

She Does Everything. What Happens When She Stops?

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Kate Winslet as Mare in Mare of Easttown: the woman who learnt to repeatedly subjugate her own needs to finally discover that no is also a complete sentence

Let's All Try Putting Ourselves First

You are the one who remembers everything, organises everyone and answers every call. Helen Russell's forthcoming novel *Laura Clark Is Away from Her Desk* is about a woman who finally says enough. Here she explores the collective shift among women who have started asking the same question: what would it actually feel like to stop? Last week I watched a friend let her phone ring out. She glanced at the screen, her boss, then turned it face down and continued her story. This shouldn't have felt momentous. It was, objectively, a missed call. But in that moment, it seemed huge, a line drawn in the sand after decades of being on call. This friend has a big job managing a team, with two teenagers at home and an ageing father to care for. "I'll call back in the morning," she said. Then, after a pause: "Or maybe I won't..." Wildly impressed and a little in awe, I raised a glass to her. But for [women in their forties and fifties](#), this kind of decision is becoming less of an anomaly and more of a collective shift, with more of us starting to ask: what happens if I just stop?

This question is at the centre of my new novel, [Laura Clark Is Away from Her Desk](#), in which an overwhelmed and under-appreciated mother, wife and manager disappears without warning, leaving colleagues, family and friends to cope without her. The

idea emerged from conversations with friends, decades of interviews with women just like my protagonist and [research](#) showing that women are still doing 30% more housework than men, 50% more unpaid care and the bulk of the emotional labour at work.

The invisibility of our labour is part of the problem. There are very few cultural references to depict the realities of this squished-from-all-angles stage. Imagine if Marmee from *Little Women* was also holding down a nine to five job and caring for elderly parents, at the bottom of her own to-do list. Or if Kate Winslet's beleaguered character from *Mare of Easttown* had even more things to worry about. Or Kate Foster from *Workin' Moms*, the modern always-on woman juggling career, childcare, marriage and household management, but without the professional acclaim. The real women I see around me are entirely absent from pop culture.

For generations, being needed or on call was treated as evidence of competence and kindness. And sometimes it is. But often it is habit. We are socialised to be helpful and taught to override our needs, resulting in exhaustion, resentment and outrage, the three horsewomen of my midlife apocalypse.

Reversing this conditioning can feel especially challenging because society, culture and even our language has not caught up. We have terms for stepping back, burnout or quiet quitting, but these imply depletion or disengagement. What is happening here is neither. Many women are facing a reckoning.

"I see this in my clients every day," says Dr Julie Hannan, Chartered member of the British Psychological Society and author of [The Midlife Crisis Handbook](#). "Highly capable women who've spent decades holding families together, caring for others, building careers, and managing homes, become so focused on others that they've neglected their own desires and wishes." Julie experienced this firsthand. "I got divorced in my early 40s after being in relationships off and on since I was 17. It hit me hard." Then her [children left home](#).

"People use the term midlife crisis but this is too dismissive: it's an existential crisis." Women in midlife are often at the height of their wisdom, competence and emotional intelligence but still feel disconnected from themselves. "We don't know who we want to be," says Julie, who channelled her own reckoning into retraining as a psychologist. "We grow up with a blueprint. We follow societal rules and ask what the world wants from us, which for women is often organised around relationships, motherhood, attractiveness, or caring for others." Psychologists call these introjects, beliefs we accept without questioning. But in midlife we question everything.

Previous generations had fewer choices, more clearly defined roles and could become unavailable accidentally. A missed call was a missed call. The rise of

smartphones, instant messaging and workplace cultures that blur the line between professional and personal time mean reachability has become the default condition.

If we have children today, we probably had them later than our mothers did. When my mum was the age I am now, I had left home and was working in London. But I am still on primary school pickup. My peers and I were sold the lie that we could have it all, at least not at the same time. Now we are realising that time, energy and attention are finite resources. We are experiencing in real time the costs of being endlessly available. For me, this manifests in insomnia, so desperate am I for time to myself that my brain decides this should be at 3am. One friend gets migraines. Another, back pain. [Hormonal changes](#) reduce our capacity to simply push through. HRT may help, but we still need boundaries.

"This is the age when women wonder, do I still have to live like this?" says Julie. Many friends are reflecting on the urge to feel needed or chosen, personally, professionally and romantically, that drove us in our twenties and thirties. "We question the assumption that being permanently available is a virtue. We need to ask: what parts of life were built on someone else's vision of success? What did I absorb growing up about being a good woman, daughter, partner, or mother? Do these still serve me? Or are they draining me?" We can start paying attention to what gives us energy and what takes it away. Then practise tolerating the discomfort of disappointing others and stop waiting for permission. It rarely arrives. "Change is uncomfortable," says Julie, "and there are plenty of people invested in us staying the same. But beyond that, there's often relief and a new vitality."

At work, this means no longer measuring our worth by productivity or presenteeism. My novel is dedicated to anyone who has ever received an email marked urgent at 5pm on a Friday. We will still do a good job, of course we will. But we do not have to do everything for everybody. Marmee from Little Women deserves a mini break. One friend has instituted unavailable Sundays, during which she neither hosts, organises, nor problem-solves for anyone else. I am currently teaching my children to do laundry, since the next generation need to be independent, fully rounded humans, and pairing 70 pairs of socks a week could be the thing that finishes me off. "We have to take responsibility for ourselves," says Julie, "because our time is not infinite." And we cannot be endlessly available. "Can you just" is not a complete sentence. You know what is? No.

[Helen Russell](#) is a journalist and author. Her novel, [Laura Clark Is Away from Her Desk](#) is out July 30th, published by Wildfire.
