

# The Big M

## Women Traveling Together Through MENOPAUSE, Midlife, and More

by Lynette Sheppard  
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### **CHAPTER ONE**

#### **The Beginning of Our Travels Together**

It very likely started when we hit forty and realized that gravity was not our friend. The End of the World as We Knew it. Yet, all in all for a few short years, we handled the changes in our bodies reasonably well. We exercised, ate healthy foods, and congratulated ourselves on how gracefully we were aging. And then, the hormonal shitstorm hit the fan. The changes (emphasis on plural) were streaking at us faster than meteors in the Perseid shower. Emotional, physical, mental. You name it - nothing was left unscathed. We were smack dab in the middle of The Big “M”. Menopause. The Change.

No one prepared us for THIS! The magnitude, the intensity, and the sheer number of changes overwhelmed us. So Theresa and I did what all good women friends do. We

shared our freakouts, panics, sorrows, and epiphanies with one another. We bitched, whined, and complained, and yes celebrated, on a fairly regular basis. And we wondered. We wondered what exactly the Big M would result in. What were we actually changing into? Werebeasts? Psycho crazy ladies? Space aliens?

Then one day we were deep into a long distance discussion of these changes (and still finding some humor in them). I was lamenting that all through high school I'd wanted to be voluptuous and womanly, instead of a Twiggy-esque stick figure female, and now finally through the magic of perimenopause and age, I found myself at least looking like a goddess. Unfortunately, that goddess was Venus of Willendorf. "Venus of Who?" asked Theresa. "I learned about her in an art history class," I told her. "She's this ancient stone goddess from Crete or somewhere. She has a huge bulbous head atop a zaftig torso dominated by these ginormous pendulous breasts."

After we finished laughing together, Theresa offered the possibility that we really are becoming goddesses. Maybe The Big M is morphing us into Venuses of a sort. True, we menopausal women are not the Venus of Willendorf; a symbol of fertility, the fecund female. Nor are we Botticelli's young Venus rising lustrous and innocent from the half shell. No, our mature goddess is a real woman's goddess, a goddess for the 21st century. More than a figure of fertility, more than a benevolent goddess, more than youth and outward beauty, she is a woman. A woman at the crossroads of midlife. With all the real-life thoughts, feelings, wonderings and wisdom that the Venuses of old sure never got to voice.

It seemed, by God, time to find out just who she might be and to celebrate her coming into being.

Theresa and I decided that this celebration required expanding our circle of Venuses, (Venii, Venici?) to get input and insight dealing with and exploring our “new” lives. Looking forward and back and just being in the present moment, right here, right now. We invited women friends of all persuasions, backgrounds, occupations, and locales to join us for a slumber party with a focus. We were going to share, learn, commiserate, and vision. We were going to help one another find our way through the changes and learn who we might become for the next 50 odd years. And of course, we promised lots of chocolate and wine.

Who is this new Venus that we may be on the brink of becoming? It’s much easier to understand who she is not. Venus is not the archetypal goddess we usually envision in the full season of procreation, fruitfulness, and sexuality. She's a goddess, if not past her prime, at least past her summer. Venuse is entering the autumn of her life and her leaves are turning. Venus is leaving fertility - and basically the world as she has known it - behind. And she has no map to guide her.

She’s tall, short, rounded, thin, blonde, brunette, quiet, loud, perky, morose, single, married, partnered, in-between. She’s a CEO, a nurse practitioner, an artist, a real estate agent, a homemaker, a golf pro. She’s blue collared, white collared, and Izod golf shirt

collared. She's a Democrat, a Republican, Independent, apolitical. She's all of us; all of us mid-life women coming to grips with the myriad changes inflicted upon us by this time of life.

Including but not limited to "The Big M." The Change. Menopause.

We do feel like changelings or werewomen. Our bodies are completely unfamiliar to us during this involuntary change where it seems our very molecules are being reconstituted.

And if we don't want to change? Before us lies the opportunity to reinvent ourselves, but what if we don't want to? What if we like things the way they are?

Sorry - Mom Nature doesn't work that way.

Which brings us to our present time and place - unwilling travelers being forced down a road well trod, but poorly documented. We are embarking on a path taken for hundreds of years, yet for all we know about what lies ahead, it might as well be a maiden voyage.

Our mothers, would-be-cartographers for this unmapped journey - are less help than we hoped they would be. Many of them had their uteruses (uteri?) removed before "the Change" naturally came upon them. Dutifully ingesting their hormones, many of them appeared not to chronicle this passage. In keeping with the times, they did not talk about the changes that they did experience and may have traveled a solitary path into the

unknown. (Gail Sheehy in her book *The New Passages* calls this "the Silent Generation." But I'd also call them the unexamined generation.) Many simply ignored the changes - the unexamined life preferable to peering inside too deeply, stirring up God knows what feelings, urges, etc.

We tried reading articles and books on our own. Some of the information was helpful; some contradictory, much was overwhelming. Most of it was like reading textbooks - dry and complicated and factual. Some of it was overly upbeat and filled with new-agey advice about this wondrous transition to the glorious creature that we should be thrilled to become. I got images of Glinda, the good witch of the north, waving her wand and gliding in yards of bouffant pink tulle. Never cranky, always smiling, and certainly not sweating like a pig. Small wonder most of us were unable to relate to this fantasy scenario. We wanted to celebrate this change but we wanted it grounded in reality.

Modern women of the 21st century, we surfed the net hoping for guidance. Again, we found a dizzying array of info and confusing bits of divergent data. We "learned" that menopause was a mere hormonal blip that most women would hardly notice. On other websites, we "discovered" the opposite: that the Change was likely one of the biggest events in a woman's life, right up there with marriage and childbirth. Bioidenticals, HRT (Hormone Replacement Therapy), soy isoflavones, black cohosh, wild yams, maca root, testosterone patches, and a host of other unfamiliar remedies peppered the websites. Confronted by a veritable smorgasbord of "fixes", we found ourselves paralyzed by the sheer number of choices available. While we trusted our health care professionals, we

did not want to abdicate responsibility for our own welfare. Yet the more we researched and read, the more confounded and befuddled we were.

It soon became clear that we required much more than information. We were in desperate need of **wisdom**, that sage advice that can only come out of personal experience. We were going through BIG STUFF and we needed answers.

So we turned to one another - our fellow Venuses - for answers and questions to illuminate our journey. We founded a community of like-afflicted women eager to understand, to commiserate, and most important, to share.

Perhaps the most critical lesson we learned can be encapsulated thus: We need not travel alone. Undertaking this expedition as a solitary traveler can be hazardous in the extreme. The path is strewn with huge boulders of self-doubt, longing, anxiety, and depression. Alone, these obstacles can seem insurmountable. Together, we belay and boost one another with laughter, tears, and a collective knowledge that helps us up and over the hurdles. The synergy created through our individual sharings becomes wisdom before our very eyes.

### **A Venus Group Is Formed**

Our group of goddesses came together in an organic fashion. Theresa and I invited our closest friends, who asked some of their friends and acquaintances. We all trusted (read hoped and prayed) that we would gel into an interesting “work group”. No single one of

us knew everyone in the group. We were going to get acquainted, share openly and honestly with one another, and try to blaze a trail together all in the space of a weekend! It was a tall order indeed. But hey, we were women! We were used to doing the impossible - at work, at home, even on vacation. (For most women, vacation is just a dressed up word for work.) And as long as the wine kept flowing and the chocolate held out we had a chance. And if the whole idea fizzled or tanked into nothing more than bitching, at least we'd have had a little fun.

Let me introduce you to the original Venuses.

### **Meet Venus In All Her Guises - The Individual Goddesses**

It would be impossible to do justice to any Venus with a short, descriptive paragraph. An entire book could be written on each one of us. However, life stories are not what we want to share with you. The travails and triumphs of the menopausal and midlife journeys as we have experienced them together are the best we have to offer our sister goddesses. Of course, each woman in our group is so complex and complicated that I hate to even try to distill her essence. However, I owe it to you all to give it a shot so you'll have an idea who is speaking her piece in the chapters ahead. I even descriptively named the goddesses to make it easier to keep track of who's who since 'menopause brain' makes it harder to keep track of more than two of anything. However, I want to stress that it matters little which goddess shared which tidbit of wisdom in the meetings. Our sharings resulted from the synergy we experienced when together and we feel that the wisdom was universal. In other words, don't feel bad if you can't keep us all straight.

We think it is more important that you get what we said than worry about who said it. Heck, if we didn't have tapes, we wouldn't remember!

Menopause is the great equalizer. It matters not how much schooling a woman has had, where she lives, or what her career path has been. We found we were so much more alike than different. Our fears, concerns, hopes and desires were so alike we found ourselves to be instant sisters. As you read on, you likely will find that you recognize bits of yourself or your friends in these Venuses.

So here we are: the real-life Venuses, cast and characters of *The Big M* as we came together for the first of four annual gatherings. I want to emphasize that I'm describing who we were as of **Meeting One**. To say we went through some changes in circumstance and even identity over the years (and throughout this chronicle) is putting it mildly. Before the end of this four year journey, one of us will be divorced, one will be separated, two of us will suffer serious illness. But I'm getting ahead of myself. You'll get to experience those changes right along with us as you read further. For now, I'll introduce the goddesses as they appeared at our initial gathering.

### **Theresa - Goddess of Mischief**

Theresa-Venus is my co-conspirator and instigator of the Venus group. This upbeat can-do leprechaun has been a success at everything she has worked at in her life. Aerobics instructor (she was so inspiring that people fought to be in her class), college instructor, and real-estate maven are just a few of the permutations she's morphed through. She's a



bit of an imp and likes to ‘stir the pot’ to get us going deeper. Theresa has been our resident travel guide and fun hog, creating some of our most treasured bonding experiences. She married her high school sweetheart/soulmate 30 years ago. She has two grown children.

### **Beej - Goddess of Truth**

Beej-Venus is our larger-than-life, full-on, straight-shooter. What you see is what you get with Beej. She doesn’t pull her punches and she takes no prisoners. Beej engages in everything she does 150%. And she is a wildly generous, huge-hearted caretaker of way too many people. In that vein, it will come as no surprise that she is a nurse practitioner in private practice. She is a fantastic writer and could easily be a stand-up comedienne. She’s been married 26 years and has two grown children.

### **Jane - Goddess of Perfection**

Jane-Venus is arguably our most glamorous Venus. She always looks perfectly put together. Her hair, jewelry, make-up, and clothes are nothing short of impeccable. We’d hate her for that if she weren’t so wonderful to be around. She is organized, efficient, and extremely competent in her work incarnations (former schoolteacher and caterer, now real estate agent), volunteer activities, and personal life as well. Ah well, someone in our group has to represent perfection. She’s happily married to a wild Hungarian and has a grown son.

### **Bobbi - Goddess of Empathy**

Bobbi-Venus may be the sweetest of all the Venuses. She rarely says an unkind word and is giving to a fault. She's the official homemaker of the group, although she has been an unofficial private duty nurse, creator of an elementary school self-esteem program, caterer, and personality consultant. She acts as spiritual guidance counselor for the Venuses, which both delights and irritates us. Hey, growth is hard! Bobbi is a fine art photographer in her spare time. She has been happily married for over 25 years and has two grown daughters.

### **Claire - Goddess of Caregiving**

Claire-Venus in her high-powered career for a major air carrier managed to raise a family, while traveling for her job to far-flung places. After leaving the airline, she started a boutique travel business leading groups in the south of France. She then threw herself into the 'job' of self-knowledge, and spiritual growth. While all women are givers, Claire is world-class. If there were an Olympic event in helping, Claire would have several gold medals. She delights in singing and lends her incredible vocal talents to a choral group. Claire has been married for 25 years and has two grown children.

### **Carol Ann - Goddess of Sunbeams**

Carol Ann-Venus is a sunshiny sprite, who seems to sprinkle fairy dust wherever she flits. A dental hygienist by profession, she has recently had to stop working because of severe health issues. Rather than becoming despondent or bitter over the obstacles she's encountered, Carol Ann has found new strength in her challenges. She is unfailingly

optimistic about everything. Her spiritual life been a profound source of comfort to her, and she approaches each day with gratitude. She is happily married and has two children.

### **Courtney - Goddess of Authenticity**

Courtney-Venus is the contrarian pragmatist of the group. When we wander astray or get too 'far out', she brings us back to center. She doesn't do perky or cutesy. She is very interested in getting at the truth of things and often helps us wrestle with issues we might rather avoid. Her self-deprecating humor masks a wry emotional intelligence that the Venuses value highly, even when it makes us uncomfortable. She is the authenticity barometer, yet she offers her probing with such caring that we happily stretch beyond our preconceived limits. Previously married and divorced, she has been living with a mate for the past five years and they recently bought a house together. She has three grown children.

### **Sharon -Goddess of Advocacy**

Sharon-Venus is a nurturing presence for all of us. She is the youngest Venus, yet it sometimes seems to us that she is mentor, friend, and even mother to us. Part of her presence may derive from the fact that she has been involved as an advocate for women's health issues for most of her life. She is the CEO of a company that formulates and distributes women's natural health products, many of which are useful in the transition of Menopause. She is a board member for a woman's health foundation called Women In Balance. ([www.WomeninBalance.org](http://www.WomeninBalance.org)) Although she has not yet started the Menopausal

journey, she is our resident natural health expert on this transition. Sharon has been divorced and has now embarked on an exciting new relationship.

### **Karen - Goddess of Creativity**

Karen-Venus is our next youngest Venus. A whirlwind of energy, she is a speaker and consultant, a successful artist, and a best-selling author. In her spare time, she acts, sings, and dances. Whew, she makes us tired. She is wise beyond her years, and is able to help counsel and guide us in becoming the best goddess each of us can be. However, perimenopause (what she laughingly refers to as her ‘peri como’, because something this weird deserves a funny name) has thrown her into a tailspin. Fortunately, we are all here for her. Been there, done that, actually still doing that. She is happily married for 12 years and has no human children, but a couple of furry ones still live at home.

### **Lei -Goddess of Island Wisdom**

Lei-Venus is an amazing amalgam of “local” Hawaiian girl and savvy businesswoman. Her early incarnations included professional hula dancer and bank mortgage consultant. COO of a catamaran building company, she no longer actually crafts boats with her husband. (Although she is fully capable of doing so.) Lei now concentrates on the marketing and management of the company, along with the ordering, payroll, and bookkeeping. A successful jewelry artist, she volunteers her time to schools and elder programs teaching them to make their own adornments. She offers the Venuses a unique perspective of common-sense island-style wisdom, when we get bogged down in our

small dramas. She married her soulmate 25 years ago. They have no biological children, but are 'Auntie' and 'Uncle' to scores of young people.

### **Sandy -Goddess of Keeping the Peace**

Sandy-Venus is Theresa-Venus's sister. A middle child, she is a born mediator. Sandy is uniquely skilled at seeing others' points of view and finding the middle ground to effect compromise among dissenting positions. Often to Sandy, it has seemed easier to know the viewpoints of others than to know her own. She was unsure how much she had to offer the Venuses at first and determined to be the 'fly on the wall' unless her peacemaking talents were needed. However, Sandy, like all the Venuses, is a strong, intelligent woman. In spite of her original intentions and reservations, she became a voice of clarity, often piercing through to the heart of a matter with a pointed question or recommendation. Sandy is our blue-collar gal. She works as an accounting manager for a construction company - a woman working in a mostly male bastion. She has been married for 27 years to a man who cooks (we all envy her this except Theresa-Venus who also has a man who cooks.) She has two children.

### **Lynette -Goddess of the Written Word**

Lastly, there's me: Lynette-Venus. I'm co-facilitator (with Theresa-Venus) of our group and official Scribe for the Venuses. My main role is to focus our gatherings and sift through our sharings for the fabulously abundant wit and wisdom that we can't wait to share with our sister goddesses. The overflow that didn't fit in the book and the sharings of other goddesses around the globe can be found at [www.MenopauseGoddessBlog.org](http://www.MenopauseGoddessBlog.org).

I've been a nurse manager, a business consultant, and writer. I live with my soulmate of 20 years in Moloka'i, Hawai'i and Lake Tahoe, Nevada. We have two grown children.

### **A Slumber Party With A Focus**

When Theresa and I began organizing our first gathering of midlife women for a weekend of sharing, we knew that we needed to provide a focus. That focus in a nutshell? To figure out WHAT was happening to us, HOW we were going to cope, and ultimately WHERE we were going from here. WHY didn't even enter into it - that's a question with no possibility of a reasonable answer, so we figured it was just better not to even go there. In the spirit of beginning to map the journey for the next phases of our lives, we felt it was important to do some preliminary soul searching. We drafted a questionnaire to accompany our invitation, designing it to help us in our self-inquiry and literally begin the group work before our first meeting. We wanted to look at ourselves past and present, what we wished we had known earlier, as well as what we're glad we didn't know, our best and worst life moments, our collective values and how they might have changed over the years. Theresa and I hoped that our answers would serve as the grist for our initial sharings.

### **The Invitation:**

Hello dear friend,

Welcome to our weekend long slumber party - no men, no makeup, loose tongues, food and spirits, lots of fun. We're thinking spontaneity and open discourse, humor and heart, laughter and an honest look at our lives from this midlife vantage point. Theresa and

Lynette hope to write about some of what we all come up with together. We have a working title of “Venus Rising: A REAL Women’s Guide to the Goddess Within” . Also under consideration is “Venus Rising, the Wisdom of Menopausal Goddesses”. We’ll explain all about Venus when we see you.

This will be our contribution to the welfare of women for generations to come. Or not. It ought to be a great time regardless.

We’ll stay in a great house with a spectacular view of Lake Tahoe. We’ll eat meals in, so we don’t have to be polite in public or dress up or anything. October can be cool, so bring warm clothes. We’ll probably go on a hike, so bring comfortable shoes.

To help us all get started, we came up with a few questions. Please fill them out and send them back to us by September 15. You can email them to us - email to lynette at [LynetteSh@aol.com](mailto:LynetteSh@aol.com) . email to theresa at [souers@homeintahoe.com](mailto:souers@homeintahoe.com). Or if you prefer, you can snail mail them in the enclosed envelope.

Bring your favorite CD’s, pajamas (flannel is great unless hot flashes are a problem), stuffed animals or other totems - you know stuff for a slumber party. Mostly just bring your wonderful witty selves. We can’t wait!!!

Accompanying the invitation, the following questionnaire was sent to the Venuses, who dutifully, even eagerly filled them out and returned them. Take some time to fill out the

questions for yourself. All the Venuses felt that the questions provided an opportunity to dialogue with themselves, to remember and reflect, and to examine anew their attitudes, values, and feelings.

1. What books would be your “Desert Island “ books - the books you absolutely would not be able to get by without if stranded on a desert island?
2. Self -help books - which were your favorites or had the strongest impact?  
(if so inclined, hi-lite special passages)
3. Movies or movie scenes  
which were your favorites or had the strongest impact?
4. What were/are your Best life moments? Describe.
5. Worst life moments? Describe.
6. What were your pet peeves at age 20?
7. What are your pet peeves now?
8. What was your dream vacation at age 20?
9. What would be your dream vacation now?
10. What were your thoughts on friendship at age 20?
11. What are your thoughts on friendship now?
12. What do you wish you had known sooner re:
  - a. men
  - b. kids,
  - c. aging
  - d. career/work
  - e. friendship
  - f. anything
13. What are you glad you didn't know sooner about the same things?
14. Knowing what you know now what would you do differently?
15. What do you wish you had done more of?



16. Less of?
17. From your perspective now, what is life about?
18. How does this play out in your daily life or does it?
19. If a book was written about your life, why would anyone want to read it?
20. Any questions or anything else you would like to contribute?

Theresa and I thought the goddesses would cover multiple topics from the questionnaire at our first gathering. As it turned out, however, we were single-minded in our focus - the *Change* was all we could think about!

### **Off And Running**

We came together that first weekend ready to blaze a new trail for this midlife journey. We mapped and chronicled our travels like good little explorers and now we offer them to all our sister goddesses with hope that they might have an easier passage. We passionately believe that a smoother transition is guaranteed when undertaken in community with other women. For that reason, we invite you to eavesdrop on our meetings and join our journey vicariously through these pages. It's also why we've included a how-to guide for creating your own Venus group at the end of this book.

**Read on to join us on our travels. Laugh, cry and share with us an open exploration of the terrors and the joys, the pitfalls and the promise of this midlife passage.**

