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February 2, 1990

Vol. 3, No.5

New York's Free Weekly Newspaper

DIET, Doc!



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MAROONED WITH GILLIGAN

HOW ONE
 GENERATION
 WON'T
 GROW
 UP

By CAROLINE KNAPP

*Just sit right back
 And you'll hear a tale
 A tale of a fateful trip
 That started from
 this tropic port
 Aboard this tiny ship...*

BE HONEST, YOU KNOW MOST OF THE LYR-
 ics to the theme song above, don't
 you? It gets you humming along,
 doesn't it?

Be honest again: are you older
 than 20?

Are you *much* older than 20?

But do you feel much younger?

And does this feeling manifest it-
 self in behaviors such as partying
 like a teenager on a regular basis? Or
 spending all your money on small,
 shiny objects and little luxuries like
 cookies and ice cream (i.e., Mrs.
 Fields chocolate chip and Dove
 Bars)? Does it show up in a long list

12>



JANE SANDERS

age for years.

<<< FROM PAGE ONE

of relationships that never quite worked out? In secret fantasies—that you not only can but will someday join a rock band, become an astronaut, or write a novel?

One more thing: do you realize that Ward Cleaver was probably close to your age when he and June first introduced you to Wally and the Beaver? That's right—boring, staid, solid, breadwinning Ward Cleaver. A grown-up in his mid-30s.

And does that unnerve you? Make you feel like a kid by comparison?

Then welcome to the Gilligan syndrome.

The Gilligan syndrome is the phenomenon of feeling, and often acting, much younger than your chronological age. We derive the name, of course, from Gilligan, the bumbling, perpetually twentysomething goof of the *SS Minnow* who got older and older and older—and never grew up. And we define the condition as arising from the burgeoning perception that "adulthood" has lost its meaning, that it describes other people—your parents, your grade school teachers, your doctor, or your boss, but not you.

The feeling can be in direct conflict with certain realities. You might look like an adult. You might sport grown-up clothing and drive a grown-up car and work at a professional, grown-up job. You might even have lots of grown-up responsibilities—debts on a car or condo, supervisory duties over lots of employees, even kids. But deep down, you have a sense that you're not really an adult, that there's something fluky about the grown-up aspects of your life. You feel youthful. Somewhat ill-defined and unsettled. Aware of but oddly estranged from your chronological age. And equipped with a sense that there's loads of time ahead: time to change, time to fuck up, time to play, and—at some distant, ill-defined point—time to settle down.

The Gilligan syndrome is the patented domain of baby-boomers—folks born roughly between 1946 and 1964, who range in age today from 26 to 46. Not coincidentally, this is the generation that grew up watching "Little Buddy" year after year on the tube, stranded in his perpetual adolescence. And for good or ill, he seems to have become some kind of national role model, a character whose apparent evasion of adulthood resonates more and more.

A 24-year-old public-relations professional with a husband and a home says, "I sit there at my desk sometimes and I think, 'What am I doing here? I'm really only 13!'" A 38-year-old financial adviser with a thriving career, a home, and two cars (both paid for) says, "I have never felt like an adult. I have never felt grown up enough to want a family—I still feel like I need the nurturing." A 32-year-old advertising-executive-turned-homemaker who has a husband, a child, and a big, grown-up mortgage says, "I have all the trappings of an adult life, but I don't feel that way myself. I think of my parents as adults, and I'm nowhere near like them."

In short, the traditional benchmarks of adulthood—marriage, children, and home ownership—no longer seem to apply. The traditional linear path toward adulthood—childhood until age 18, adolescence until the mid-20s, and Full Growth at 30—seems increasingly hard to find and follow. Psychologically, it's possible these days to be in your 20s straight through your 40s, if not beyond. And "middle age" has all but vanished as a defining category.

What's happening is a combination of demographic, social, and economic

MAROONED WITH GILLIGAN

How One Generation Won't Grow Up

BY CAROLINE KNAPP



JANE SANDERS

change, with a little collective denial thrown in for fun. Among the recurrent themes: people lead healthier, longer lives than they once did, so they actually do hit "middle age" later than they used to; they also can't afford to be adults the way Ward and June Cleaver were—paying for grown-up lifestyle has gotten a tad more complex; at the same time, people have a much wider variety of acceptable "lifestyle options" available than they once did, which has blurred the definitions of what constitutes adulthood; and, finally, people simply don't want to grow up. The baby boom is reaching its middle years today. And the generation that hungered for est workshops in the 70s and sleek cappuccino makers in the 80s is showing clear signs that it will hunger for youth in the 90s.

One reason it's easy to feel like a Gilligan—or a Gilligan—these days is that 30- and 40-year-olds are younger than a lot of people around them. Life expectancy in this country has grown from about 43 at the turn of the century to about 75. Today, the median age of Americans is about 32—up from 19 in Revolutionary-era America—and the portion of people well above that age is growing faster than ever. More than 30 million Americans are over 65 today, compared with 2.4 million in 1890. And people over age 85 represent the fastest-growing segment of the population, totaling about 3.3 million today. Against those numbers, folks in their 30s and 40s come out looking, and feeling, pretty good; they have lots of older people to compare themselves with.

But that's the easy answer. Consider for a moment how people used to grow up. About 30 years ago, according to U.S. census data, if you were like 82 percent of average middle- or upper-middle-class Americans, your life followed a pretty predictable course. You got out of high school and (maybe) went to college. You spent a couple of years floundering around (again, maybe). And then you got married, bought a home, and spent the bulk of the next 20-plus years either raising children or providing for them. Accordingly, you came to think of adult roles and work/parent roles as synonymous.

Today, that scenario is often the exception rather than the rule. Consider Paulette Speight, a 38-year-old financial adviser who puts her "internal" age at about 19. Like many of us, she grew up with a clear mental image of adulthood, embodied in her mother: an adult, we thought, was someone who lived the model above, who had kids in her early 20s, and who simply never questioned her grown-up status. "A woman at 24 or 25 with a couple of kids is a tired woman," says Paulette. "A responsible woman. An adult."

By contrast, when Paulette graduated from college, in 1969, she had the cultural permission to avoid that role; becoming an "adult" in the traditional sense took a back seat to becoming a "person." She could work. She could move from city to city, job to job. Anything was possible. Which translated into a youthful sense of possibility, a feeling that despite her true age, she was really a kid in a candy store. Some 20

years later, that feeling hasn't quite diminished. "There were so many options for women, for the first time," she says. "And how can you know what you really want when you can only touch three of the 3000 possibilities out there? I think that feeling—that there's so much to do, so many things you can try—keeps you from committing yourself to any one thing."

The result: although Paulette has many of the trappings of adulthood (economic security, a home), she still feels "like I'm waiting to find out what I'll be when I grow up. I'll probably be a 25-year-old 50-year-old." Paulette is hardly alone.

Demographers and sociologists have lots of fancy language to describe what they see as a steady blurring of the line between adolescence and adulthood. "Boomeranging" has become a popular way to describe the process of moving from job to job, place to place, and relationship to relationship. And the phrase "cyclical life plan" has cropped up to describe the erosion of the typical go-to-school-get-married-have-kids-and-welcome-to-the-real-world path to adulthood.

The experts are also armed with statistics to justify those terms. People aren't moving out on their own the way they used to: the percentage of 25- to 34-year-olds who pair up and settle into homes has dropped from 82 percent in 1960 to 66 percent today. They aren't getting married, or at least, they're delaying marriage: the percentage of 30- to 34-year-olds who have never married has more than doubled in the past two decades, rising from 7.8 percent in 1970 to 18.8 percent in 1987. They're also waiting until they're 40 to have a kid—1.1 million Americans did last year. Or they're working for a while, then going back to school in their 30s—the average age of evening students at community colleges, once a milieu reserved for recent high-school grads, has soared to 38. Or they're getting married, then divorced, then

remarried, and then having kids—what-

ever.

But more compelling than the fact that people are "boomeranging" or leading "cyclical" lives is the effect that process has on their sense of self, on the way they do (or don't) define themselves. For one thing, the act of "boomeranging" itself suggests a lack of self-definition, or at least a struggle for one: many Gilligans say they're still caught up in the process of "finding themselves," much as they were in their post-college days. William Davis (a pseudonym), a 37-year-old photographer who's "sort of going to school" and "sort of working part time," is a case in point. "I know I'm an 'adult' in the sense that I'm self-aware and generally responsible and more mature than the average 22-year-old kid," he says, "but if being an adult means having a clear sense of what you want out of life, of where you are in the world—then I'm not. That's what makes me feel like a kid still. I'm still out driving around in my car blasting Talking Heads tapes and sometimes it makes me think, 'What the hell are you doing, a 37-year-old man driving around like this? Who the hell are you?'"

Like Paulette, William says the range of available options is what keeps him feeling "mildly adolescent." "It's a delaying tactic, in a way," he says. "There are so many things you can do—or not do—without being stigmatized. I suppose I would have been seen as a failure 20 years ago, being unmarried and sort of unsettled professionally. But you have permission these days to carry out the struggle for years.

Decades if you want."

And is that good or bad? "I don't know," Williams muses. "I certainly wouldn't have wanted to be plugged into a Ward Cleaver model at 25 and never have the chance to experiment. On the other hand, it can be paralyzing, not wanting to settle down into any one thing, always thinking there may be something better out there."

This, of course, is a generation that came of age assuming there would be something better out there—when we were young, we'd have a better bike than the kid next door had, a better college than our older brother went to. When we got older, we'd find a better way to "get to know ourselves," and then a better-paying job, a better espresso maker, than the guy next door. But above all, when we finally grew up, we'd have a better life than our parents had.

And why not? The logic seemed pretty sound. We were indulged, after all, a generation bathed in the affluence of post-war America. From the cradle to the college and beyond, we got pretty much everything we demanded: toys and clothes and summer camps and good schools. And, like so many spoiled children, we took it as a given that the well would never run dry.

"I just figured that one of these days, I'd get married, settle down, have some kids, and be secure—and then I'd be an adult," says Sally Keith (a pseudonym), a 32-year-old mother married to an engineer. "The first three things happened, but security? I seem to call my mother at least once a week needing something—help with car repairs or new clothes for the baby. And you just don't feel very grown-up when you pick up the phone and say, 'Mummy, the baby needs a new fall wardrobe, why don't we all go shopping?'"

No, you feel like a kid who's trying to talk mom into buying you a new Transformer. As Gilligans in their 30s and 40s decide they want all the stuff their parents had—the houses, the cars, the nest egg—they're finding for the first time that the well *has* run dry. Never mind that their parents and grandparents are the ones that filled it. Never mind that they scrimped and saved for their houses and yards. For those who grew up in an era of instant gratification, every expectation met and every wish granted, today's reality is as hard to swallow as cod-liver oil.

In 1973 80 percent of people over age 35 owned their own homes. But when the baby boom started to come of age a few years after that, the economy started to hit the skids and the good life became increasingly out of reach. Starting wages were plummeting, housing costs soaring. In 1973 the average 30-year-old man could meet mortgage payments on a median-priced home with about a fifth of his income—the same house took twice as much of his money in 1986. During those same years, the real median income of families headed by someone under 30 fell by 26 percent. And the expectations created in the 40s and 50s became increasingly impossible to meet.

Which has a significant effect on the boomers' sense of self as "grown-up." Nina Martin (a pseudonym), a 35-year-old video producer, puts it simply: "It is very hard to think of yourself as a real adult when something as basic as a place to live is so completely out of the realm of possibilities. You just can't."

Perhaps not. But if you're Gilligan, you

"they make me feel better. I get into my car [a Saab, paid for in part by Nina's father] and I feel grown-up. At least in a way."

Grown-up toys—the compulsion to own them, lots of them—are one of the clearest symptoms of the Gilligan syndrome, and it's easy to see why. So you can't afford an \$180,000 house. You don't have the \$5000 a year it takes to put a kid in daycare. Or the \$45,000 it takes to feed it until it turns 18. Well, get yourself what you can: a really great Cuisinart, an Armani jacket, new Rossignol skis. The message: you may not be able to live like an adult, but you can certainly impersonate one.

Of course, consumer culture can work another way, too. If people like Nina Martin buy stuff to feel grown-up, others spend to fend off aging, to feed a kind of collective

denial that keeps them feeling young. Just look around. Men and their 40s are buying more Mia (can't shake a tube of Clearasil) in record numbers, listening to music they listened to in their youth into nostalgia—a prime way to self from feeling obsolete—t bought into self-actualizing v the 70s and money-market 80s. Men are washing middle-gray from their hair to the tur lion a year, more than double they spend three years ago. are reading scads of new, upl okay-to-be-40 magazines like the Woman Who Wasn't Born and Moxie, launched last Se featuring a real, live 40-year

GOOD SCENTS

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Downtown's Smart Choice...

McKay's

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Perhaps not. But if you're Gilligan, you can do something else instead: surround yourself with whatever grown-up or semi-grown-up luxuries you can afford. Nina, for example, has a great stereo, wears \$75 shoes, goes out to dinner at least twice a week, and sits in a salon every six weeks to get \$60 haircuts, just like a real grown-up woman. In short, she may not feel grown-up, but she compensates with lots of grown-up trappings. "And, yes," she says,

AGENTS

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Downtown's Smart Choice...

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"they make me feel better. I get into my car [a Saab, paid for in part by Nina's father] and I feel grown-up. At least in a way."

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Just look around. Men and women in their 40s are buying more Miatas than you can shake a tube of Clearasil at. They're defying the pull of gravity in health clubs in record numbers, listening to the same music they listened to in their 20s, buying into nostalgia—a prime way to keep yourself from feeling obsolete—the way they bought into self-actualizing workshops in the 70s and money-market funds in the 80s. Men are washing middle-aged signs of gray from their hair to the tune of \$60 million a year, more than double the amount they spend three years ago. And women are reading scads of new, upbeat, hey-it's-okay-to-be-40 magazines like *Lear's* ("For the Woman Who Wasn't Born Yesterday") and *Moxie*, launched last September and featuring a real, live 40-year-old on the

cover who looks a real, live 25. And as they flip through the pages, what do they find amid the slick photos of other ageless 40-year-olds? Stories like "Debunking the Myths of Middle Age" and ads for products like Oil of Olay, in which a 30-ish woman announces, "I don't intend to age gracefully—I intend to fight it every step of the way!" If you're 40 and reading this, the message is: hey you're fine. You're still a kid. And if you don't look like one, we can help you. If you're 30, the message is more soothing still: relax, don't worry. You have years of youth ahead of you.

Anne York, spokesperson for Combe, Inc., a New Jersey-based company that makes Just for Men, a five-minute hair-coloring product released this summer for the 35- to 65-year-old market, puts it simply: "The baby boom is nothing if not youth-

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GOOD SCENTS

Parfum

Let McKAY'S be your sweetheart this Valentine's Day. Of course we have a large assortment of boxed chocolate but did you know we have the most complete selection of today's most popular perfumes and colognes? You will always find just what your looking for, and as usual, you can expect to pay less than you will anywhere else.

McKay's has Adidas, Adolfo, Almay, An

MAROONED WITH GILLIGAN

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oriented. And as they age, they're bringing the cult of youthfulness with them."

And, as always, the market and the media are accommodating them. When Combe conducted a survey of 500 men in its target market, more than 44 percent said they felt at least 10 years younger than their chronological age. Thirty percent said they looked younger than their fathers did at the same age. And 55 percent said their attitudes about life were closer to their children's generation than that of their parents. "We looked out at all those graying temples," says York, "and we said, 'The grass out there looks awfully green.'"

In short, if "middle age" has evaporated as a stage of life, it's because the baby boom wants it that way. As York puts it, "You're not middle-aged these days until...well, at least until you're in your 60s. And you're not old until at least 80. You can call it collective denial, but that's what the market is asking for."

Which may be well and good—it's fine to have lots of nice little things if you can't have lots of nice big things; and it's good to feel young, regardless of your age. But whether all this is designed to increase feelings of adulthood or to fend them off, consumer frenzy suggests a kind of submerged desperation. It's as though we're all out there with our credit cards trying to acquire something intangible—identity, perhaps. Or a sense of well-being. Or security. Stuff, at any rate, that can't be had at the Sharper Image or found in a bottle of Just for Men.

In *The Greening of America*, Charles Reich anticipated this kind of desperation when he described a dynamic called "impoverishment by substitution." In consumer society, he argued, you supplant life's basic gratifications (sense of purpose, sense of community) for *stuff*—the Cuisinarts and Armani jackets, the Miatas and the hair goop. The impoverishment comes from the fact that though all that stuff might distract you from your more basic hungers, it can't—and won't—satisfy them.

More than ever, that argument seems right on target. Not long ago, an old friend called up out of the blue, someone I hadn't seen for almost 10 years. We met for lunch

does make people grow up?" mused Gary Dale, a 38-year-old producer with a wife and two-year-old daughter.

He tried to answer that: "I suppose getting married should grow you, but it doesn't always. I suppose a war or some kind of hardship would grow you, but that's not the case for most people I know." He paused, then added, "I guess the problem is there aren't a whole lot of things out there that really grow you anymore."

Kids can. In an ongoing study of young adults now in its tenth year, Boston University psychologist Kathleen White has found that people tend to extend adolescent behavior (defined by self-protectiveness and unwillingness to make commitments, among other things) well into their 20s. She's now in the process of re-interviewing the same subjects now that they're in their 30s, and so far she's found the subjects who are married and with children to be "strikingly" grown up. "They're in the middle of adulthood," she says. "They're stuck in adult problems, juggling kids and jobs—I think having kids is a very important part of that."

Personal hardship can have the same effect. Deborah Singer, 33, vice president of corporate communications at StridRite, says she didn't really "feel grown up" until she got divorced several years ago. "I think it took that to make me feel adult. I went from knowing I could rely on my parents to relying completely on this other person. And it was a long, hard process, to learn to rely on myself."

But hardship, personal or otherwise, can be easy to avoid in an affluent society. Depend on your folks for extra cash. Avoid serious relationships. Buy yourself some new toys. If things get tough, quit your job and move somewhere new. Hey, it's the norm. "You can run around like an irresponsible maniac these days," says Gary Dale. "You can live way beyond your means, declare bankruptcy and then just go to a bar, sit there with your friends, and joke about it. And it's okay—everyone else is doing the same thing."

Which is not to say the Gilligan syndrome is all bad news. It's good to feel young. A little healthy denial can go a long way. And the blurred distinctions between youth and age even represent some positive shifts, signaling expanded options and greater freedom to explore. As

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Just for Men.

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More than ever, that argument seems right on target. Not long ago, an old friend called up out of the blue, someone I hadn't seen for almost 10 years. We met for lunch and he told me what he'd been up to: boomeranging, mostly. Lived in Providence off and on. New York here and there. Pittsburgh, at his parents' house. He described himself as "sort of an art dealer" and said he was considering spending the winter on Martha's Vineyard, "maybe doing some writing."

We got to talking about a group of people we knew in college, people in their early 30s, with whom my friend was still in touch. "Now *those* are Gilligans," he said. "They're unbelievable. Still doing as many drugs as they did in the 70s. Working out like maniacs at the gym to compensate. Running around, wreaking havoc. They're like goddamn frat brothers. *Still.*"

The Gilligan-ism, he said, showed up most clearly in their relationships: "It's the same pattern with all of them. Go out with some woman who's clearly, shall we say, not 'marriage material.' Someone who's too young or not too bright. Let the thing run its course. Then wake up some day and say, 'Well, this isn't going anywhere.' And dump her. We're not talking love and commitment here. Those aren't the goals. These are the kinds of relationships you have in high school."

A little while later, he added, "There's something very self-protective about what you're talking about. It's a lot easier not to grow up than it is to grow up. At least people tend to think it is."

Perhaps that's because they're not really sure what growing up means. "What

very on myself."

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Which is not to say the Gilligan syndrome is all bad news. It's good to feel young. A little healthy denial can go a long way. And the blurred distinctions between youth and age even represent some positive shifts, signaling expanded options and greater freedom to explore. As Martha Riche, senior editor at *American Demographics* magazine, puts it, "It's wonderful to have the opportunity to stray from the traditional 'adult' plan. To have the perception of having a lot of choices despite your age—that adds a richness to life."

But failing to grow up has its price too. A few hours after we talked, Gary Dale called back. He had been thinking about his daughter, and he asked, "Has anyone mentioned love to you? Because I think people tend to think of growing up as being financially secure and living in a house. But what I think it really means is truly loving someone. The way I love my daughter."

He continued. "I think about these reckless adult teenagers, running around—they probably don't love themselves or their own lives very much and they're probably incapable of really loving someone else. I don't know. Love was thrown around so loosely in the 60s, you know? Maybe we're all Gilligans because we don't really know how to love anymore."

If so, maybe that's why there's a certain sadness to it, and a fearfulness. The Gilligan syndrome may illustrate the richness of options in our lives, the freedom to experiment indefinitely. But it also speaks to an unsettledness, a restlessness that hasn't dissipated with this generation's advancing chronological age. Gilligan, after all, was stuck on a remote island. Deep down, he must have felt hopeless at times.

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