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The Blue Hour

(Extract from a work-in-progress)

Here it is, the day of clean slates and resolutions; it is my birthday, and a day that too often fulfils a forecast of brimstone-hellish heat. I passed it once, half-mad with loneliness, without seeing or speaking to anyone; once I spent it at a hospital where my father lay stricken with a brain tumour; a mistaken marriage collapsed the same day. J. D. Salinger, E. M. Forster, Alfred Stieglitz, and Maria Edgeworth are among the famous born on January 1st but in life I rarely meet anyone who shares my birthday, or anyone who would want to.

As a child, this turning of my age with the turning of the year gave each New Year's Day added gravity and momentum; I might even have believed, back then, that to be born on the first day of the year was auspicious. In my teens, and interested in astrology as so many of us were in the 1960s, I read that those born under my sign of Capricorn tend to age backwards. Astrologers agreed that Capricorns flourish as they approach old age, that they appear old when they are young and young when they are old, and my black and white baby photographs, with their images of an unusually wizened and serious small creature, did not contradict this theory.

Like all teenagers, my old age felt as distant as the planet Saturn that is said to rule Capricorn. Named for the Roman god of agriculture, and of time, Saturn, with its relentless twenty-nine-year orbit of the sun and its nine beautiful icy rings, is the last of the planets in our solar system that is visible to the naked eye; Saturn marks the border of all that can easily be seen from Earth, and beyond it the universe reels away into realms of darkness and uncertainty. But I remember the comfort of that promise of old age bringing a blossoming rather than a sad decline. As the sixties gave way to the seventies my interest in astrology would wane, yet I squirrelled away that one nugget of information as a private, self-nourishing belief. And despite its origins in a seductive yet unprovable system of planetary influence on human lives, the important thing is that having been primed with a positive message about ageing I feel only minimal resistance to navigating the transition from being middle-aged to elderly. Which is just as well, for my resolution this year is to learn how to be old.

“My body wanes, my mind waxes: in my old age there is a coming into flower.”

Victor Hugo.

It is fair to say that men and women experience ageing differently. With their history of dominance, men have traditionally fared better than women, who suffer the fallout from both an idealisation of youth and the premium placed on feminine beauty. Bearing the burden of a view that equates beauty with youth has made women notoriously reticent about admitting their years, and almost nothing generates so much resistance and dread as when we are asked to publicly state our age, especially in a career context.

As with puppies and kittens, to be beautiful when one is young is more or less guaranteed, while beauty in age may be less straightforward. Yet I have seen images of old women so luminous, so ripe with life, and with the powerful traces of time on their faces, that tears have sprung to my eyes in response. But the pressure on young girls that results in their sexualised appearance even before puberty is the same pressure that at the other end of life insists that women “of a certain age” must not “let themselves go,” that they resist ageing. Even the coyness of that phrase “a certain age” delivers a coded warning, and, put on the spot, women tend to scurry for cover—if we are being honest, most of us hope that with luck and decent lighting we can pass for being younger.

From the battalions of expensive “age-defying” face creams in the makeup aisles, to the absence of older women in the media, women spend their lives internalising the message that to grow old is an admission of failure. In 1970 Simone de Beauvoir wrote of female ageing as the “shameful secret,” and decades of feminism have wrought little change. From menopause onwards, women report becoming transparent, until at around sixty they begin to realise that old women are widely regarded as diminished beings, and that our youth-driven culture harbours a deep revulsion for the age-altered female body.

To be fair to men, they also suffer. If Madonna has been accused of a “lack of dignity” for performing beyond her sixtieth birthday, there are many who would silence Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones—a band who still fill stadiums across the globe—simply because they are old. The ageing Yeats said that being old made him “tired and furious”; French writer and politician Chateaubriand declared old age “a shipwreck,” while the poet Pierre de Ronsard, disgusted by his withered body, wrote “I have nothing left but bones.” Plenty of men feel driven to deny their age, and this is evident in attempts at comb-overs, in the lucrative business of hair-transplants and regrowth, and more simply in the baldness-masking shaved heads of recent decades.

Sitting in the sun in her south-facing Hampstead garden with its ripening peaches, Lady Slane, the gentle yet steely heroine of Vita Sackville-West’s *All Passion Spent*, indulges in the supreme luxury—a luxury she has waited a lifetime for—of surveying her past as “a tract of country traversed.” She realises that her life has “become a landscape,” that at last she can see the whole view, and can wander through it as she chooses. The garden is a place of reflection for Lady Slane, as it is for me, and for countless others. Time behaves with more fluidity there than in the relentless press of daily life; a garden keeps its own time, and it is far kinder than that measured by indoor clocks. Set against the steady progress of the seasons through a particular patch of soil, gardeners as often find themselves skimming back through memory as anticipating seasons to come. The English novelist Jane Gardham says, “To observe the garden puts one’s age into proportion,” and so it does if one takes the time to consider and compare. But gardening is by its nature a forward-looking pastime, and even when the comparison makes one feel that human life lasts but a nano-second, the act of gardening counters depression, it bolsters optimism.

Perhaps no other group of people are so in need of garden therapy as those contemplating the more than half-empty glass. Research has shown that getting your hands dirty in the soil increases serotonin levels, and serotonin, a natural anti-depressant, strengthens the immune system. Contact with a specific soil bacteria, *Mycobacterium vaccae*, triggers the release of serotonin in the brain, and when we harvest edible plants there is also a release of dopamine. Researchers hypothesise that this latter response has evolved over nearly 200,000 years of hunter gathering, so that when food is found a flush of dopamine in the brain's reward centre triggers a state of bliss, or mild euphoria.

There is a long moment just on nightfall when the garden is at its most seductive. New shapes emerge; it is a place of hurried, half-seen flutterings, this evening hour that is older even than the word "vespers." Weather and season shape each slow dissolving, at times conjuring moths, mosquitos, scents of compost and leaf mould, or the rare blue-strobe flicker of sheet lightening beyond the hills. Wings beat unseen towards distant treetops, and time's linearity—implacable in sunlight—becomes as mutable as thought, as dream.

The blue hour is the first and most bewitching of the dimming evening's stages. Known as civil twilight, this threshold arrives when the sun dips below the horizon by up to six degrees, when the first faint stars are visible. Pale flowers float as shadows deepen, and white objects rush to meet the eye. In spring and summer dusks, when crickets creak, and the blackbird pours out his last thrilling solo, I would, if I could, capture and hold the garden in this moment of ecstatic sinking. I am never without my camera then; I write, but the blue hour is elusive.

Nautical twilight is reached when the sun dips below the horizon by between six and twelve degrees. Both horizon and stars are visible at nautical twilight, a boon to navigating sailors. The third and last of evening's stages is astronomical twilight, which arrives when the sun dips to eighteen degrees below the horizon. The sinking of the day is complete when the last shimmer of sunlight disperses. Nightfall arrives then, as it must, though in truth, night in the garden does not fall, but rises inexorably from the roots and soil and shadowy underplanting; night swallows the deepest colours first.

This birthday I turned sixty-eight, and with it I find that I have reached my own blue hour. Barring unexpected calamities, there will be two more seasons of roses, of plums and quinces, two more visits from the tree pruner before the next stage of life's dimming. An upbeat friend assures me that sixty is the new middle-age, and for some that may be true—each of us ages us our own pace. But at seventy I will no longer consider myself an "older woman," that fuzzy descriptor within which I have so often sought refuge, and perversely, this pleases me. Perhaps it is a consequence of that early astrological priming, of being born under Saturn's influence—Saturn, the planet of time, whose message is that we each have to undertake a reckoning with age. But this is not really Saturn's message, it is life's message: if we are lucky, if we live long enough, we will have to learn how to become old.

In *Old Age*, Simone de Beauvoir's meticulous and exhaustive examination of the subject, she writes that "knowingly or not, we prepare a given old age for ourselves at the beginning of our life: chance, and particularly biological chance, may distort it; but in so far as it depends upon the individual, he has defined his old age by his way of life."

At sixty-eight, I must trust that my early preparation was adequate, and that chance will be kind, for there is no way of knowing how much time is left, and I could be in deeper than I imagine—rather than civil twilight I may be in nautical twilight, with astronomical twilight, and the long night, looming. Nevertheless, seventy is a significant border, and if it can be crossed, it must be crossed. Once on the other side, I will be old, no question; I will move into uncharted realms.

Last winter, in preparation for this crossing, I ceased colouring my hair. For women of my maternal line, the first greys arrive early, so I have been using hair dyes since my late twenties and absorbing who-knows-what in the way of damaging chemicals. Going *with* the grey instead of against it had to do with the increasing difficulty of achieving a natural colour, as well as the expense and inconvenience of monthly visits to the hairdresser. That is what I told people. But I see now that I was quietly preparing for this new life chapter, one in which the defences against ageing previously held in place so tenaciously will be lowered, one in which I will learn how to become that figure from fairy tale—an Old Woman, a hag, a crone.

As my hair began its painful transition from dyed brown with blonde bits to its new and surprising silver, I sensed that my social visibility decreased a little. This was not such a shock to me as the post-menopausal shift of interest, but all the same it registered with a small ping of surprise. Strangely, the decision to reveal my natural hair colour coincided with a fashion moment in which young women were bleaching their hair and dying it silver, at great expense for the ongoing maintenance. Why were they doing this, I wondered? Were they playing with their sense of invincibility? Were they testing prospective suitors: will you love me when I'm old? Were they under such laser-like pressure from the male gaze—perhaps intensified by pornography—that they were seeking refuge in the anonymity of age, even if it was only an illusion? Of course, being so obviously young meant their grey hair was unlikely to be real, so there was that. But while I achieved similar colour results at only the cost of persevering through the awful growing-out period, I could tell from the reactions of strangers that I was somehow less than I had been, while the young salon-tinted, silver-haired women, whether they wanted it or not, were more.

Deciding to “come out” as an old woman naturally makes me wonder how other women have dealt with this inevitable dimming. As always, I turn to books, to other women writers, to lean on their experience and wisdom. What I have discovered is the shocking scarcity of older women in fiction—indeed there are so few books in which old women are the main characters that it is possible to make a list and plan to read them all.

In perhaps the lowest moment of my research into elderly heroines, I turn up a story on the Internet in which a literary agent states: “I couldn't sell a novel about a woman over fifty if it came with a blow job.” Sickened, I at last understand that the absence of older women in books is a deliberate erasing, and alongside the novels I begin to compile another list of books and papers written by scholars in the fields of ageing, of cultural and women's studies, and those working with the emotions, particularly shame. I also add to my list a few brave memoirs.

The first puzzle about the scarcity of older women in novels is that older women, often avid readers, appear not to be seeking themselves in fiction but instead are reading the adventures of younger, thirty and forty-something women. Is this because older women in novels have largely been reduced to stereotypes: the demented, the eccentric, the quarrelsome, the devoted yet side-lined grandmother, the meddling mother-in-law, the faded beauty, the disappointed spinster, the feisty older woman? How I have come to dislike the word “feisty” with its sly undertone of aggression. Is it possible that older women readers do not recognise themselves among this sadly stunted troupe? Do books about younger women allow them to read through the filter of memory? Or are they so affected by the shame associated with ageing in our youth-obsessed culture that they shun the subject, both in life and on the page?

In her memoir *Ammonites and Leaping Fish*, Penelope Lively remarks that “fiction is perhaps mainly responsible for the standard perception of the old,” and that “memorable and effective writing about old age is rare.” In the United Kingdom, a survey of more than a thousand women over the age of forty has discovered that 51% of those surveyed felt that older women in fiction tend to fall into clichéd roles, and 47% felt there were not enough books about middle-aged or older women. Those that do appear are often insultingly portrayed as “baffled by smartphones, computers or the internet,” and 56% reported that they would like to see women their age portrayed as “more active.” The survey, conducted by Harper Collins imprint HQ in conjunction with Grasnet, a social media platform for older people, found that women over the age of forty-five buy more fiction than any other age group.

So where in fiction, I wonder, are the good, wise, elegant women, familiar to me in real life, the capable women doing what they do with competence and compassion—managing families, and businesses, writing books, and research papers, acting as mentors and role models, sustaining their even more aged parents, supporting children in their fledgling adult lives? To find a place in fiction it appears that older women must be less than they actually are; they must be cardboard characters with “big hearts” and “irresistible flaws.” But why should such qualities be demonstrated by older women any more than by younger women? Is it to compensate for their perceived loss of beauty, their waning sexual appeal, their post-menopausal inability to bear children? Whatever the answers, it appears that older women are some of the most underwritten and marginalised people in contemporary Western culture.

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As women approach fifty, the male gaze they have been braced against since puberty is gradually removed until there is nothing left for them to brace against, or in some cases to be propped up by. The loss matters more to some women than to others, and despite the freedom from surveillance it heralds, it is still a sobering moment, a rite of passage unimaginable on the by-now distant battlefields of youth.

At around the same age, older women fade from fiction, while beyond sixty, women fade not only from fiction and the male gaze, but from every gaze. Younger people of both sexes do not see them; children do not see them; walking suburban streets for the good of their health, older women can find themselves budged off the pavement into the traffic. I walk every day, and each time I am bumped, or forced to step aside, I long to stop the culprit and quote from Sally Vickers's novel *Miss Garnet's Angel*: "...if you are young now you might hold it in your mind that one day you too will be old ..."

More ominously, older women may be less visible to their doctors, and other health professionals, for it seems that the ageing female body does not attract even their concentrated interest or concern. Recently, ABC News reported that a seventy-eight-year-old woman with a broken foot, split lip, cut nose, and sprained wrist had been denied treatment at a private hospital in Hobart, despite being in possession of paid-up private health insurance. Over sixty-five, she was deemed "too old," and her injuries too complex, to be financially viable for the hospital to treat. Fortunately, the woman had a daughter-in-law to advocate for her, and she received treatment at a public hospital, though not before she had been humiliated and made to feel unworthy of care. Many elderly men and women must face such situations alone, with a courage that is humbling.

Even more troubling is the prospect of a future in which our elderly population expands. The Australian Bureau of Statistics predicts that by 2053, 21% of the population will be aged 65 and over (around 8.3 million people) and 4.2% will be 85 and over (1.6 million). Inevitably, this raises concerns that the elderly will put unsustainable pressure on public funds, particularly in rising health costs. Socially, these predictions generate an angry background buzz; they pit young against old, positioning the elderly as a threat, fuelling resentment that surfaces as "boomer bashing." Under international law, the elderly have a right to the "highest achievable level of health." However, it is not paranoid to believe that a time will come—or perhaps has already come—when behind closed doors in the public health system there will be discussions about discouraging the use of expensive medical technologies for elderly patients, and about who should and should not receive treatment and care.

With my blue hour at hand, I have begun to diarise my reading of older women in fiction, and already I have found that some writers seem not to know what to make of women beyond their fifties any more than I know how to handle the necessary key-changes of my own ageing.

Books in which elderly main characters expire towards the end are being described as "coming of death" novels, a genre perhaps more eloquently expressed in German as *reifungsroman*: a ripening novel. The term was conceived by American academic Barbara Frey Waxman, and opposes the conventional decline narrative with its negative stereotypes of old women and age. Waxman was inspired by septuagenarian May Sarton's optimistic concept of "ripening towards death in a fruitful way." The genre's purpose, Waxman says, is to alter perceptions of age in the society that has created those stereotypes.

Meanwhile, an English writer I admire and spoke to at a recent writer's festival, where she performed with enviable grace on a difficult panel, has died shockingly fast from an aggressive cancer; she was two years younger than me. In the *London Review of Books* I read a moving account by a famous Irish writer of his struggle against testicular cancer, while beyond the publishing world, friends and acquaintances are dropping at an alarming rate. I am relying on older women in books to tell me, amongst many other things, how they deal with the fear of dying.

In Margaret Drabble's *The Dark Flood Rises* (2016) published when Drabble was seventy-seven, her character Fran is close to the author's age when she remembers how an old woman sweeping stairs in Florence has said to her "*la notte e vicina per me*": night is near for me. Neither Fran nor I were much comforted by this remark, made by a woman who was, one guesses, well beyond the blue hour and pushing deep into nautical twilight.

It was cheering then to learn that Elizabeth Taylor's *Mrs Palfrey at the Claremont* was shortlisted for the 1971 Booker Prize. It was the last of Taylor's novels published in her lifetime, and in it, Laura Palfrey (her surname so close to "paltry") sets out her rules for living: "Be independent; never give way to melancholy; never touch capital." The injunction against melancholy reminds me of the English nature writer Richard Jefferies dying of tuberculosis and exhaustion at thirty-nine, and the tone of resolve that ebbed and flowed throughout his last book of essays, *Field and Hedgerow*: "We must look to ourselves to help ourselves. We must think ourselves into an earthly immortality." What is this earthly immortality, I wonder? Is it to be found in a garden?

Growing out my hair colour has not been without anxiety, and many bad hair days. At the outset, my hairdresser suggested I go lighter all over so as to minimise the contrast between the dyed ends and grey roots. His advice was sound, but I resisted. I have never wanted blonde hair; it makes me look ill. And this was the point at which anxiety kicked in, for how ill would I look, I wondered, when my hair was grey?

In Jean Rhys's novel *Good Morning Midnight*, Rhys's character Sasha Jensen describes a similar "transformation act." Sasha's hairdresser says: "In your place, madame, I shouldn't hesitate. But not for a moment. A nice blond cendré," he says. Later, Sasha mercilessly mimics the man: "But blond cendré, madame, is the most difficult of colours. It is very, very rarely, madame, that hair can be successfully dyed blond cendré."

From a manual on hair colour theory I learn that molecules of blue pigment sit closest to the cuticle in the hair shaft, and that blue is the easiest pigment to remove. Red pigment, sitting deeper in the cortex, is more resistant. Yellow sits deepest of all, and is therefore the hardest to shift, which is why bleached hair often looks brassy, and white hair can take on a yellow cast. In both cases the yellow must be neutralised with violet.

Just as I have resisted yellow plantings in the garden (in his book *Concerning The Spiritual in Art*, Wassily Kandinsky expresses a low opinion of yellow, associating it with violent, raving lunacy) I have resisted the yellow pigment in my greying hair. A good violet shampoo and the occasional application of blue toner keeps it at bay, but the experience has given me an insight into the much-mocked "blue rinse" matrons of years gone by: poor souls, they were only women dealing with ageing, battling yellowing hair with fewer products than are now available.

Older women need a mature doctor and a young hairdresser. Whereas a younger doctor is likely to judge one so ancient as to be hardly worth treating, an older doctor may have experienced some of the same aches and pains. If this sounds extreme, consider that the ageism prevalent in the general population cannot be assumed absent from those in the medical profession. It probably affects both men and women patients. As for old hairdressers, my theory is that they may be jaded after decades on their feet all day, more likely to give the same cut they've carved out many thousands of times before. Or if you should ask, God forbid, for "something different" the result will send you home weeping, and a lot poorer. Newly minted hairdressers are trained in the latest techniques, some of which may be useful in making the transition to grey. Like all professions, hairdressing is constantly developing, and a young hairdresser will bring the latest cutting and colour skills to bear so that you do not end up looking like a cardboard cut-out from the 1960s and 70s.

I found my new young hairdresser on Instagram, where her posts of graceful, loose updos looked like styles I might soon aspire to. For without the hair dye, the condition of my hair has so radically improved that I have resolved to grow it. From Bel's selfies, I saw that her own hair, like mine, was curly, and this was a bonus. I arrived at her salon to find her young woman's soft lower lip pierced by a metal ring, her alabaster arms delicately inked, and as soon as she put her hands on my hair I knew I was safe.

I have stumbled across the grey-hair movement on Instagram. Pages that act as portals to communities of women dedicated to supporting each other through their transition to natural colour. From the stories they share I discover that for some women the grey kicks in at an early age—sometimes even during their teens. The candid posts, the photographs of hair in every imaginable shade and patterning of grey, give me hope that social media is the perfect tool for this new women's movement, one that could be instrumental in chipping away at our damaging beliefs about ageing, and at ageism in the wider population.

In Doris Lessing's *The Summer Before the Dark*, first published in 1973, Kate Brown, a forty-five year old mother of four grown children, by a series of coincidences, embarks on a summer of self-transformation. Kate has become aware that the image she holds of herself as the "warm centre of the family, the source of invisible emanations like a queen termite" is outdated. She throws herself into new work as a translator while her husband and children are busy elsewhere, and at a conference in Turkey meets a younger man, Jeffrey, who invites her to accompany him to Spain. There, in a remote inland village, Jeffrey falls gravely ill, and eventually so does Kate. She had "small, dark anxious eyes in a white sagging face around which was a rough mat of brassy hair. The grey parting was three fingers wide."

Back in England, recuperating, but not yet reunited with her family, Kate embarks on further adventures in a rented room. Eventually, the visible signs of her journey of self-discovery are entirely centred on her hair. She "would walk into her home with her hair undressed, with her hair tied straight back for utility; rough and streaky, and the widening grey band showing like a statement of intent." Kate feels as if her body, which is ageing but amenable, belongs to everyone else. "But her hair—no! No one was going to lay hands on that." Kate was preparing to say "no: no, no, NO—a statement which would be concentrated into hair."

The back cover blurb quotes from a review in the *Sunday Times*, in which the outcome of Kate's journey is described as "an act of self-definition so searching, so acute and total, one puts down the book shaken, enlarged, in awe." This response to Kate's determination to let her hair go grey offers a clue, if one were needed, to the pressure women have been subjected to for so long, to conform to society's ideals of femininity.

While I was accidentally primed to believe I might age backwards, the example of empowered ageing set by this brave new wave of women Instagrammers will surely alter the way their daughters and granddaughters deal with their greying hair—indeed, many of those who post say that their aim is to adjust perceptions around beauty for future generations. If the movement catches on it should give young women the confidence to be themselves that neither I nor any of my friends had modelled for us by the dye-dedicated generation that preceded our own.

Some roses grow more beautiful as they age. I'm thinking of "Leonardo da Vinci," a rose with intricately pleated heads that start out a clear strong pink and gradually age to the dusty colour of a rose you might find pinned to the neck of a ball gown boxed for decades in the attic. The petals do not wrinkle; instead they are transformed into something even lovelier than the fresh young blooms. Why cannot we humans age in the same way? As I embark upon my year of learning to be old, this is the question I ask myself.

In searching for answers, I foresee a pattern of thinking, reading, and writing that is not unlike the patterns a spider makes in spinning a web between rose bushes—the hundreds of small, tidy, tying-in movements; the occasional bold free-fall into space. I will write what only an old woman can write. Not because I am unusually wise, but because I *am* old, and I have decided to embrace it.