



# QUARTER LIFE CRISIS

Career and life coach Alice Stapleton tells *Lauren Romano* why more and more of us are finding it hard to figure out what to do with the rest of our lives

Alice Stapleton

**I**want to be a journalist.' It was a line I duly repeated at family gatherings, on the phone to my grandparents, or to my slightly apprehensive parents when the 'what do you want to do when you grow up?' question cropped up. This resolute end-goal stayed at the back of my mind throughout my degree and my dissertation and even saw me scribble my way through the dreaded three-and-a-half-hour Shakespeare exam.

Post-university and throughout the string of internships that followed, when I sat at my computer with an eager, Cheshire cat grin, hoping for a by-line so microscopic a monocle could just about make it out – it became my mantra. And then, as I was about to throw in the towel

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and admit that graduate writing positions just didn't exist, I landed a job. I was finally doing what I had set out to do: I had secured my career, succeeded in my lifelong calling. Or had I?

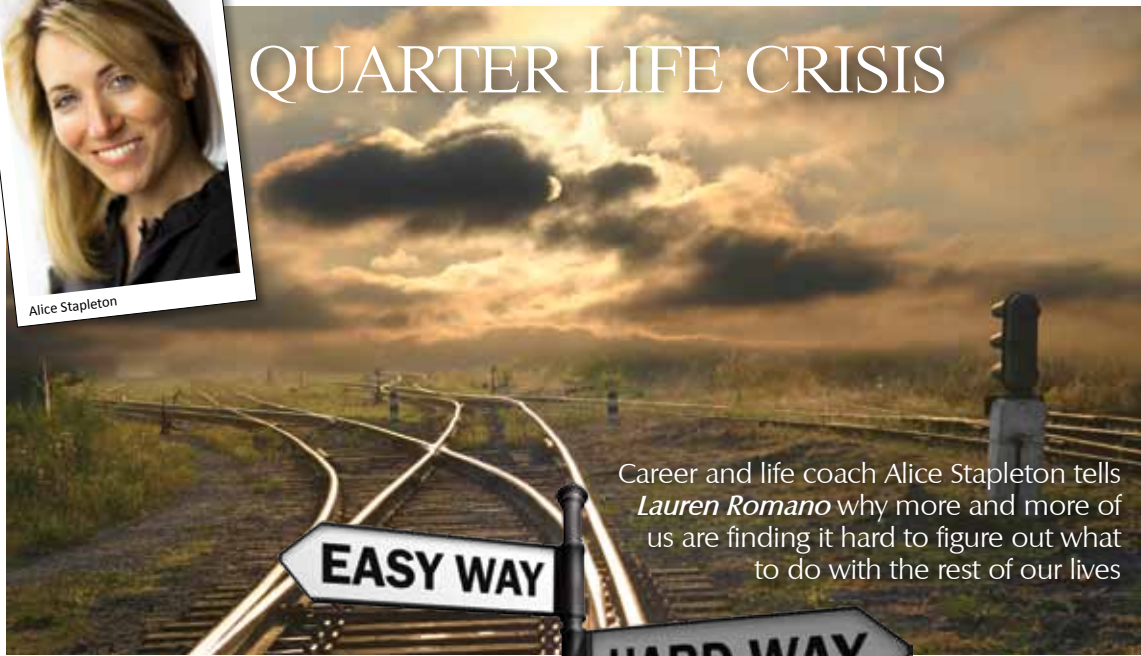
It all started with my 25th birthday. The cards sitting on my mantelpiece were awash with pithy digs: 'Another 365 days older'

quipped one; 'Let the quarter life crisis begin!' read another. It was the first time I'd heard the expression but as soon as I did I couldn't help but relate.

When I'm 30 I'll be an editor, a published author, have a flat, perhaps a fiancé; I'll have travelled the world and be fluent in at least one language... Well that's what I told myself anyway. With my 27th birthday now around the corner, I have come to realise that crossing off even one of the things on that list might be a little unrealistic.

Don't get me wrong, print deadlines might be a bit stressful – although I'd take them any day over standing up in front of a class of surly teenagers – but I love my job. I have a great set of friends and, while I'm no jetsetter, I've still been on a couple of amazing trips this year. But from time to time there is a niggling doubt in the back of my mind: is this the life for me; should I just throw in the towel, grab my backpack and head for the Amazon?

This year, a number of my closest friends got married and settled down. A couple have even bought houses, which scares me as I'm so far behind. I'm in good company, according to locally-based career and life coach Alice Stapleton. I've come to visit her for a coaching session in the hope that she will provide me with answers. Alice is quick to point out, however, that she isn't a career advisor.



'People sometimes confuse the role of a coach with that of a counsellor. I'm not meant to steer or influence you, I won't say, "I think you should quit your job and become a personal trainer". I'm here to listen, to offer an objective perspective, to question you about your aspirations and try to unpick what you really want,' she says.

Prior to a consultation, Alice gets all her clients to fill out a preparation form, which asks what they hope their lives will be like three years from now and in 12, six and three months' time. 'What people sometimes fail to realise is that you're not going to wake up in three years and say – "Today is the first day of my life as a business owner", or whatever it is you see yourself doing. Setting yourself on a path now will help you get there.'

Alice admits that many of her clients are afraid of failing and it is this fear that holds them back. 'When people leave education there is a period of transition and uncertainty. Then they jump into a job and work at it for two or three years until they start to question what they are doing.'

I put it to Alice that one of the causes of this perpetual uncertainty could, ironically, be the amount of choice open to us. We live in a global world, one where we can travel anywhere and theoretically do anything. 'The paradox of choice,' she nods in agreement. 'Our generation is used to being constantly stimulated.

Many of my clients are university-educated and crave the learning and challenge that comes with that.'

The quarter life crisis is also, Alice believes, part of the contemporary mind-set. 'We are constantly comparing ourselves with our peers. You can't open a newspaper without coming across a story of an enterprising individual who has come up with a trail-blazing idea. Your eye hovers over their age, which is the same as yours and you realise you don't have a business.'

As we talk through my dilemmas, the biggest one being retaining a sense of control in my work-life balance (sometimes it feels as though my friends live in Timbuktu not Brixton), Alice continually questions me. I'm not somebody who finds talking about themselves easy (hence why I prefer to do the interviewing), but in this instance vocalising my concerns helps.

'You don't have to be at breaking point to benefit from some coaching,' she says. 'I can help clients commit to changes that they would like to make.'

At the end of the session it is apparent that some of my solutions are easier than others. There are things I need to action which I have known, deep down, for a long time, but telling Alice about them gives me a renewed sense of purpose and a clearer idea of what to do next. Roll on 30. ■

(alicestapleton.com)

## ARE YOU HAVING A QUARTER LIFE CRISIS?

1. Work your way around the circle, giving each segment a score out of 10 (with 10 being the highest).
2. If you think of the circle as the wheel of a car, each segment has to be the same for a smooth ride.
3. Use the chart to identify the bumps in your journey and to think about how you can improve certain scores; re-visit it every now and again to see if balance has been restored.

