

# Making a U-TURN

*SOPHIA STUART led a busy, glamorous and successful life but realised at a pivotal moment that it didn't really mean much. Here, she explains why she gave her high-octane existence the flick*



PATRICK DEMARCHELIER/TRUNKARCHIVE.COM/SNAPPER MEDIA

I just walked away from a big job in Manhattan and I'm starting all over again in Los Angeles at the age of 44. It's terrifying yet exhilarating and most of my friends think I'm crazy. Author F. Scott Fitzgerald once said, "There are no second acts in American lives." I intended to prove him wrong. And anyway, I was born and bred in England.

For seven years I had a dream job in New York, with an office on the 42nd floor and a PA who booked my business travel to places like China and India. I had worked hard to become head of digital for a magazine company's international operations. It was glamorous, but I developed a nervous twitch from exhaustion, put on 27 kilograms and constantly monitored the red light on my BlackBerry. I had a gorgeous apartment with rooftop views, but everything in the bathroom was travel-sized and my bags were always packed for the next trip. A concierge service handled my grocery shopping, but I never cooked, so it was all rather pathetic: pots of yoghurt, bottled water and individually wrapped cheese portions.

Then, two years ago, during a routine medical check, doctors found a growth in my throat near my thyroid. Within a year, one tumour became three. A surgeon told me I needed major surgery to remove them, and that I had a 30 per cent chance of cancer. I put on my big dark glasses, took a cab to Park Avenue, slipped into the Waldorf Astoria, ordered cake and sobbed. It wasn't that I thought I was going to die, it's that I'd forgotten how I wanted to live. My intense competitive drive had forced me into the wrong life. I was utterly lost. I was also alone.

Manhattan is full of highly motivated, successful career women, and I play for the other team, where relationships among the Sapphic set are like something out of a movie, full of weekends in the Hamptons and matching charge cards at Barneys. I had dabbled in this world and retreated. When I got my surgery date, I'd been alone for a while.

There's nothing like illness to give you a wake-up call. After one of those very long, dark nights of the soul, I realised I needed to start again. I had gone so far into a life I didn't want that I knew if I didn't make a plan now, I would never do so. (After a very painful surgery, it turned out I didn't have cancer, after all. But the possibility was there.)

I decided I wanted a simpler life. I wanted to be creative again. I looked longingly at my Nigel Slater cook books and dreamed of farmers' markets and sunshine and peace. I began to dread the constant wail of police sirens and loud parties in the glam restaurants on the street below. I was done with this life. I looked at my neck in the bathroom mirror and wondered how bad the scar would be and how long I would be sick afterwards. And then I wrote a list, because I'm good at lists and goals and determination. It's how I got so far in the first place.

It was shocking how many people tried to dissuade me from my life swap. Friends said I needed to get beyond the surgery and try to put it all behind me, to carry on as if nothing had happened. A few hippie California friends muttered about the tumours being in my throat chakra, and that I'd blocked my communication channels. I rolled my eyes but knew they had a point. I'd always wanted a creative life. But, like many, opted for a job with a regular salary, the trappings of success and the illusion of security.

Despite a long career in digital media, I never had my own website. It would've been awkward under my own name, due to the high-profile job. But I needed somewhere to talk to others who would understand how terrified I was by the surgery. So I started a

site called Teamgloria.com (all the glorious people, places and things that kept me sane) and wrote anonymously. I spilled my guts onto the screen — the pain, the operation, the recovery, my fears, and then, slowly, how I wanted to walk away and start again.

What was so incredible was the support I got from complete strangers. Nobody who read my website knew who I was in real life. I was free to be just another human being sharing her words and images online. I forged deep virtual friendships and these people cheered me on. I was often moved to tears late at night reading their comments. This was how I got the strength to start again.

Eventually, I came to an arrangement with my employer to leave and then I began to downsize. I gave away everything I didn't want in my new life — awards-ceremony outfits, chic winter coats, a Prada handbag. I flew to California and stayed in a friend's spare room for a week, mostly staring at the wall, wondering what the hell I'd just done. LA's a lot mellower (and cheaper) than Manhattan. And for someone who grew up in England, the perpetual sunshine is delicious. But it wasn't what I'd expected. The paperwork alone in starting again in a new city felt overwhelming — finding somewhere to live, getting the electricity turned on and home phone number set up, applying for a new driver's licence. I was in a low-level panic for weeks sorting everything out.

And I felt like a teenager finding my way in my new career. Unlike NYC, it's normal to earn your living doing several things in LA. No one blinks when they ask what I do and I reply with a triple hyphenate: writer-photographer-digital consultant. But getting to that description took a lot of soul-searching and hard work. It was humbling. I was very lucky I had enough savings to last for a year. But I had no idea how to build an entirely new life. My whole sense of identity was stripped away. The only thing I knew was that I wanted to write and take photographs every day and to use my skills in digital media to help people. But I hadn't worked as a writer or photographer since my mid-twenties.

The world of photography is very different today, so, at 44, I became an intern. Two photographers let me work for them, for free, as an assistant and I learnt retouching, lighting for digital, Photoshop and the business side. I also swallowed my pride and did all the things an assistant does — took the boss's dog for a walk, cleaned up the studio, built up my own portfolio on the side. It paid off; recently, I had my first solo exhibition and couldn't stop grinning.

My journalism cuttings were more than 15 years old. I needed to reinvent myself and so I asked for help. I asked (much younger) editors to tea and pitched column ideas to give myself a new platform. The digital consulting I'm doing feels meaningful, too. Most of my clients are Hollywood women who felt clueless about digital — and now they don't.

Starting again has been truly scary. There are days when I wonder what I've done. But it also feels so right. I'm creating a life based on what makes my heart sing. I now do my own grocery shopping and my Nigel Slater cook books are nicely broken in. I take care of myself now (instead of paying other people to do it) and I have no idea where I'm going. I can still see the scar on my throat, but I'm happy. Do I miss the regular pay cheque? Yes. Would I exchange it for my bubbling excitement while driving along California's scenic Pacific Coast Highway belting out cheesy pop songs with unlimited possibilities ahead? Hell, no. ■

*How To Stay Sane In a Crazy World by Sophia Stuart (Hay House) is out in February (howtostaysaneinacrazyworld.com).*

## SOPHIA'S GET-OUT PLAN ESSENTIALS:

### DREAM FIRST

Make a vision board and see what your heart truly desires. Then make a plan.

### GO BACK TO BED

If you're exhausted, take a Sunday afternoon off and relax. You deserve it.

### FIND SOME TUNES

Music helps — make a playlist that revs you up and puts you in a mood of endless possibilities and exciting thoughts.

### BE POSITIVE

Ditch (or get distance from) people who drag you down. You need supportive friends who tell you anything is possible. Because it is.