

WOMEN
of a
CERTAIN
AGE

Edited by

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Introduction – Jodie Moffat with Maria Scoda and Susan Laura Sullivan

I was at a conference recently, at a networking group discussing elder rights, and one of the participants – a woman – said that for the purposes of government policy, to be considered an elder, a person need be sixty-five or older, fifty if you are Indigenous.

I was genuinely surprised. In my mind, an elder was someone wizened and ancient, but apparently, in fourteen years time, I would become that entity: elder. My youngest son celebrated his fifteenth birthday the day before that network meeting. Here I was, balanced on some sort of ridge-cap between mother and crone.

There is no handbook for ageing. Time is unidirectional, impartial, indifferent and unsparing; not all of us will have children, or partners or careers. But we will all age.

I remember being heavily pregnant, half my body weight again, waiting for a woman on the train to notice me and take her son on her lap to give me a seat. These days when I get on the train someone always stands for me; that's what the stick figures on the posters tell us to do: stand for the pregnant, the infirm and the elderly.

I was half the age I am today the last time I was asked for ID at a pub and I thanked the lad on the door for his query. It was always my greeting at pub doors, but these

days I get the feeling I have erred by expecting to be allowed entry to a pub at all.

You never feel age, it happens without your permission all the time: one minute being pulled over by a cop because you don't look old enough to drive and the next being unable to read road maps without your glasses.

But even my glasses don't show me how the world sees me at this age; that is something I see reflected in the eyes of others, and in how they treat me. I was always older than I looked, but at some point the big reveal of my actual age stopped being the point at which I gained respect and started being the point at which I became invisible.

I was thirty-odd the first time I was advised with no encouragement or preamble by a salesgirl about products suitable for ageing skin. I was fortyish the first time a doctor told me I should accustomise myself to everyday back pain because it was inevitable, a necessary consequence of having borne two large babies, and age. About that time, hairdressers started asking me what I wanted to do about the grey in my hair: 'Nothing' was implicitly the wrong answer.

Being possessed of a naïve and unshakeable belief in justice, and a blissful ignorance of whether or not the profession would welcome me, at forty I decided to study law. At forty-five I became a solicitor with a respected law firm. After continual positive performance reviews, I thought I had reached a place where I was being judged by my employer solely on my skill set and work ethic. I was nearing fifty; I stopped dyeing my hair and wearing the lipsticks and tight skirts that were no longer flattering, and the high heels that were painful and at times life-

threatening. I sought a pay rise commensurate with my experience and revenue-generating capacity.

And that is when it happened. I began to fade. I faded so much that I became a grey smudge in the peripheral vision of my employer, both overlooked and looked through. The younger, brighter solicitors began outstripping me, not in performance but in recognition. I had witnessed older female support staff vanishing from my workplace, one by one, but they weren't money-making legal practitioners as I was. It didn't matter. There was no pay rise. When I left the firm abruptly, with a quick sideways push from the middle-aged male principals, the space contracted around my absence seamlessly, as if I had never been there at all.

I started noticing it elsewhere in my life, a gradual diminution of my presence in the world. In places I had been formerly welcomed, cafes and pubs for example, I became a piece of unwieldy furniture impeding the real customers. My children tripped over me on the way to their lives.

But I was not alone in my pall of invisibility. It became a primary topic in conversations I had with similarly aged female friends. At the crux of one such conversation, my friend Maria suggested we write a book about what was happening to us. I contacted Sue, another friend of our age, and we set up a teleconference to discuss what we could do. In that conversation, this book was born.

Maria, Sue and I agreed we would reach out to a cross-section of women past the age of forty and gauge their willingness to write about things they may or may not have done to arrest the assumptions and presumptions that age deposits on us, like so much dust. Our mandate

was simple: we weren't looking for stories about ageing gracefully; we wanted stories that recognised the woman inside and outed her, stories that embraced her.

We were heartened by the positive response and like-mindedness amongst the women we approached. We found that most of the women we spoke with were in the same place as us, a place we had arrived without fanfare and, somehow, unexpectedly. We found that, despite a span of some thirty years in age between our youngest and our oldest contributors, each had grown to have a strong sense of self: some coming to terms with regret, some seeing this time in their life as an opportunity for growth or giving back, some feeling a sense of accomplishment, some feeling a restlessness about what is to come. Many were generous with their time and with advice on how to nurture this idea of a book into a reality. We brought our idea to Fremantle Press where we were welcomed with an extraordinary amount of support and encouragement to bring this book to fruition.

We selected fifteen stories that for us captured the essence of women of our own age and beyond; stories of public achievement, personal development and private reflection. Our book begins with the tale of a woman who did not expect to live to menstruate, let alone reach motherhood and thereafter, menopause. We move through the phases of a woman's life, through androgynous childhood to fertile motherhood and, for some who did not become mothers (and some who did), rich and productive working lives. We hear from women whose lives have been affected by their cultural backgrounds, regardless of any personal preference, and from women who have reached a place

where they are older but perhaps not wiser, still yearning to live and become content with themselves. We hear from women who continue to make a difference in the face of indifference. We move through a multitude of experiences to end with an observation of the inevitable ordinariness of life, reconciling oneself to a certain sadness and not recoiling from it.

Each of these stories is singular in its detail, though certain themes, beyond ageing, create links and connections between the different pieces. We hear from women whose challenging childhood has wrought in them a profound capacity for peace and the ability to endure, as seen in the very different narratives of Charlotte Roseby, Goldie Goldbloom and Tracey Arnich.

The idea of a 'typical' Anglo-Australian lifestyle is challenged in migrant stories from Anne Aly, Mehreen Faruqi and Maria Scoda, and examined in two quite different ways in the Indigenous woman's experiences of Jeanine Leane and Pat Mamanyjun Torres. The idealised Anglo-Australian existence is viewed through the prism of lived experience by Jenny Smithson, Pam Menzies and Susan Laura Sullivan, with the latter two providing something of a historical context.

Many of our writers address the quintessential discrimination that exists between men and women, most keenly experienced in the traditional male-dominated workplaces in which Mehreen Faruqi, Jenny Smithson and Anne Aly have prevailed to a greater or lesser degree.

And within this mix are the ordinary, inescapable experiences of women of a certain age. Our bodies betraying us, changing without our consent in ways with

which we may disagree; our relations with people around us delineated by how we are seen and not seen. These are the experiences explored in intimate detail by Krissy Kneen and Sarah Drummond, Brigid Lowry and Liz Byrski.

These stories speak to the everyday and sometimes very raw experiences of women of a certain age. We look at the diversity of our lives and are heartened by our commonality and our capacity to endure. Rather than being diminished, we are strengthened by the absence of expectation facing us, and the extraordinary opportunity and unshaped potential this gives us to be exactly whomever we choose.

Just as one conversation between Sue, Maria and I yielded this abundance of personal wisdom and lived experience, it is our hope that these stories will begin conversations amongst readers about what it means to be a woman of a certain age.

Ignorance – Anne Aly

As the world was bidding farewell to the 70s, I was saying goodbye to my childhood. The year 1980 heralded a decade marked by extremes of unabated enthusiasm and apocalyptic dread.

It was the decade that saw the end of the Cold War, the assassinations of John Lennon and Anwar Sadat, Reaganism, Thatcherism, MTV, Madonna, the advent of the computer and electronic gaming, the end of the Berlin Wall, AIDS, Chernobyl, the *Challenger* disaster and bad fashion choices. Big hair, big shoulders, bold colours and bright lipstick weren't just the fashion faux pas of the 80s: they were the icons of a decade of excesses and the 'me first' generation.

I was about to enter the 80s as a teenager. The year I turned thirteen was my second year at Moorebank High School in Sydney's south-west. The school classified us into streams based on our academic ability. Academically, I had already proved myself as one of the better performers; I was in the 'A' stream, and could be assured that my classmates wouldn't tease me for being too smart. If there were cliques at our school, I was too young, or too preoccupied, to notice them. I had a good group of friends – both female and male – and was fast getting a reputation for being witty in class, though my teachers would probably have

described me more as a smartypants.

There were still the occasional remarks about my dark skin by some kids, but as American pop culture saturated our TV screens with shows that made being black and/or ethnic cool and almost normal, my skin became something that made me 'exotic' – like an iguana or a giant penis-shaped plant that trapped live bugs and dissolved them in digestive fluid.

Most of the time I thought of myself as a fairly typical Aussie teenager, though I was acutely aware that there were things about me and my family that marked us as different, as 'new' Australians. We never went to the movies because my parents preferred to watch Arabic films at home, and they bought a video recorder as soon as they came on the market so that we never had any excuse to go to the movies. We never ate at restaurants because, as my father would say, 'Why should I pay someone to cook a meal for me when I can get your mother to do it for free?' We never took family trips to the country during school holidays or had lazy long weekends. We were never allowed to stay the night at a friend's house because, as my mother would say, 'Why would I let you sleep in a stranger's house? If your friends want to sleep, they can sleep here where we can keep an eye on you.' There were lots of things that we never did and that I wished we would do, because if we did those things, maybe that would make us more Australian.

As I grew out of my obsession with the Brady Bunch, finally coming to terms with the fact that Bobby Brady was never going to visit Australia, find me and make his TV parents adopt me, I began to imagine the quintessential Aussie family by observing those around me.

My dearest friend in my early teens, the closest thing I had to a sister after my real sister, was a girl who lived in our suburb. Tracey's family was one of the last to build in our street. She was a year younger than me and at first I was wary of her, thinking that we could not possibly have much in common. Physically, we had absolutely nothing in common. Tracey was petite, even for her age – like a child yet to catch up with her taller, broader, more physically developed peers. Her blonde hair framed her elfin face in what was a popular Princess Diana hairstyle of the day. I rarely noticed her slight awkwardness around other teens or the way she giggled shyly whenever she drew unwanted attention. She was, I thought, as beautiful as a delicate porcelain doll.

Some time during the summer of my thirteenth year, my body decided that it was time for me to grow up. I wasn't ready for round hips and breasts so big they strained against the fabric of my school uniform, causing the seams to split and the buttons to pop. They were just another feature that made me stand out as 'different': Anne Aly, the dark-skinned wog with the big boobs. I was so conscious of my gargantuan chest that I wore a school jumper over my uniform all through the year, even in the height of summer when the mercury would regularly reach forty degrees. While some teased her for her pre-pubescent, boy-like body, I envied Tracey her flat chest and slim hips. She glided effortlessly in her aeronautically engineered frame; I carried my burden of a body like the mythical Atlas.

Had I been left to judge a book by its cover, I probably would have thought of Tracey and her family as part of

the ignorant and uneducated masses who believe Australia is in danger of being swamped by ‘insert group here’. But stereotypes cut both ways, and ignorance is not something any of us are immune to if we live our lives separated by assumptions of difference, never having the opportunity to glimpse in others that which makes us frail, vulnerable and just human.

Quite by chance, Tracey and I ended up walking to school together one morning, and soon enough the twenty minute walk to and from school in each other’s company became a ritual. We spent all our time after school, on weekends and on school holidays together. We tracked imaginary animal prints in the bushes, pretending that a giant feral cat was on the loose, and inventing wild new contraptions to capture it. We went jogging in the early mornings with our dogs and swimming in our backyard pools until late at night. When Tracey reached puberty, we shared the rites of passage into womanhood: make-up, our first concert (KISS), first heels and first *Cosmopolitan* centrefold (which didn’t impress us much but provided us hours of laughter).

Tracey’s dad was a big-bellied, beer-swilling, tattooed truck driver who looked an awful lot like Norm, the affable couch potato from the popular ‘Life. Be in it.’ television ads of the 70s. Her mum had regular perms, wore a bikini and laughed at her husband’s lame jokes. Her younger brother was in the same year as my brother and they too became inseparable, often passing the time by having farting competitions, which both disgusted and amused us in equal measure. Our parents never became what I would call friends, but they were as civil as neighbours could be,

and developed a mutual respect and affection for each other cultivated by their children's inseparability.

Every month, Tracey's family ate dinner at a restaurant. Not a dodgy café at the mall that served crusty egg and mayonnaise sandwiches and cold cups of tea, but a real, fancy restaurant: The Black Stump. My very first meal at a restaurant was with Tracey's family. I got to order real Australian food like steak and chips and salad, and garlic prawns and pasta. I joined her family at games nights where we all sat around the table playing cards or board games late into the night. I looked after their corgi when they went away to the country for long weekends.

Being around Tracey and her family made me feel ... Australian. It was a feeling that had eluded me as long as I was constantly told that I wasn't Australian because I didn't, couldn't possibly, look Australian. Even now, the question 'Where are you from?' still makes me uncomfortable. I'm never too sure what to say: Sydney? Albury-Wodonga? Perth? WA? Egypt? I've learnt to gauge the meaning behind the question: whether it is out of innocent curiosity or something more sinister, like a poorly disguised attempt to segue to a debate about religion or the status of Muslim women. Not that I would shy away from a debate, but it gets kind of exhausting when all you want to do is enjoy your double chocolate sundae, or wrap up a polite conversation about the price of free-range eggs. I've also learnt not to roll my eyes with conspicuous exasperation when middle-aged men in suits ask me this question in the boardroom after I've just spent ten minutes speaking about the challenges to substantive equality, and developing social,

economic and political participation in a democratic political system. Most of all, I've learnt not to focus so much on being different but to develop relationships based on commonalities: Tracey taught me that.

Teenagers lead secret lives, and I was no exception. When I was fourteen, I found a copy of Nancy Friday's book *My Mother/My Self: The Daughter's Search for Identity* in the library and it was as if I had been handed a whole new looking glass. Friday's assertion that 'The older I get ... the more of my mother I see in myself' scared the bejesus out of me. No way! No way was I ever going to be like my mother. I much preferred the other things Friday had to say about being a woman and how the ideals of womanhood passed down from mothers shackled their daughters.

I knew even back then what kind of woman I wanted to be, but I was incapable of comprehending just what it would take to be her: an independent, free-thinking, autonomous woman who took no shit – a disruptor. Sometimes I felt like my belly would swell and burst with all the anticipation of womanhood that was growing impatiently inside me. Sometimes I despaired that she would never see the light, destined to live her life, my life, curled up in the fetal position, tethered to an existence defined and dictated by men and mothers to save her from her own vulnerability.

I started reading everything I could get my hands on about feminism. I read Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* and warmed to its utterly despairing vision of femininity and marriage. From there I graduated to *The Feminine Mystique* and a sequence of novels that featured

strong female protagonists. But it wasn't the Jane Eyres and the Jo Marches that I found appealing. As much as I discovered parts of myself in the writings of Western feminist authors of the 60s and 70s, I couldn't relate to the nineteenth-century heroines and the complexities of nineteenth-century social norms. I preferred reading stories about women who jumped out of planes or fought off monsters to all that nineteenth-century politeness.

I never spoke of these things. Not with my family, and not even with Tracey. I kept my thoughts private, retreating to my bedroom to read the books I kept hidden underneath my mattress. This was something that belonged to me and only me. I lived my life straddling two worlds. I could sing all the words to Madonna's 'Like a Virgin' (and know exactly what they meant) and convince my parents that I was their little angel who brought home good grades and didn't know what a penis was. I needed to do that to survive, avoiding an inevitable clash of cultures that threatened to implode my world. Anyone who has never had to negotiate two identities – often with conflicting expectations – cannot possibly understand just how adroit young women can be at slipping in and out of identities: princess, queen, slayer, diva, damsel.

Beyond the seclusion of my bedroom – where I meandered through pages exploring dangerous, exciting ideas – I lived a life dictated by expectations. As a normal teenager, I did normal teenage things. Tracey and I went to concerts and weekend rollerskating sessions and movies. We talked about boys and read teen magazines. Despite my secret reading habit, I formed my ideas about beauty

and attractiveness from the glossy pages of *Dolly*, where pink-skinned pre-teens with shiny blonde hair and flat chests modelled leg warmers, polka dots and flared skirts.

Tracey's family moved away, and I lost touch with her before I finished high school. I thought about her often and wondered what happened to her and her brother, and the family that allowed me to do Australian things with them without judgement. I missed my childhood friend, my companion through the journey to womanhood who knew, more than anyone, how much I struggled to reconcile the me in my head with the me I saw in the mirror each morning: the me I knew others saw too.

Then, not so long ago, an email arrived in my inbox asking me if I was the same Anne Aly who had lived in Chipping Norton and had a brother named Sam. It was from Tracey's brother, who'd managed to track me down after seeing me interviewed on television. I had a thousand questions for him. What had become of my dear friend? Did Tracey become a vet like she always said she would? Marriage? Kids? Pets? What about horses? She always loved horses. And what of their parents? Were they still around?

Tracey's brother's reply came back immediately. He told me that he was sorry to hear my father had died, and that he and Tracey had always felt safe and loved at our house. But it was his next lines that stopped me cold. He wrote that their own father was in jail: he had been convicted as a paedophile, who had abused Tracey from when she was five until she was seventeen.

I cried for days. I cried for my friend and her lost innocence, and I cried for my own ignorance. I cried for the time I was seven years old and a stranger came into the bathroom with his pants down and his erection in his hand like a loaded gun, calling my name and trying to drag me close to him. I cried with relief and guilt for being spared the torment Tracey had endured. I cried because the new burden of my knowledge could never be as immense as the burden my friend had to carry all her life.

In retrospect, my greatest teenage challenges had revolved around straightening my curly hair, bleaching my upper lip and containing my burgeoning breasts. I can take some comfort in the fact that my family – the family I complained about constantly, that I wished could be more normal and less ethnic – gave Tracey and her brother a haven. I take comfort knowing that they felt loved and safe with us. And yet, the pettiness of my early teen obsessions still fills me with shame and hurts my heart. I'd had a secret life as a teenager, where I was working out the kind of woman I wanted to become. But it had never occurred to me, in my self-absorption, that Tracey might have had a secret life too.