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At Sixty-Five

FROM *The American Scholar*

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, I've really begun to feel age. I feel it in my left eye, which sometimes leaks spontaneously—I swipe at it with the back of my wrist and people take me to be weeping. I feel it in my new habit of swinging both legs out of the car at the same time, apparently in unconscious response to a directive from the part of my brain that monitors muscle strength and balance. Having risen to my feet, I feel it in an embarrassing arthritic hobble that takes me ten seconds to walk off, hoping all the while that other parking-lot crossers aren't noticing, though several of them seem to be suffering from the same condition, or worse.

I hasten to add that though my muscles may be weakening and my joints stiffening, I'm not infirm. I'm as vigorous as I ever was, and reasonably healthy. Mentally I'm quite intact, though my memory, always bad, grows worse. People tell me I seem younger than my years.

But as I say, I'm feeling age. I feel it in my invisibility to strangers. I haven't been nubile for many years, and never got many glances when I was. I didn't mind that, or told myself I didn't. I saw my ordinary looks as protective coloration, a duck blind behind which I could comfortably observe and take my shots. But I'm not at all sure I like this new kind of anonymity, which is an absolute dismissal. Even in contextualized situations like readings and receptions, eyes slide past me; internal shutters fail to click.

When I was thirty, I felt sure that a paradoxical reward awaited me at sixty, if I made it that far. Having never had any beauty to lose, I reasoned, I'd be exempted from mourning its loss. But as

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I've grown older, this proposition has turned inside out. I see now that I did have at least some beauty—not much, but some—and exactly because I had so little, I could hardly afford to lose it. Now, at this inconvenient moment, I realize that I do care about my looks. I find myself spending more energy compensating for my inadequacies than I used to. I search for becoming clothes. I color my hair. I experiment, in a gingerly way, with makeup. I suspect these efforts don't do a lot for me, though they do make some difference, if only in letting people know I'm trying.

But it's not easy to judge success or failure, when these days the reference class itself is collapsing. So many women my age have fallen victim to disqualifying conditions; it's hardly a consolation to congratulate myself on having escaped the ones I've so far escaped. After sixty, nearly every blessing is hinged to a curse that has fallen on someone else. Counting those blessings takes the form of saying to myself, At least I don't have varicose veins; at least I don't have a bald spot; at least I don't have a dowager's hump. Surely there's a diminishing utility in these kinds of comparisons, which extend seamlessly from minor gloating to deadly *schadenfreude*. (At least I haven't lost my mind. At least I'm not alone.)

There's a saving element of aesthetic disinterestedness in my new concern for superficialities. I find I can amuse myself for hours looking at clothes in stores. In the process, I learn about line and mass and balance, note that V-neck sweaters are flattering and that elbow-length sleeves are not. (Would that I'd learned these lessons earlier, when they were more applicable!) I take pleasure in rifling through racks, in running my fingers over fabrics, in holding garments at arm's length and appreciating the poignant way they seem to be offering themselves: *Choose me!* Saleswomen understand what I'm just now coming to acknowledge, which is the primitive imperative to decorate oneself, even if one is a crone—*especially* if one is a crone. "Ready to check out," they ask as I stand before a mirror, draping myself with scarves, "or still playing?"

I do most of this playing and self-decorating alone, but also sometimes in the company of other women. It's an odd surprise to me that these days I experience myself as more feminine than I ever did in my childbearing years, or at least more identified with other women. Now that all, or most, bets are off, I see that the deep alienation I felt from my gender for most of my life was largely defensive. Under the aspect of decline, I understand other

women better. As our sags and wrinkles make us kin, I feel a tenderness for them, particularly for their—for our—slight shoulders and delicate wrists, those skeletal markers of femininity that no drag queen can approximate. I'm persuaded that we're alike, that we were alike all along. I feel a new sympathy for other women, and for myself.

Tiresias-like, I understand men better too, and make allowance for the lust that enslaves them all their lives. I think of the boys I knew when I was a teenager, of what was really going on in their minds. How could I have missed it?

Another small surprise: the intense pleasure I take in pure, strong, flamboyant color. A yellow hibiscus blossom, seen at a distance, will stop me in my tracks. Many years ago my husband and I spent a few nights in a New England guesthouse. One morning I came to breakfast in a bright red top, an unusual choice for me. Our hostess, a bent, muttering old thing, emerged from behind her dark desk under the stairs and trotted up to me, all animation now, her eyes alight. "RED!" she bellowed. "I LOVE RED!" I was baffled and amused. What was this about, this senile glee? Now I begin to understand.

Thirty years ago I assumed I would take the eccentric route as I aged, become one of those bluff, outspoken, truth-telling old women people claim to admire, even as they avoid them. That would have been in keeping with my strong contrarian impulse. But instead of growing bolder and more heedless, I seem to be growing more circumspect, more nervously observant of the proprieties, more conscious of other people's feelings.

At my age, motives are generally multiple. I can think of three explanations for this development in my behavior. Ranged along a continuum that moves from most to least cynical, they are as follows:

1. Age is unnecessary, as Lear observed. More and more I feel that I'm here on sufferance. If I don't want to be left out on an ice floe, I'd better try to be pleasant.
2. Being interesting is getting harder, but I can always be good.
3. Age is slowly melting away the outer layers of my personality, revealing the sweetness within.

I feel my aging in my moods, which have always been volatile, but are steadier now than they were when I was still menstruating and out of my mind for half the month. Even so, I can't say I often feel serene. A lot of the time what I feel is a buzzy muzziness, as though I need to give my head a good shake (perhaps it's tinnitus). And though my moods have stabilized, the background coloration of my subjectivity has darkened. This is a difficult distinction to make, because the concepts of mood and color seem inseparable, but a darkening of mood is not the same as a lowering of mood. It's an indelible staining, the result of a long immersion in the vat of years. Depression can occur concomitantly, of course. In fact, the darkening makes the lowering more likely.

I can't deny that often I am depressed, but I also find myself in the grip of an inalienable stoicism. Even when my moods are acutely painful, I no longer try to force my way out of them through explosion or confrontation or drinking. The price in shame would be too high: after sixty, one no longer gets the discounted rate. I simply wait for my moods to go away. What replaces them is nothing like euphoria. It's often the default state of muzziness I describe above, but sometimes—if the mood has been very bad, and I'm lucky—the muzziness lifts like a California fog and I enjoy an interval of steady, neutral clarity.

Not only am I better at containing my emotions, I'm also much more in control of my appetites, partly because many of them have shrunk. I'm improved in many other ways as well; I'm more conscientious, more prudent, better organized, more reliable. It amazes me that in my youth I was so morally careless and cheerfully self-destructive. I remember late nights in my early twenties, joyously rocketing along piney back roads in some drunk's car toward a party house rented by an older male reprobate. What was I after? I can't recall, though I do remember what I got. Now I feel poisoned if I drink two glasses of wine. Not that feeling poisoned stops me, though it does slow me down.

I'm proud of my newfound moderation and self-control, but I also must report that I've begun to notice in myself a certain age-related tendency to peevishness. Like the fussy old lady in C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, who only wants a properly made cup of tea and a piece of really crisp toast, I get seriously annoyed when the soup I've ordered comes to the table lukewarm. In earlier days I'd have bolted it obliviously, along with a sandwich, but a tiny

disappointment like this really bothers me now: the only lunch I'll get today, ruined! Even so, I won't send it back to be reheated. That's not like me. That's the behavior of my alter ego, the grouse-stick-brandishing old bat I haven't become.

I also notice an age-related touchiness, an increased sensitivity to slights and insults to my dignity. I've always been easily hurt and quick to anger, but when I was young there was a robustness to my reactions. What I feel now instead of a straightforward rage is a quivering, querulous outrage that I have no choice but to conceal behind a tight smile. It's as if I suddenly expect chivalric treatment: How can people wound me when I'm old and I can no longer chalk their slights up to experience? How can they hurt me when I can no longer learn anything from it?

I've become much more sensible about my health, but also more relaxed about the prospect of getting sick. For many years I interpreted every flutter in my stomach as the sure sign of something terminal. Occasionally my panics took me to the emergency room, where irritated interns looked me over and sent me home, but mostly I avoided doctors because I feared that they'd catch me out. Diagnosis meant judgment, and sickness meant death. I lived much of my adult life in a state of medical dread. I look back on my earlier self with exasperation; so much of life wasted in vague neurotic terror, when now it turns out that all along I was quite well. Only a person who knew nothing of illness could have romanticized it the way I did, allowed it to carry so much existential freight.

Now I shrug off symptoms that thirty years ago would have had me calling an ambulance; but I also monitor my health. I take long conditioning walks, I floss faithfully, I keep regular hours, I seek balance. I actually find it comforting to stand in line at the pharmacy, to produce my Aetna card at the doctor's office. I suffer from none of the obscure and terrifying ailments I feared when I was younger, though I do require medication for elevated blood pressure and high cholesterol. I find it almost reassuring to have developed these garden-variety, though serious, conditions. I've joined the great citizen army of the elderly, and finally I'm like everyone else. In a few weeks I'll be eligible for Medicare!

My fear of death is considerably diminished, or perhaps it's only more diffuse, more mixed together with the other elements of my

subjectivity. At any rate, I no longer sit bolt upright in bed, gasping at the thought of personal extinction. I suppose that aging is getting me used to the idea—limbering me up for it, so to speak. What fills me with dread these days is not the prospect of my own death but the thought of losing my husband.

I check in with a psychiatrist at irregular intervals, a cheerful man in his mid-seventies. I admire his graceful and realistic acceptance of his own aging, and would take him as a model if I could feel any certainty that the path of my aging will follow his—there are so many possible branchings. The last time I was in his office, I asked him, *What are the compensations of age?* "Well," he said, tentatively, "how about wisdom?" I was disappointed. That was it, wisdom? "Wisdom?" I said. "I'm wise enough already." He smiled faintly at this wise-guy riposte, lapsed into silence for a moment, and then quietly mentioned that old friends of his had been dying at an increasing rate lately. "Just one," he said, "after another."

Oh, how foolish I was in an essay I wrote a decade ago, to carry on as though I were ancient and resigned to it. Such presumption, and I was barely menopausal! The prematurity of this claim left me in an awkward position, like a sheepish party guest who has made a great show of saying goodnight to everyone and then finds she must return to retrieve her car keys.

Young people are forever professing shock when I mention my age. "You can't be," they say, and I assure them, with a certain grim relish, that I am. They continue to protest, but begin to take my word for it. I walk away from these encounters feeling like a fraud, partly because I've so obviously been fishing for compliments, but more importantly because I've left the impression that I'm an authority about age, that I know where I am in my life. I'm reminded of the shame I felt when I was twelve and I told my eight-year-old cousin some nonsense about sex in a falsely wised-up way.

This is a good time in my life. To say otherwise would be rank ingratitude. I've finally worked free of the agitation and misery of youth, which in my case extended well into middle age. I've learned better how to live, to do my part in maintaining my marriage, to master impulse and cultivate self-respect. If only, I find myself thinking, I can manage to keep it up for a while, I can shape the end of my life in a way that justifies and redeems what came

before. But I'm suspicious of that ambition: it puts me in mind of some heresy I read about once—I forget its name.

I can't know, of course, how long I'll be able to keep it up. I can't know where I stand in relation to the end. What I do know is that a lot can happen during the time I have. It's a happening time: the late years are an avalanche of contingency. All the ways of going, all the ways that lead up to going—the ischemic episodes, embolisms, syncopes, infarctions, -omas! I could have a bad fall, drift into dementia, develop diabetes or pulmonary obstruction or heart disease or all three at once, discover I have cancer. I could lose my sight, my hearing, my colon, my husband. A sinister home health aide could steal my electronics and credit cards and disappear, leaving me without food for days. The state could take away my driver's license.

Any of these things, or any combination of them, could happen, and soon. Or not: I could continue moving along the gently tilted plateau I've been negotiating for years now, though the angle has been growing a little steeper. I could continue to write, to take walks and cook and travel and drink (moderately) and have lunch with friends and talk to my husband. Whatever happens, I continue to have a future. What will that future consist of? As always, I don't know, though the range of possibility has narrowed considerably. I don't know, and the reason I'm tempted to carry on as if I did is that I'm trying to bargain, in some primitive way, with my unknown fate. But there's no bargaining, no knowing the worst, no protecting myself from the shocks of age.

"Lord," says the psalmist, "make me to know mine end, and the measure of my days, what it is; that I may know how frail I am." The Lord, if I read the psalm correctly, gives no response. In the psalm's last line, the psalmist-petitioner drops his demand for knowledge in favor of a plea for an extension: "O spare me, that I may recover strength, before I go hence and be no more."