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Detours **Kay Bolden**

Standing on line at Taco Bell is not the most inspiring way to spend your 40th birthday.

“Chicken or steak, lady. No time for special orders,” from a 17-year-old in a paper hat who never met my eyes. Arriving at mid-life renders you invisible to the naked teenage eye. It wasn’t the first time.

It was just the first time it made me cry.

Lila, my co-worker and constant lunch buddy, jostled me to a table, shrugging. “It’s just lettuce and beans, girl.” At 26, invisibility was not a concept she could grasp.

But the fast food menu fit the pattern of the rest of my life. I always seemed to be choosing between 2 equally loathsome things. Soggy lettuce or refried rubber. Low-paying job or high-stress career. Toxic marriage or painful divorce.

My life was half over, and where was I? Eating fake Mexican food with a plastic fork, while Aretha Franklin belted out Freeway of Love on the radio. Oh sure, Aretha sounded wildly free and happy in her pink Cadillac, but I wasn’t free. And I had to drive a minivan.

In the parking lot, Lila struggled with the door handle and asked me -- again -- why I didn’t trade up to an SUV. I shrugged, like I always did, and pointed to the toddler car seat, the rollerblades, the sea of abandoned french fries on the floor.

Back at the office, there was a birthday e-mail from my best friend. “Lie!” she advised. Vivian hit 40 a year ago, but decided not to make a fuss. Having a mid-life crisis in California, she said, was redundant.

“Remember when we turned 21?” she went on. “We thought 40 was old! LOL!” We thought we’d be gray and wrinkled. Kids in college. Summer cottage by the lake, baby blue Cadillac in the garage. Yes, I remembered.

I remembered. I remembered all the dreams I once had for my life that I now had to acknowledge would never materialize. I would never be a Broadway star or a UN diplomat, a Peace Corps volunteer, or an ice dancer. There was no stay-at-home mothering in my future, no waiting patiently by the stove for Mr. Perfect Husband/Daddy to get home.

There were other things, too. Things I should have done for fun in my 20's, like skydiving. Or backpacking through Europe, sleeping in hostels and meeting nameless lovers on trains. Now, at mid-life, "hostel" is a synonym for "big fat bugs" and "backpacking" sounds like more sweating than France is really worth.

I worked late to give Lila a little support, and came home to a dim and quiet house. My 13-year-old and my 2-year-old were curled up together on the sofa, a sleepy tangle of arms and braids and fuzzy slippers.

I unraveled them carefully, and dragged them to bed. One of them -- which one?-- kissed my ear.

My daughter, at 13, was finally outgrowing that "small for her age" look, and I found myself remembering how tiny she had been at birth, how close I had come to losing her. My son, the 2-year-old thrasher, all elbows, knees and spitballs, didn't talk until very recently, and still, he mostly just screams his sister's name. It wasn't part of my master life plan to have my children so far apart, to have teens and toddlers at the same time, but it was working.

Like so many other unexpected detours in my life.

A missed exit in Tennessee, routing me miles off track, heading straight through the Great Smoky Mountains and the most magnificent, mind-blowing sunrise I had ever seen. My first trip to Europe during the Gulf War, when a co-worker literally dropped her tickets to London in my lap, saying "Go, if you're not worried..." A divorce, sending me across the country to my mother, for what turned out to be the last year of her short life.

How many times had my master plan taken a back seat to some unforeseen but life-changing detour? How many times had the detour turned out to be a blessing? More times than I could count.

I went out the next day and bought myself a Cadillac.

It's not brand spanking new; it's taken a few road trips, been stranded once or twice. But it has been well-loved; in the sunlight, it sparkles like a champagne cocktail.

I put my daughter's skates in the trunk, the baby's booster on the back seat, and 2 extra diapers in the glove box.

Lila thought the new car meant I was having a mid-life crisis. "I saw it on Oprah," she said, deadly serious. "Can a Cadillac change your life?"

I hid a smile. I don't need to change my life. I just need to enjoy my life.

Although I'm thinking we should skip the annual trek to the lake this year, maybe drive out to the Grand Canyon instead. And I would like to stop by Taco Bell for a special order combo, no beans, no lettuce, no backtalk, thank you.