

NEW YORK FORUM

ABOUT PEOPLE

Growing Up — But Not Old

By Meg Peterson

JUST AS I was leaving for a party in Hoboken, to celebrate my 60th birthday, a young man appeared at my door. I mean young, as in gorgeous! He pushed his way into the kitchen, handed me a red rose, and said, "Oh, it's so good to see you, again."

"It is?" I fumbled for a hint of when we'd met. "You look familiar, but I can't quite place you."

"You can't?" he said coyly. "So that's all our evening meant to you? How could you have forgotten so soon? I certainly haven't!"

He showed me a doctor's bill for treatment of a herniated disk — the result, he said, of a strenuous night in a motel. With me? I protested. I didn't remember any night in a motel. Despite my questions, he stuck to his story, insisting that I was worth more than women half my age. He was right, of course, but how did he know?

Then it dawned on me where I had seen this energetic young man. He was an actor, and had starred recently in a play opposite an old friend of mine. So this was a joke. Bless her! She had saved my day. Later I left for Hoboken, having totally forgotten that I should act my age — and even what it was.

In truth, I really didn't mind turning 60 — considering the alternative — but I never expected that it would happen to me. It was something reserved for my mother and grandmother. And I certainly didn't resemble *them*. I had not one gray hair (that anyone could see), I ran three miles a day, I climbed mountains, and I consumed my own homemade muesli. Nobody offered me a seat on the bus or called me Ma'am. Even with five grown children and one grandchild, I thought of myself as entering middle age, still wondering what I would do when I grew up.

This landmark birthday might have passed without any ill effects were it not for all the fuss made by my friends and relatives. Early in the day,

I had opened some greeting cards, all of them depressing: senile characters in wild dress attesting to my individuality; announcements that the warranty on my body had expired; and 60 candles burning radiantly above the caption, "Perhaps it would be better to light just one candle than to curse the brightness."

I went out for a walk in the park to dissipate my growing panic. Obviously I was being oversensitive.

When I returned, the message light on my phone was flashing. "Happy Birthday to You" sang my kids, each one adding a special greeting. Why did they have to go on so about this new phase of my life? How dare they extol the virtues of longevity! I fought back the tears. This *must* be a real turning point. I was falling apart.

Several weeks later I concluded that it wasn't being 60 that bothered me, but what other people said and felt about it. My older sister assured me that this very respectable decade wasn't that bad once you got used to it. So I decided henceforth to announce my age proudly to the world.

My young neighbors were the first to get the news. "Oh, my God! You're as old as my parents," the wife said, incredulously. "I never would have guessed it — you seem so young. I hope I have half your energy and look half as good as you when I'm . . ."

"Don't go on or I'll throw up," I warned.

But it's not only the young folks whose reaction to age is damaging — it's the misguided

peer who has sold out to what I call RWH syndrome: Resignation Without Hope. This can be brought on by any number of everyday mishaps — a pulled tendon, a turned ankle, a back temporarily thrown out. Once the syndrome takes hold, the formerly active victim can be heard repeating such phrases as: "Sometimes you just have to learn to live with it," or, "Once you get one ailment it leads to another. Mark my words. When it rains it pours!"

Then comes the final, most damaging phrase: "After all, what can you expect? We're not getting any younger."

I have now come full circle in my approach to age. I play the game, dispense with honesty, and never look back. Recently I attended an art opening and spent the evening conversing with a charming gentleman of indeterminate age who asked for my phone number. "By the way," he said, "how old are you?"

"How old do you think I am?" I replied.

"About my age . . . 48."

"How ever did you guess?" said I.

Meg Peterson is a freelance writer who has written extensively in the field of music education.

