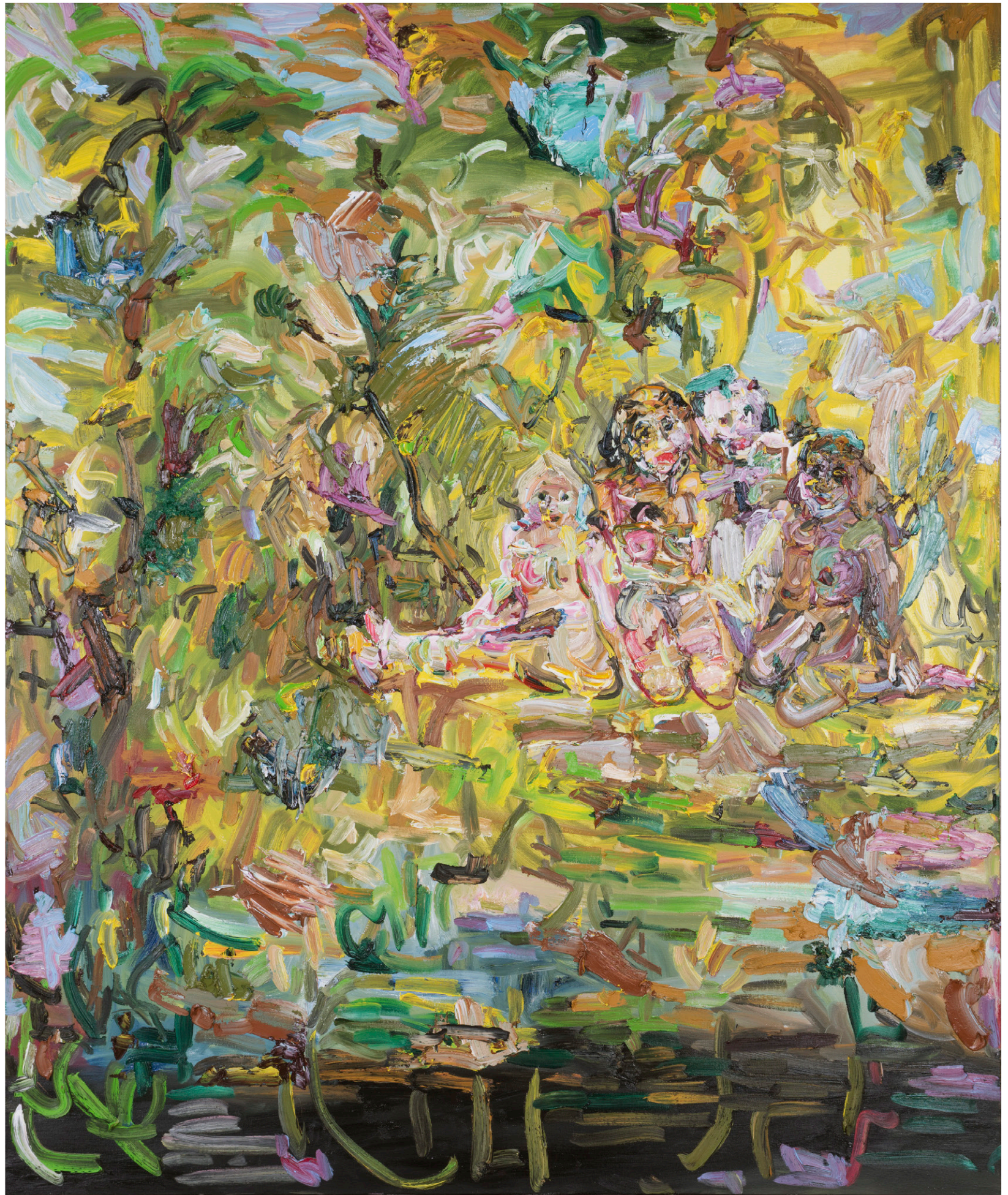


geTtiNg ChAngEd

MENOPAUSE USED TO BE THAT SCARY, WEIRD, HOT-FLASH TIME OF LIFE THAT HAPPENED TO OUR AUNTS AND THAT GRUMPY WOMAN NEXT DOOR. BUT THANKS TO NEW TREATMENTS, NEW PRODUCTS, AND A NEW ATTITUDE, THE TIME OF LIFE KNOWN AS "THE CHANGE" IS GETTING A MUCH-NEEDED REBRANDING. **BY MEIRAV DEVASH**



When freshly single 50-something Candace Bushnell signed up for Tinder (and wrote about it in her new book, Is There Still Sex in the City?), men her own age didn't really swipe right.

Firmly in midlife, even the real-life Carrie Bradshaw—patron saint of cosmos, new boyfriends, and Manolo Blahniks—had tumbleweeds rolling through her inbox. It's hardly an unfamiliar narrative for women in our culture: With your first period, you become a sexual being, then maybe kids, maybe a messy divorce, until, inevitably, hot flashes, dry vagina, and...nothing. At this point—the menopause point—you become invisible. If you're lucky, you reemerge as an old lady living in Miami with three roommates who love cheesecake and everyone's wearing a caftan.

Or so the horror story goes.

Bushnell doesn't buy into this outdated narrative. When she recalibrated her Tinder settings to 22- to 38-year-olds instead of the baby boomers that automatically popped up, she was deluged with potential matches. Men her own age might not be interested, but millennials—who grew up with the sexual trope of seductive older women—are definitely DTF. Hot moms are such a popular fantasy that “MILF” and “stepmom” have been the #3 and #4 searches on pornhub.com for

two years running, proof that the sexiest fantasies, the ones driven by all those hormones, hardly require perky, youthful bodies.

Menopause is getting its glow-up—and it's about damn time. First, the technicalities: To be menopausal, you need to miss your period for a full year in the absence of other causes. The average age is 51, but the years before menopause are where the action begins. Hot flashes, night sweats, and irregular periods are signs that your ovaries are sputtering out less estrogen. Called perimenopause, this transition can begin as early as your 30s. This stage of life is so much more than vaginal dryness and a dying libido, but we've avoided the conversation because if we don't talk about it, it won't happen, right? Obviously not. Now women like Bushnell and Darcey Steinke, the author of *Flash Count Diary: Menopause and the Vindication of Natural Life*, are tapping into what was once unthinkable: the idea that there is another version of midlife—and you access it with real talk, honest reflection, a sense of adventure, and maybe the hottest sex of your life.

Until now, there's been a particular mélange of disinterest (old ladies, zzz), distrust (she's going to do something crazy!), and disgust (expired vaginas) reserved for women of a

certain age that has made talking about this stuff uncomfortable, to say the least. “We live in a patriarchy. Women are mostly valued for their sexuality, their fertility, and their mothering skills, so once your fertility wanes, you seem less valuable, and that can make you really fearful,” says Steinke, whose own experience with “the change” was so confounding that she was driven to write a book about it. To her and many of us, it comes down to self-worth. Says Bushnell, “When society tells you that you're no longer valuable, you have to find your own sense of value.” And that's easier to do once you start framing menopause as an opportunity, not only a loss. Women are freed from the constraints of contraception and the menstrual cycle's hormonal roller coaster, which is why many find a new kind of clarity. “Ultimately it's a change in your brain,” says Bushnell. “It's a time when many women feel like they can say ‘fuck you’ [to society]... and learn to be your own person.”

This can transform menopause into a period of radical self- and sexual discovery, where procreation is off the table and everything that happens under the sheets is entirely for pleasure. Sure, the drop in estrogen will sap vaginal moisture, but that's nothing a little lube can't fix. (After an NPR interview about midlife sexuality, a social media commenter nailed it, Steinke says, joking that postmenopausal sex sounds a lot like gay sex: lots of lube and conversation.)

Loss of desire can happen too, though it's hardly inevitable. There's no female equivalent of Viagra yet, but there are now two FDA-approved drugs designed to boost libido: Addyi (flibanserin), a once-a-day pill, and Vyleesi (bremelanotide), an injection you self-administer 45 minutes before sex. Neither one really performs well when compared to a placebo, plus the potential side effects are the opposite of arousing. When Addyi interacts with the most common aphrodisiac, alcohol, it can lead to decreased blood pressure, dizziness, and fainting. Vyleesi's most common side effects are nausea and vomiting. But the fact that time and research are being devoted to the study of

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female arousal and pleasure is reason enough to stand up and applaud.

Nonetheless, even when interest in penetrative sex may dip, the menu of sensual options can actually expand. “It’s not what you do; it’s how you do it that’s important,” Bushnell says. “When people are having good sex, they’re having good sex.” That doesn’t always mean the penis goes in the vagina. Sometimes penises are nowhere to be found.

Consider ostensibly straight women who spend decades married to a man, raise a family, and then find themselves unexpectedly falling in love with another woman later in life. It’s not as rare as you’d think, and they’re not necessarily closet cases. Sexual proclivities may actually switch back and forth multiple times during different life stages, says Lisa Diamond, a professor of psychology and gender studies at the University of Utah, who has studied sexual fluidity in women for over two decades. “It seems that the life experiences, confidence, and self-assurance that come with age play a huge role in women’s willingness to acknowledge and act on their own capacity for expanded erotic opportunities,” Diamond says.

Tamryn Juris*, 44, for example, had always considered herself straight. But when her second mar-

riage ended, she found herself in the arms of a colleague from work named Damian*—a trans man. “If I was younger, I might be thinking about family planning, but I’m past that point in my life,” says Juris, who is raising her daughter with her new partner. “I never enjoyed sex with cis-gender men the same way my friends seemed to, so I very much welcome the concept that there are many different ways to have sex.”

Upon turning 40, Annette Benedetti, now 45, expanded her marriage into an open relationship. “The old expectations were suddenly stripped away, and that’s when I started exploring dating women,” she says. “Some people say women become invisible after 40, and maybe that’s true, but I felt liberated.” She started a meetup group for bisexual women in her city and attracted over 100 members in less than a week. Now the group has almost 400 members, and Benedetti has a fulfilling marriage and a supportive tribe of open-minded friends (and occasional lovers). Sheryl Wilson, 41, escaped her dead bedroom when she met her girlfriend. “I lost myself once my kids were born, and I was struggling in my marriage. My ex-husband and I weren’t intimate very often, and I didn’t feel good about myself,” she says. “My new relationship was the biggest breath of fresh air. I never felt more alive or more desired. I’m balancing being a good mom with my own happiness. I never thought that could be possible.”

One of the many myths of menopause is that it renders women irrelevant, undesirable. The reality is there are plenty of smoking hot, wholly engaged women in their 50s and beyond. Salma Hayek is 53. Sharon Stone is 61. Susan Sarandon is 73. When Steinke searched the cultural vacuum for menopausal role models, she had to look in unexpected places, like *The Testosterone Files* by Max Wolf Valerio, in which he writes about his move from female to male as an adventure. “He was going into this new hormonal world. How would he feel? How would his body feel? There was struggle, and it was weird, but it was also exciting,” Steinke says. “That’s the way I felt about my own menopause!” (She also found a postmenopausal leader called J2, aka Granny, a matriarchal orca who lived to be over 100 years old and used her wisdom to guide her pod and nurture their calves.)

And consider this: Most mammals don’t have postreproductive lives. Menopause is a once-in-a-lifetime gift from nature and an uncharted journey. Just we humans and a few types of whales live more than 25 percent of their adult years after fertility ends. It’s an open-ended script that’s up to each of us to write.

ROOM FOR CHANGE

DISPATCHES FROM THE
OTHER SIDE OF MENOPAUSE.

BY VALERIE MONROE

Like every woman my age (69), I’ve been through menopause. Also, like almost every woman who’s been through menopause, I’m intensely, acutely, wildly happy to be alive—when I’m not wishing I were dead. (All right, not actually wishing I were dead. But wishing it the way you might if you’d just had a great blowout and a pigeon shat on your head.)

I can tell by the way you’re looking at me—eager, hopeful, full of irrepressible, early-midlife energy—that you want me to tell you menopause is not a horror show. And I want to tell you menopause is not a horror show. But I’ve also made a commitment to be honest with you, my younger sisters. So the truth is, menopause can be a little bit of a horror

show, or a lot, or not at all. I mean it’s called “the change,” for God’s sake. You might have the kind of hot flashes that leave you looking like you swam the English Channel in your Proenza Schouler pantsuit. Or the kind that involve no sweating but the feeling for exactly 30 seconds that you were just run over by a garbage truck. If you have my brand of menopause, you might have the kind of mood swings that leave you sobbing when your cleaning woman switches her day. Or the kind that require you to angrily power walk 10 miles up to the George Washington Bridge and back in a hurricane (me again).

How menopause affects you depends partially on genetics, so the intensity of your symptoms is to some degree predetermined. What’s not predetermined is how you cope with them. And I believe you’re better equipped to cope when you’re older than when you’re an 11-year-old suddenly having terrible stomach cramps and (whaaat????) bleeding into your

Help Is on the Way



JOYLUX VFIT INTIMATE WELLNESS DEVICE.

Yes, it vibrates, but this doohickey also uses red LED lights and sonic vibes to stimulate blood flow. Clinical research shows improved pelvic muscle strength, more natural lube and vaginal sensation, and fewer urinary symptoms. (\$495, with \$100 off using code ALLURE through November; getvfit.com)



EMEPELLE SKINCARE.

The serum is for morning; the rich cream is for night. Together they treat estrogen-deficient skin by tightening, plumping, and restoring radiance without the side effects of estrogen. These products rely on a potent blend of niacinamide, peptides, and the newly discovered ingredient Methyl Estradiol-propanoate, which nonhormonally fires up skin’s estrogen-receptor pathway. (\$175 and \$195; emepelle.com)



SEEME BEAUTY SMOOTH OUT RECOVERY SERUM.

Artichoke leaf extract is one of the stars of this new two-product skincare line (a serum, above, and an airy cream). Clinical studies show that the antioxidant is actually more powerful on estrogen-depleted skin than on younger complexions (in some cases, as effective as retinols at smoothing and firming). (\$55; seemebeauty.com)



PAUSE WELL-AGING COLLECTION.

A spray of Hot Flash Cooling Mist to the face and chest is like a peck on the cheek from Elsa, relieving the burning-from-the-inside misery. Collagen Boosting Moisturizer tightens facial contours and increases elasticity with a blend of vitamins, antioxidants, and peptides. Like a futuristic gua sha stone, the Fascia Stimulating Tool massages the face, neck, and chest to kick-start collagen-making fibroblasts. (\$192 for set; pausewellaging.com)



BONAFIDE RELIZEN.

This Swedish pollen pill is one of the few solutions that “actually has studies to suggest a good safety and efficacy profile for hot flashes,” says Dweck. (\$50, or \$35 with subscription; hellobonafide.com)

little flowered cotton underpants. Better equipped to cope than when you’ve just pushed nine pounds of human out of your vagina and your breasts are fountains of milk (or not) and you realize you’re legally required to keep that human alive.

What I’m saying is: Menopause is not very different from the other transitions you’ve already survived—and likely thrived after. Weird shit happens, and then it’s done. Sure, some of it lingers (a small percentage of women have hot flashes postmenopause). And yes, there is loss involved—loss of juiciness, agility, even friends.

Mostly, though, once you’ve made it through the transition, things start looking up. Not in a cheery, saccharine, “the sun will come out tomorrow” way, but in a more mature, authentic, “love what you have” way. Postmenopausal well-being has a rich, poignant, happy/melancholy quality. For one thing, we older women are pretty much free-range chicks, roaming the landscape unencumbered by the watchful, often predatory

gaze of men. (I really miss the gunning engine of desire. But I’m enjoying a more languorous, luxurious kind of intimacy than I knew in my youth.) After a lifetime of caring for other people, I now am the first person I ask about what to do next. (I do miss the quotidian demands of motherhood. But today I’m enjoying the fruits of my child-rearing labors, ripe with a delicious grandbaby.)

For all the adjustments, whatever the gains and losses, it’s the poignancy I cherish. It’s a poignancy you can’t appreciate until you’ve reached an age when you can fully understand what a gift it is to be alive. There’s no escaping that this is a last act, and I’d like it to be a long one, years before the lights dim and the curtain drops. But the playwright never gives away her plot. And so, now a long way from the thrilling promises of the overture, I’ve given myself over to the reprise. Because the music is still very beautiful, and honestly, I am still so delighted to be here.

COURTESY OF BRANDS (5)

*Name has been changed.