

# The Forty Thing

## Put Champagne On Ice

Elizabeth Howard

Dostoyevsky's anti-hero in *Notes From Underground* proclaims early in the novel that "an intelligent nineteenth century man must be, is morally bound to be, an essentially characterless creature. This is my conviction at the age of forty. . . . Living past forty is indecent, vulgar, immoral! Now answer me, sincerely, honestly, who lives past forty? I'll tell you who does: fools and scoundrels."

Dostoyevsky was 43 when he published *Notes From Underground* in 1864. While one might argue that these insights may have little to do with a woman turning forty in 1990, they are a reminder that it is a milestone. Psychologists, social scientists, theologians and artists have recognized that forty is the transition from youth to middle age: the time when, recognizing new parameters in one's physical limitations, individuals face their own mortality.

We are living in the decade that will be followed by the beginning of a new millennium. Through scientific research and technology our life spans are being extended and effective replacement parts are being

designed. We are in the midst of an information age when knowledge (much of it gained through experience and maturity) is a most important asset. Certainly the significance of turning forty is an old fashioned notion. Or is it? What is the perspective of a



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woman turning forty in 1990? Am I truly terrified, as a member of a society that reveres and celebrates youth? . . . In a culture that considers a lean, taut and wrinkle-free body

more important than wisdom and experience? Perhaps Dostoyevsky is correct? It is indecent to live past forty and we are fools if we think any differently!

If the paradigm of beauty is youth, our only hope is to package ourselves as being forever thirtysomething. Celebrate forty? Hardly. Don't let your husbands notice that you really are aging. Remind your colleagues that you're really trying to become a svelte new model. Admit to ourselves that we must move up one box in the age chart. Perhaps, our 40th birthday should be a clandestine affair spent in a clinic being reshaped and removing the accumulated rust. Liposuction, Retin A treatments, breast augmentation, a spartan, low-fat and alcohol-free diet.

Society emphasizes the birthdays

that celebrate our individuality and freedom. At sixteen, we are awarded with mobility and the freedom from being transported to and from events that are, by necessity, screened by parental discretion. At twenty-one, we are educated, we have started to earn economic independence and we even have a voice in government. Family, friends and colleagues are invited to the celebration. For women, there is a dark side, though: the countdown to thirty begins.

The calm one may experience as a single, professional woman in her late twenties is like the stillness before a hurricane. Achievement, after all, only counts for so much. A husband and two children consistently provide the keys to the kingdom. My mother's gasp of relief was audible across the Atlantic

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# Woman

runs out for some people in their 20s and 30s. And, if it is true that we have lost the "healthy glow of youth," haven't we gained a stance that reflects inner confidence and accomplishment? Replaced by younger women? I hope so! We have held on too long and lost too much ground in the business world by not letting go. And, if men want to spend their retirement years bringing up new babies and attending P.T. A. meetings, that's their prerogative. I intend to be trekking in Nepal and farming in Africa.

I think Dostoyevsky was correct and I must be a scoundrel. Who knew what life was about at 16? Twenty-one is absolutely terrifying. Support yourself in a Village garret writing poetry. Who will pay the telephone bill and buy the cottage cheese? Marriage at 34 is confusing even for a normal soul.

Put the champagne on ice. I intend to celebrate my 40th birthday with an indecent, extravagant, perhaps even vulgar celebration. And if necessary the next morning, I'll start wondering about how I will feel at 50 — in the year 2000. ♦

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Ocean when I called her from a pay telephone in London to tell her I was engaged. At 34, I made it in just under the wire!

So, I have been wondering how 40 would feel since we toasted the new year with a vintage bottle of Dom Perignon. How will my body react? And my mind? And my under 30-year-old employees? At least they are too young to remember the concepts and politics behind not trusting anyone over 30! What is

♦ *"Of course time is running out. Yet, it runs out for some people in their 20s and 30s."* ♦

bothering me, it seems, is that I feel OK.

The psychologists are right. Forty is the convergence of wisdom and reality. It is the point at which the beliefs we have been weaned on either work in concert or clash with reality. When the truth becomes clear about love, achievement and expectations. We stand exposed with no place to hide. What freedom! What opportunity!

Of course time is running out. Yet, it