

Falling in love again at 47 and marrying for the second time at 52 was a miracle. And a bit frightening.

But, then again, falling in love is always phenomenal and terrifying.

We took care of each other, inconsequential things: me, placing a water glass on his bedside table; him, refilling my coffee as I wrote in the morning.

We touched each other often, like shorthand. *I'm here. I'm here.*

I never doubted we'd spend our later years holding hands, having better sex than ever, kissing our way around the world, then ... eventually... in the distant future ... the *way* distant future... face dying together.

But then, at 60, my husband announced he wanted to have a child with a younger woman.

Immediately, my hips widened, my breasts sagged, and my wrinkles deepened. Every internalized belief and vision of what it meant to be an old, unwanted, irrelevant woman became me.

A few years earlier, I'd started talking about death. I'm not obsessed; I'm practical. Although I didn't have a specific illness, I was aware that my life was limited—not in the sense that I could get hit by a bus tomorrow (really, how likely is that?) but in the awareness I had more past than future. I wanted to complete our wills, fill out medical proxy forms, and learn his burial preference—burial or cremation, sweetie? Did he want all life-saving measures or not to be resuscitated? I needed to take care of these details. So, if, God forbid, I did get hit by that bus tomorrow, I wouldn't spend my last moments alive thinking: *shit, I never got around to filling out those forms.*

My husband didn't want to talk about getting old and dying. He did not want to choose between burial or cremation. He did not want to even *think* about it. Although everyone who has ever lived on this earth has died, it felt like a personal affront to him. I got that. I even felt that. We were both doing this damn aging thing for the first time, like learning a new sport, and we both felt clumsy, scared, and inadequate. I simply wished to take care of the paperwork and return, believing we would live forever together.

Accepting old age was considered sinful. Or at least shameful. Or maybe weak. My images of aging had always been dismal: yellow toenails, dark spots, dim mind, and crepe neck.

I'd bought moisturizers, magic anti-wrinkle creams, and exercise programs promising to reduce flab and fight gravity. I'd read articles suggesting clothes and hairstyles that camouflaged tell-tale signs of aging. Brain exercises like sudoku tried to stave off forgetfulness.

So, together we'd exercised, ate organic, and pretended we could make youth last. I'd imagined us till the end, laughing and commiserating as we handled the shifts and tweaks aging requires.

There was no correct way to age. Some of us were overwhelmed with the grief of lost youth. Others tried to exercise their way to eternal life. Some took risks, jumping out of airplanes or switching to jobs that once frightened them. Many were filled with endless doctor's appointments. Some were despondent with regrets.

For many, as we neared the borders of elderly, as we came closer to the end of life, there could be an edginess that caused some of us to topple our lives, going for change and busyness as a way of avoiding our dread of this next phase.

My husband chose to have his first baby.

I didn't see that coming.

Sixty was the age of leaving the house and returning for the car keys, the age of *have you seen my glasses?* The age of sudden, unwanted diagnoses. Who left a marriage at this point?

Turned out a lot of people.

The divorce rate for people in the U.S. aged 50 and older was almost double what it was in the 1990s. There were names for this group: *silver splitters*.

Ugh.

When I was younger, I'd agonized about how I'd age. My fears ran the gamut: growing stupid, not knowing my children's names, having strangers clean my body, being immobilized by bad hips or knees, or never staying awake for the end of the story.

I became afraid of the junk. So many boxes live in my basement Piles of old journals, clippings from old newspapers, a broken vase that needed glue, totems from friends, and articles I intended to read were stuffed in file cabinets.

I dreaded having the jumble of my life spread over the lawn, left out on the little strip of grass between the sidewalk and the street.

"What did she keep all this for?" one of my kids would ask.

And I would scream from the underworld, "I planned to clean it all out. I just ran out of time."

Now, I questioned my friends: *What is your plan?* Age in place? Community living? *What is the procedure?* I heard my voice rise with an edge of panic. I did not believe I'd react well when asked to give up my car keys.

But all this planning turned out to be futile. I didn't get to choose from my fantasy menu of aging options. Remember the old Yiddish saying: Man plans, and God laughs.

This new phase of life required a different mindset. What if I treated this aging as an adventure, like traveling to a new land? Who knew what path I'd take or what I'd discover? Imagine how glittery I'd be – if I filled in my cracks like the Japanese tradition of kintsugi, patching broken pottery with gold and silver. Imagine if, instead of averting my eyes, I looked at aging with awe.

And with this altered perception of aging, whole worlds opened up.

When my youngest son, from my first marriage, got engaged, he asked, "So, Mom, do you still believe in love and marriage?"

I wanted to take my time here; he'd witnessed both my divorces. Each person we love takes a little piece of us, and then they're careless, forget to look both ways, drink too much, climb mountain cliffs, or are otherwise negligent.

People die. They fall out of love. They leave.

We grieve.

The only way to avoid this pain is to avoid love. But that is too hard a way to live.

"Yes," I said. "I do." I paused and said, "Love alone isn't enough. You need to be fearless."

Because a funny thing happened during my grief over my husband. I discovered I really liked living alone. I found my way back to myself. Of course, it was difficult to describe being alone and happy without sounding like I was trying to convince myself that low-fat yogurt tastes as delicious as ice cream. But there could be a gratifying ending with being in alliance with myself, my desires, and the people I cherish.

People around me are beginning to ask, are you seeing anyone? Are you dating? I understood their motivation. It was some version of getting back on the horse.

A happy ending for this saga of lost love would involve me meeting another love. It wasn't a terrible notion. I am a sucker for love. I am still the woman who watches romantic comedies. I am still a believer.

Friends and family members would relax if I fell in love again. They would stop imagining long, bleak, lonely evenings for me. Probably the only people who wouldn't care if I am in a relationship or not are my grandchildren. I love them for it.

My husband and I have chosen very different paths to age.

Maybe, I couldn't jump as high. Conversations from last week sometimes drew blanks. But I valued sitting and listening to a long meandering story of my granddaughter's nightmare.

I sat on the floor yesterday playing with cars and dinosaurs with my two-year-old grandson. I said, half in jest, "I'm not sure how to get up."

"Like this, Nonna." He demonstrated putting his two hands on the floor and his bottom in the air and pushing.

I laughed so hard I fell over.

My body didn't work as it once did, but I was committed to not letting embarrassment or shame get in my way. I was determined to still get on the floor and play with cars. Even if it meant I must put my ass in the air to get up.

I am strengthening my skills for this new land. I am learning to ask for help and be more gracious in accepting it. I am learning to disclose what I don't know or when I'm unsure. I attempt to admit when I'm wrong and to apologize. (Of course, I should have tried that one

earlier, but better late than never.) I've committed to taking care of myself: resting when tired, being outside more, and not creating daily to-do lists that actually require three days to complete

I'm working on accepting that I cannot create happiness for anyone else. I can share joy and wonder, crack jokes, and join in the laughter, but I cannot develop a sense of serenity in another person. Despite my many years as a therapist and a parent, I know I cannot prevent suffering. I can sit with my children, grandchildren, friends, and patients. I can hold their hands and offer a shoulder to cry on, encourage and cheer them on; I can soothe hurt and troubled feelings. I can advocate for them and help them find resources. But finding a sense of well-being is their own work to do. That is an inside job.

And, of course, that also applies to me.

I have let go of the idea that I will make a big splash and solve the world's problems. I recycle, protest and donate, but I really have no idea how to protect endangered species or get the world to pay attention to climate change. Or end poverty. Or child abuse. Or war. Or racism.

I savor small pleasures. Daffodils. Growing beans we can eat. I pull my novel out of the drawer and dust it off. At work, I ask for a raise and get it. I focus on the birdsong in the pre-dawn light.

Despite the visible reminders of old age, strangers say hi and smile at me. I believe, *Ha! They are admiring an energetic, engaged old woman.*

I still carry a self-image of a graceful, pretty woman, so I'm shocked when I see a lumbering gray-haired photo. I tell myself that I've always photographed poorly.

I choose to live with these two delusions: I photograph terribly, and strangers admire me. There are worse ones. I could choose to believe I control the world, or should, and always be

upset when things don't go the way I'd planned. I could choose to live with the delusion that by 70, the world owes me something and be pissed when it doesn't come my way. I could choose to live with the illusion that aging and dying are not in my cards and be horrified at the process. I could choose to live with all sorts of delusions that would cause me to be resentful and scared.

Instead, I choose to feel graceful and believe that strangers on the street are wishing me well.