stomachs, a powerful idea took hold: *No one is with me. No one can keep me safe. There is no one who won't ever leave me alone.*

I had a headache for a year.

When I flew home from Ireland, I couldn't write the story, could not confront the fact of my own mortality. In the end, I dragged out some words and made the deadline but at an ugly price. My short temper lengthened into diatribes against the people closest to me, driving away the only sources of support who might have helped me fight my demons. I broke off with the man who had been sharing my life for four years, fired my secretary, lost my housekeeper, and found myself alone with my daughter Maura, marking time.

As spring came, I hardly knew myself. The rootlessness that had been such a joy in my early thirties, allowing me to burst the ropes of old roles, to be reckless and selfish and focused on stretching my newfound dream, to roam the world on assignments and then to stay up all night typing on caffeine and nicotine—all at once that didn't work anymore.

Some intruder shook me by the psyche and shouted: *Take stock! Half your life has been spent. What about the part of you that wants a home and talks about a second child?* Before I could answer, the intruder pointed to something else I had postponed: *What about the side of you that wants to contribute to the world? Words, books, demonstrations, donations —is this enough? You have been a performer, not a full participant. And now you are* 35.

To be confronted for the first time with the arithmetic of life was, quite simply, terrifying.

It is unusual to find yourself in the middle of a

shooting war, but many of life's accidents can have a similar effect. You play tennis twice a week with a dynamic 38-year-old businessman. In the locker room a silent clot throttles an artery and before he can call for help, a large part of his heart muscle has been strangled. His attack touches his wife, his business associates, and all his friends of a similar age, including you.

Or a distant phone call notifies you that your father or mother has been hospitalized. You carry with you to the bedside a picture of the dynamo you last saw, clearing land or dashing off to the League of Women Voters. In the hospital you see that this dynamo has passed, all at once and incontrovertibly, into the twilight of ill health and helplessness.

As we reach midlife in the middle thirties or early forties, we become susceptible to the idea of our own perishability. If an accident that interrupts our life occurs at this time, our fears of mortality are heightened. We are not prepared for the idea that time can run out on us, or for the startling truth that if we don't hurry to pursue our own definition of a meaningful existence, life can become a repetition of trivial maintenance duties. Nor are we anticipating a major upheaval of the roles and rules that may have comfortably defined us in the first half of life, but that must be reordered around a core of strongly felt personal values in the second.

In normal circumstances, without the blow of a life accident, these issues affiliated with midlife are revealed over a period of years. We have time to adjust. But when they are thrust on us all at once, we cannot immediately accept them. The downside of life comes too hard and fast to incorporate.

In my case, the unanticipated brush with death in Ireland brought the underlying issues of midlife forward in full force.

If I tell you about the week, six months later, if I

report the observable facts—while dashing out the door to catch a plane to Florida to cover the Democratic National Convention, a healthy, divorced career mother finds one of her pet lovebirds dead and bursts into uncontrollable tears—you might say, "This woman was cracking up." Which is precisely what I began to think.

I took the aisle seat in the tail of the plane so that when we crashed, I would be the last one to see the ground.

Flying had always been a joy to me. Plucky one that I was at 30, I had taken to parachuting out of bush planes for sport. It was different now. Whenever I went near a plane I saw a balcony in Northern Ireland. In six months the fear of airplanes had blossomed into a phobia. Every news photo of a crash drew my attention. I would study the pictures in morbid detail. The planes seemed to split at the front; I made it a rule to sit in the tail. From the safety of the entrance canopy I would call in to the pilot, "Have you had experience with instrument landings?" By now I had no shame.

I did have one comfort. The upsets of the first half of my 35th year were vaguely classifiable. I could attach the anxiety to real events. My flight phobia fell under the convenient umbrella of conversion reactions (the process by which a repressed psychic event is converted into another symptom). The sense of uprootedness could be explained by the fact that I'd had four different addresses in the previous two years. All my life-support systems were in flux.

By that July, however, I had put on the brakes. Things appeared to have quieted down. On the contrary, very little was going on near the surface, but no less than everything was shifting below it.

An outburst of weeping over a dead lovebird was the signal. What was wrong with me that I couldn't even keep a lovebird alive? Somehow, I connected this loss to the unexpected departure of my housekeeper.