

I MADE IT AFTER 35

*Everyone wants instant gratification. But success is that much sweeter when you're all grown up, says actress **Kate Walsh**.*



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Age is just a number. Unless, that is, you live in Hollywood, where there's this notion that if you haven't hit it big by your 20s, you may as well hit the road. But if anyone had told me that I would be thankful when I looked back on celebrating my 28th birthday alone in New York City with a piece of stale cheesecake, working at one of my three waitressing jobs, I would have punched him. During those broke years, I shared not one but two studio apartments, first with my brother, and then with my pal Karen, sleeping head to foot in the same bed. I never dreamed that one day I would land my breakout role at the ripe old age of 36, as a doctor on *Grey's Anatomy*. But now, at 44, I look back and I am eternally grateful for that lonesome birthday.

For me, my 20s were all about reaching for the brass ring of work in theater, television, and film, surviving in between by waiting tables, painting houses, serving coffee, and temping. Anytime I wanted to quit acting, my brother Joe would come visit me at work and patiently ask what I would do instead. The conversation always yielded the identical result: "Okay, I'm gonna keep acting." Acting was all I ever really wanted to do.

I never worried about my age, though, until I moved to Los Angeles in 1999. That's when I had a look around and realized that I was infinitely replaceable. There would always be someone younger, prettier, sexier, stronger, faster (and probably cheaper) than me. But I didn't let it deter me. Maybe that's because I grew up watching classic films, and my heroines—Bette Davis, Joan Crawford, Lucille Ball, Mary Tyler Moore, Vanessa Redgrave, Meryl Streep, Helen Mirren, and Judi Dench—were all working in their 30s, 40s, and beyond. I was never defeated by age; I was inspired by it.

At 30, I thought I had made it because I landed a recurring role on *The Drew Carey Show*. Everyone told me, "The world is your oyster," and "You'll get loads of development deals from the networks." I went into pilot season feeling confident and on top of the world. I tested for eight or nine shows that year, which was a personal record—and got not a single one. After that my ego and I took a vacation to Anguilla to recover from the rejection and humiliation. It was a big turning point: I learned to take my pride out of the audition rooms. So when a casting director said that my audition was great but the producers didn't think my shoes were sexy enough, instead of crying I ran to Macy's at the Beverly Center to buy a pair of five-inch stilettos.

And when *Grey's Anatomy* became must-see TV and my entire life changed, I felt like it was the moment I had been waiting for my whole life; after all, I had spent three decades working toward it. By then I had the character and the personal infrastructure to enjoy the incredible ride. Through my years of slogging through waitressing and bit parts, I had developed the capacity to weather challenges, rejection, and the various personalities you encounter, with grace and tact. I had been able to actually live life, unobserved, paparazzi-free, and make a ton of mistakes in private, when I was younger.

My age gives me perspective and the confidence to speak out about things, to embrace change, and the courage to take risks. I even started my own fragrance business, *Boyfriend*, at age 42. Trust me, it has not been easy. I've faced obstacles, missteps, and learning curves, but I know how to balance the role of CEO with my day job as an actress because I mastered the juggling act in my 20s.

The best part is that I know I'm just getting started. I've learned over and over that life happens on its own terms, not mine. ■