

The joy of...



## QUITTING

Having been told her whole life that leaving is for losers, Alex Holder jacked in her high-flying job and realised that, actually, it was the most empowering thing she had ever done

**I TOOK INSPIRATION FROM ZAYN MALIK ON THE DAY HE SAID GOODBYE TO 1D.**

I sat with my business partner in the park opposite our office, said the words 'I'm leaving' and cried. I was quitting my dream job – or at least what had once been my dream job. The one I'd gone through eight rounds of interviews to get. I was partner in a brilliant advertising agency; one I'd admired for so long. Loads of people wanted that job, I'd got it, and now I was giving it up.

And there you have it, my proudest career moment to date: the day I quit.

When I'd left the house that morning, I hadn't known that, by the end of the day, I wouldn't have a salary and, gulp, an answer to the question, 'So, what do you do?' I had to ring my boyfriend and confess: 'Er, I quit my job today.' Did I mention our 11-month-old son, our mortgage, my ego? Oh, and by no means were we prepared financially; there was enough money to last six weeks, maybe eight. But when I got into bed that night, I felt an elation that only comes from an act of bravery.

I was always taught that quitting was for losers, so throughout my life I'd made sure I wasn't one of them. I stayed with the boy I lost my virginity to for seven years; I ran marathons, once with cystitis. If I started a book, I finished it, even when I misguidedly picked up *Ulysses*. I spent a relentless decade working my way to the top of a career. I was *not* a quitter. Then, with two words, suddenly I was.

What I had mistaken for ambition and conviction at work was actually fear. I told myself I was happy enough. I had the house, the partner, the baby and the job. This is what adults do, isn't it? They forsake fun for security. I regarded freelancers, part-timers, artists, the self-employed and anyone who didn't go into an office every day with wide-eyed jealousy and confusion. I stayed put, not because I loved my job, but because I was too scared to leave.

I describe how I'd felt to behavioural psychologist Michael S Guttridge, who immediately diagnoses imposter syndrome. 'It's the persistent fear you'll be exposed as a fraud,' he explains. 'Our society's bias

*'Change is hard, so don't quit your job, your relationship and move house all at once. Pick your battle, ask yourself what would make the biggest difference to your life right now'*

– that women aren't as competent as men – means more women suffer from it.' His words rang true: I felt I was just about getting away with keeping the job I had. I worked ridiculous hours to prove I was good enough; I was *that* person, the one sending 3am emails. I was scared that quitting would confirm what everyone already knew – that I was useless. In her book *The Secret Thoughts of Successful Women*, Dr Valerie Young articulates my thoughts perfectly: 'You feel as if you've flown under the radar, been lucky or they just like you.'

Before quitting my job, I'd hit a real confidence low at work and had sought the help of life coach Tania Keeling. In our first session she said, 'Imagine someone is giving a speech about you in 20 years' time: what do you want them to say?' The speech I conjured talked of my brilliance as a mother and friend, and praised me for my creativity and spirit of adventure – not once was my job in an ad agency mentioned. And that was my first breakthrough: I was putting most of my energy into a job that, in the wider context of my life, wasn't important. Looking back, I asked Michael what it was about projecting into the future that gave me such clarity: 'By seeing yourself from a distance, it removes the emotion from the situation; it can also help if you imagine a friend in the same position and the advice you would give them.' And actually, my friends and family had tried to tell me my job wasn't what defined me, and it certainly wasn't worth the stress it brought to my life.

**GRADUALLY, I BEGAN TO REALISE** that quitting wasn't failing. It would mean I believed in myself. 'It's about making choices and not sleepwalking through life,' says Michael. 'It's checking in with yourself and asking, "Do I really enjoy this?" and "Is this what I want?" Life is too short to plod through years in a job or a relationship that's so-so.' At one point he shouts, 'Wake up! Live! Don't spend your life on autopilot!' I get it, Michael; I too want everyone to understand the power of quitting. Remember when Miranda in *Sex and the City* struck upon the wisdom of 'He's just not that into you' and couldn't help telling strangers in the park? I'm Miranda on a mission and can't stop talking about how good it felt to quit. Although it's not that I want everyone to quit; I just want them to know they *can*. Even Michael advises against quitting too many things at once: 'Change is hard, so don't quit your job, your relationship and move house all at once. Pick your battle, ask yourself what would make the biggest difference to your life right now.'

Feminist icon Gloria Steinem got it right when she said, 'Growing up and settling down don't have to go together.' Ever the pioneer, she came to this realisation in the Fifties, when she found herself engaged to a man she didn't want to spend the rest of her life with and >

## THE JOY OF QUITTING

pregnant with his child. She ended the engagement, had an abortion, went travelling to India and became the heralded political activist we know now. That was some serious quitting! But if anyone can break Michael's rule of not ending everything at once, it's Gloria. At a time when many women were giving up autonomy over their lives, Gloria took control of hers and inspired a generation.

**I STILL REGRET NOT QUITTING** my childhood sweetheart earlier. I stayed with him from my 16th birthday until the age of 22 because I hadn't worked out that, sometimes, for all the right reasons, relationships end. We met in our local club, where he bought me a £1 shot, paid for in 20 pence pieces. I was completely charmed. Fast-forward four years: we had opposing political views, our sex life had plateaued, but still we plodded along. I stayed with him throughout university, when I was meant to be open-minded and free, and I still think about the boys (and girls) I didn't sleep with. When I finally found a way to end it, after years of knowing I should get out but not having the guts to, I resolved to act more quickly the next time my life felt stale.

Accepting I'm not trapped has made my relationships since then stronger. I'm not afraid of committing, as I know I can always leave, whether it's a joint mortgage or a boring film at the cinema – in fact, I've waltzed out of both in recent years.

Admitting we've made a bad decision can be tough. My friend Amelia, 28, found this out the hard way after meeting an Icelandic girl on Tinder, falling in love and, after a seven-month long-distance relationship, leaving London and moving to Reykjavik. 'I put it on Facebook: "I'm moving to Iceland to pursue my dream of being cold – let me know if you know anyone there!"' But only two weeks later, I realised I couldn't stay in Iceland; the relationship wasn't strong enough for me to build a life in a new country. I quit everything again and was back. Quitting the dream after only two weeks was harder than when I left my whole life to go.'

Emigrating is socially acceptable quitting, but coming back? That feels shameful. The conversation is always about what must have gone wrong, rather than the new thing you tried. Amelia continues: 'There was my panic at coming back to no job and no house, but the real panic, the one I was most consumed by, was the Facebook status – I'd told everyone!' I asked Amelia if she regretted going, whether the upheaval and (short-lived) embarrassment of quitting twice had been worth it? 'Of course I'm glad I went, or I'd always wonder what could have been.'

Bronnie Ware, a palliative care nurse, revealed in her book *The Top Five Regrets*

### HOW TO SUCCEED AT QUITTING

**Be realistic,** plan and prioritise. Don't quit everything at once.

**Start small** and think,

'Do I want to be doing this next year?' If the answer is no, work out what you need to do between now and then to get out.

**Be selfish.** It's your life.

**Project yourself** into the future, think about the person you want to be in 10 years' time. Is what you're doing now going to get you there? If not, quit!

**Do what makes you happy,**

not what other people expect you to do.

**Don't spend years** in limbo. Be decisive.

*of the Dying* that the most common was: 'I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.' Ware urges: 'Life is a choice. Choose consciously, choose wisely and choose honestly.' I put this to my life coach Tania, who agreed. 'Work out what's important to you and make sure you honour that in your life. So many of my clients are women in their thirties who are doing what they *think* they should be doing – working hard, keeping the partner, having the baby – rather than living the life they want.' It's true; I think about Michael shouting, 'Wake up, live!' So many of my friends plod through life until a wake-up call like the death of a parent, being made redundant or having a baby shakes them to question what they really want out of life. It's ironic we often need to experience this kind of loss of control to realise the control we actually have.

It's been seven months since I quit my job, and I genuinely haven't looked back. My current role is a maternity cover, which is just the right mix of commitment and freedom. I'm planning on moving to Bali... India... doing a Masters, wherever my daydreaming that afternoon takes me. I like not knowing what I'll be doing in six months' time, although, admittedly, I do occasionally find myself wide-eyed at 3.30am with chest palpitations thinking about the mortgage. Oh, also, it wasn't that difficult to find a job I truly love. Take that, imposter syndrome!

**I'M A DIFFERENT PERSON NOW.** As with all good breakups, I had a drastic haircut afterwards. I know I'll never suffer boring again. Because, hey, you can always quit. I'm now the queen of French exits (leaving a party without saying goodbye) and refuse to feel guilty – no one wants a bored guest. If a book doesn't have me in the first 50 pages, I no longer suffer through the next 200. My advice to any wannabe quitter would be this: listen to your gut, not your head. It doesn't matter what you 'should' be doing in life – if it doesn't feel right, lean out. Do not plod. *Live!* ■

