

## seventy-five

**I**'m jealous of my granddaughter.

I would never, ever tell anyone that.

Everyone says the older you get, the wiser you get. I don't feel wise at all.

I'm supposed to feel so blessed to be seventy-five years old. Hell, I tell people that myself, but that's mostly to make myself feel better. I tell people that the best part of being older is the wisdom that comes with it. Truthfully, that's bullshit. What else can you say, though, unless you want to completely depress people? Let them find out for themselves when they get here. If someone had told me how much I would truly hate being seventy-five, I would have been out of here a long time ago. Not killed myself. Oh, no, God forbid. I just would have moved to a deserted island and spent the rest of my days away from the harsh reality of a mirror.

So at seventy-five, if I've got all this wisdom, why can't I cure cancer? If I'm so smart, why don't people trust me to swoop in and save the world from utter destruction? Let my seventy-five-year-old girlfriends and me attend United Nations sessions so

we can let them know how to make this world a better place. Since we're so smart, let us give our opinions. No one ever asks. You know why? No one else really believes we're so wise. If they did, maybe they'd listen to us more.

I hate being seventy-five. I really do. And I did not want this birthday party tonight, but my daughter, Barbara, insisted on it. Barbara can be a royal pain in the ass sometimes.

After reading what I've said so far you probably think that I'm one of those mean, cranky old ladies who complains about drafts that aren't there, or returns one peach to the supermarket if it's a little bruised, or steals Sweet'N Low packets from coffee shops. I'm not. I don't even like Sweet'N Low. My granddaughter always says, "My grandmother is cool." I think I *am* cool. I keep up-to-date on things—what's happening in the news, reality shows (though I hate them)—and I always try to dress fashionably.

Seventy-five.

I am so goddamned old.

(And by the way, I rarely curse. That's just the best way I can find to express myself right now.)

My girlfriends and I keep telling one another that age is just a number.

"I don't feel seventy-five," my lifelong dearest friend, Frida, says.

"I don't, either," I lie, knowing she's lying, too. Frida looks and acts more like she's eighty-five, but far be it from me to ever say that.

"My mother is a young seventy-five," my daughter tells people in front of me. I hate when she does that. Why does she have to do that?

"I do it because you look so good, and I want to brag," Barbara says. Let me say, it's fine if *I* admit my age, but not when my daughter does. It's no one's business.

"My daughter is fifty-five," I tell them, smiling.

"What did you do that for?" Barbara will ask when we're out of hearing range of the person we've just inundated with unasked-for age information.

"What?" I ask defensively. "You look good, too!" I tell her, trying to act stupid. My daughter would never accuse me of throwing it back in her face. She doesn't think I'm smart enough to do that.

Truthfully, the thing that's pissing me off right now is that if I really stop and reflect, I've still got about twenty years max to stew about all the things I really should have done with my life. That makes me sad. Angry and sad.

First things first: I would never have sat in the sun for all those years. In those days, though, no one knew the damage it could do. I guess that's the wisdom I've gained from getting older. Thanks. When I think of the years I sat by the pool bathed in oil without any protection . . . We didn't have sunblock then. We were *supposed* to sit in the sun back then; it was *good for us*. We let our children play in the sun all day because they told us we should. If they burned, we put cold washcloths on them. They didn't have skin cancer back then; at least I never heard of anyone getting it. Now it's one of the main topics I discuss with my girlfriends. One of us sees a dark spot on our arm and it's an all-day episode of *House* until the doctor tells us it's nothing. Sadly, it wasn't *nothing* for poor Harriet Langarten. That's why we're all so scared. I've become that old lady on the street who

**adena halpern**

walks around with an umbrella on a sunny day. Through the years I've tried every cream on the market to get rid of sunspots and wrinkles. I've had chemical peels and let doctors scrape my face in the hope of undoing the damage I did trying to look tanned and sexy for a cocktail party in 1972.

Second, I wish I had exercised more. We didn't work out when we were younger. We played tennis or golf, but mostly we played bridge at the country club while our husbands golfed. And since most of them are dead, they obviously didn't get enough exercise, either. I joined a gym with Frida a couple of years ago, but we were the oldest people there by thirty years so I gave it up and bought a treadmill. I walked so many miles on that thing I could have walked to China and back by now. Even though I tell people I feel so much better since I started exercising, it's a lie. My feet hurt, my joints hurt, my boobs hurt. They say that beauty must suffer. I feel I've suffered enough, so I rarely get on that thing anymore.

So I went the plastic-surgery route. I've used Botox and Restylane, had one face-lift (talk about PAIN) and a brow lift (waste of money *and* pain), and electrolysis to make me look younger. I can't say that I look all bad, but I definitely don't look fifty, like the doctor told me I would. Quack.

Aside from taking care of my looks more, if I could go back and do it all again, there are a couple of major things I would have done differently.

First, I would have gotten a better education.

In my day, the 1950s to be exact, it wasn't important for a woman to get an education. I know that sounds crazy, but it couldn't be more true. Your parents (at least my parents, and all

my girlfriends' parents) discouraged higher education. "You need a good husband," my mother said to me when I told her I wanted to be an English literature major at the University of Pennsylvania. She handed me the application to secretarial school and drove me there on my first day with a sack lunch consisting of two hard-boiled eggs, some crackers, and a nickel for the milk machine. So I learned how to type. I figured I'd read the classics on my own, plotting as if it was devious and underhanded to sneak James Joyce and Dylan Thomas into my home to read when no one was around. Sadly, though, I never did. Who had the time?

Instead, I met my husband.

That's the second thing I would have done differently. I never would have married my husband.

Again, please don't tell anyone I ever said that.

It's not that I didn't love my husband; I did love him. I loved him very much. He was a fine man. If I really had to be honest, though, really, really honest, I'd have to say I do not think he was the man for me.

Howard Jerome was a prominent Philadelphia lawyer. I met him when he was a young attorney just starting out and I was one of the secretaries at the firm. He wasn't the most handsome attorney at the law office, but he was the one who wanted me. Howard was short, bald, and fat, even back then. I was actually smitten with another lawyer there, Burt Elliot, but he had eyes for a different secretary and married her.

"You'll marry Howard," my mother said after our second date. "He's safe."

So I did.

“Thank God,” my mother said. “I was afraid you were becoming an old maid.”

I was nineteen years old. Nineteen!

Howard was ten years older than I was. We met in September and married in June. That was what we did back then. It was time to get married, so we did. I moved from my parents’ house to my husband’s house, and I never knew what it was like to live on my own. Once—*once*—before Barbara was born, Howard went on a business trip for two days. That was the extent of my living on my own when I was younger. I smoked a half a pack of cigarettes—the last time I ever smoked—and went to a movie by myself. (And I hope you don’t smoke, by the way; it’s bad for you. I lost a lot of friends along the way because of it.) That was the craziest I ever got. How I would love to get really crazy, just once.

Barbara also followed my route. She married young—her husband, Larry, is a dentist—and had Lucy. I told her to get a job and wait. But did she listen to me? No. I should have insisted she get an occupation as stubbornly as my mother insisted I shouldn’t. I regret I didn’t show her that working was important, not just for money’s sake, but to do something for yourself. I loved having my daughter, don’t get me wrong, but I wish I had done other things first. By the time I was twenty-five, I had a child and a house in the Main Line suburbs of Philadelphia.

Two years ago, Howard dropped dead while eating a corned-beef sandwich at the Nate n’ Al deli in Los Angeles. It was completely out of the blue. He’d had some heart issues—a bypass here, a bypass there—but no one thought this would ever happen. Heart surgery is so common among my age group that you start to treat it like it’s just another thing you have to do. (“How

about dinner Saturday night?" I'd ask a friend. "Oh, Alan is having a bypass on Friday. How about the following Saturday?" she'd reply. Same thing with the prostate operations.)

Anyway, it was the most horrible thing that's ever happened to me. We were in Los Angeles for my friend Thelma Punchick's daughter's second wedding, to an architect. One second we were sitting there having a conversation about whether to go to the Getty Museum or the LACMA, and the next he's keeled over in his coleslaw. I said: "Howard?"

He didn't answer, so I said it louder: "Howard?"

Again, he said nothing.

I knew he was dead, with his face on the table like that, but I was so shaken-up that I thought for a second that maybe he really liked the coleslaw. It was very good coleslaw. I don't know where my mind was. The third time I screamed really loudly: "HOWARD!"

That's when the whole restaurant went silent and I jumped up out of my seat. Two nice-looking men in their thirties were sitting at the next table. I had noticed them earlier, how handsome they were in their T-shirts and khaki pants, and I wondered if they were in the movies. It was lovely how quickly they reacted. One of the men propped Howard up and laid him down in the booth (thank goodness Howard insisted on a booth or he would have been on the filthy dirty floor at this point) and the other gentleman called the paramedics. The waitress held on to me like she was my sister, and I buried my face in her chest. I should have written her a thank-you note, or at least given her a good tip. Anyway, by the time the paramedics came, poor Howard was already gone, and I had to make plans to get him back to

Philadelphia. I don't even want to tell you what goes into transferring a body. Howard was in a casket down in the cargo hold, and I had my purse on the seat where he should have been sitting. I sort of wondered if maybe I shouldn't have put my purse there, you know, as kind of a memorial for Howard, but I kept crying and needed my bag handy for my tissues.

The reason I was crying, aside from the fact that my husband had just died and I did love him even though I probably never should have married him, was that Howard always handled everything. I allowed Howard to handle everything, like my mother taught me I should. I was a woman of leisure, while he worried about all the behind-the-scenes stuff. How was I going to get along without him? That was the first time I really started to regret the way I'd lived my life, and every time I thought about it the tears kept coming. Thank God for Barbara. Thank God Barbara knew to call a funeral home to get the body transferred back to Philadelphia. Even though I'd never tell her (Barbara is the type of person who would take a compliment like that and use it as a weapon later), thank God Barbara is there when I need her.

I do miss Howard a lot, more than I thought I would (again, mum's the word). We were married for more than fifty years. I married a man whom I had nothing in common with, but in those days you had to find someone and start a life. And we *did* build a life. It wasn't perfect, but what is? Was he the love of my life? No. Who was the love of my life? Sadly, it's too late for me to ever find out. Barbara thinks I should date, but who am I going to date? Hershel Neal has had a thing for me since I moved into this building. He's always asking me to come up to his place to

listen to his Chopin records, but I just shoo him away. I should find some other old man with health problems and let him drop dead in front of me again? No, thanks.

Howard worked hard. He played hard, too, though he didn't think I knew it. Howard had affairs through the years. Did he think I was too stupid not to smell the perfume on his shirt? Did he really think I believed him when he told me he had to work late on Friday nights?

I thought about leaving him when Barbara was little. I thought about just packing up one night and taking Barbara someplace where no one would know us. I fantasized about that a lot when Barbara was young and Howard was having his affairs. It just wasn't something you did back then—leave your husband.

You know what you did? You kept your mouth shut.

Believe it or not, it was almost accepted for a man to have an affair, but oh, no, never a woman. I remember saying to my mother: "He's got a girl on the side."

She shrugged her shoulders and said, "He works hard and he provides for you. Subject closed." And it was. In those days, you listened to your mother and respected her opinion. Not like now—yes, I'm talking to you, Barbara.

After all, was my life so horrible? No, it was not. Howard never put me on a budget, never once. I had all the money I could ever hope to spend. My child was well provided for. We took trips, wonderful trips, all over the world. I've seen everything from the Eiffel Tower to the Great Wall of China. With all the jewelry Howard bought me over the years I could cover myself in diamonds from head to toe. Barbara never wanted

for anything. She went to the best schools, and in summer she went to camp and then to the Jersey Shore. In those respects, Howard was a wonderful husband and father. If I had left him, what would have been the alternative? That would have been the stupidest thing I ever did. It wasn't the time to do that. Today, it's different; a woman can make a lot of money and be on her own. In those days, do you know that you couldn't even get a credit card unless your husband opened the account for you? It's true! Your husband was the one who had to fill out the credit card application, and even then, when you got the card, it never said your first name. All of my credit cards read MRS. HOWARD JEROME.

So I kept my mouth shut.

Even now, two years after Howard died, I never have to worry about money. I've got all that I need. Howard made sure I would always be taken care of, and I will always be grateful to him for that.

Still, what I wouldn't have given for a little romance myself in those times.

If there's any wisdom I've gained from reaching seventy-five, sadly, that's it.

Sex with Howard was fine. At least I think it was fine; I never knew it with anyone else. Howard was the only man I ever had sex with in my entire life. We never had crazy sex—just plain old Howard-on-top or me-on-top sex, three times a week, sometimes four if Howard felt like it, never me. I was never much for sex. I wonder, if I had ever been with anyone else would I have liked it more? Believe me, I was a pretty woman back then, with a cute figure. I could have gotten a lot of men in my time if that

was my thing. How wonderful it would have been to have someone in my life who wrote me love letters. Howard never wrote anything. His secretary even signed his name on my birthday cards. How marvelous it would have been to just have that thrill of someone else finding me attractive.

You know, it did almost happen once. I'm not saying I would have actually gone and had the affair, but once at a benefit for the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Russell Minden took me aside and told me he thought I was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen. He asked to take me to lunch. This was 1962, and I got scared out of my mind. I was sure that everyone at the benefit could hear my conversation with Russell. So I just laughed demurely, and then regretted not doing anything about it for the rest of my life. Russell died a few years back (the C-word, pancreas). I saw the obit in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. I sent a donation to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in his memory, to thank him in my own way. I hadn't seen him for about twenty years, but I never forgot how beautiful he made me feel that night.

That's another thing I'm angry about. I never knew how attractive I was. When I look at pictures of myself back then, God I was beautiful. Everyone always said so, but I never believed it myself. I wish I had taken more advantage of my looks. In those days I looked good for Howard. I did my hair and ate right for fat-bald-run-around-with-other-women-behind-my-back Howard. If I bought a new dress or a new perfume, it was for Howard to compliment. I should have been doing it for me. I only wish I had taken the time to feel good about myself.

So in a nutshell, take all that—no education, sex with one man, not knowing that the sun was bad for me, and not realizing

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how gorgeous I was—and that’s why I’m jealous of my granddaughter, Lucy. She’s got her whole life ahead of her, and she lives in the perfect time in history. That’s what I was thinking through my whole seventy-fifth birthday party: *I was born at the wrong time. I wish I was Lucy.*

You should have seen my Lucy sitting there at the party. She’s got this mini e-mail contraption that she was using to talk to her friends the whole night about where they were going to go after she left my birthday celebration. “Texting,” was what Barbara kept saying, as in, “*Lucy, it’s Gram’s birthday. Can you stop texting for two seconds to toast your grandmother?*” I winked at Lucy. It was okay with me.

All I wanted to know was who she was talking to and where she was going.

And the way she was dressed! Barbara kept saying all night, “She looks like a streetwalker.” She had on a tiny minidress with platform heels and a jean jacket over it. I thought she looked like a movie star, and I wished I could wear something like that. Lucy has such a figure! She is so trim, not like her mother. Barbara takes after Howard’s side of the family, with their big hips and ample bosoms. Barbara is constantly on a diet. (Ha! I think she cheats more than she diets.) Lucy and I don’t diet. Sure, I watch my figure, but because of my metabolism I can afford to cheat, and so can Lucy. Sometimes Lucy and I have ice cream for dinner. Just last week we got a big tub of Ben & Jerry’s Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough and went hog wild. Lucy looks like I did when I was her age. I always had great legs, and a great tush like Lucy’s. Everyone said so. I don’t know what happened—my body just . . . *sagged*. It looks like . . . oh, you know when you put

too much paint on a wall and it starts to drip down? That's what my body looks like. I'm thin, but saggy. But, oh, did I have a great behind! God I miss my cute rear end. I lost my tush somewhere between my forties and my sixties and I'm still looking for it. (And by the way, if you're reading this and you're much younger than I am, I have one word for you: *moisturize*. You'll still sag like a wet washcloth at seventy-five, but at least you'll look better than your girlfriends at the same age. At least I do. Oy, if you could only see Frida.)

Anyway, Lucy and I are very close. She only lives about four blocks from me in the city. I'm so happy we live close to each other. After Howard passed on, I had no desire to stay in that big house in the suburbs anymore. A few months after he died, I noticed that the water heater was leaking—just a little puddle, nothing dramatic. The water heater was located in the basement, just a few feet away from the washing machine. I only noticed the leak when I went to grab a new box of detergent. I always bought extra boxes of detergent and kept them right beside the heater. That's when I noticed the leak. I remember thinking to myself how funny it was that I never noticed that water leaked from the heater. I didn't know it wasn't supposed to leak. (Gladys, our dear housekeeper who died last year, was the one who always did the laundry.)

So when I went to take a bath a week later, there was no hot water. They had been doing some construction on Mrs. Lewis's house next door and I figured that had something to do with it. What can I say? It all seemed logical at the time. Later that day I went downstairs to throw some towels in the washing machine and the whole basement was flooded. Because I had those extra

boxes of detergent by the water heater, there were soapsuds everywhere. *Everywhere!* It looked like a Turkish bath!

I was in such panic that I called Barbara, who came right over. When she saw the mess, she berated me for not having the sense to call a plumber. (Okay, *berated* is a harsh word, but she treated me like a child. So shoot me. I didn't know it wasn't supposed to leak.)

Anyway, that was it for me. I got a new hot water heater and put the house on the market the same day. I moved into a lovely apartment on Rittenhouse Square and I sold my car (word to the wise: when that "service" light that comes up on your dashboard, it is not there for decoration); and I'm so much happier as a result. My days are spent playing bridge or going to concerts at the Kimmel Center. At night I go out to restaurants with my friend Frida or other girlfriends who've lost their husbands. I bought in the same building where Frida lives and so we're always in each other's apartments. It's fun actually, and it's good that we can check on each other. My apartment faces Rittenhouse Square Park and nothing makes me happier than to go down there on a nice day and sit on a bench under a tree and read the newspaper.

Barbara didn't want me to move into the city. "It's too far from me," she said at the time. "Why don't you get something in the suburbs?" I'll tell you, I'm even happier that Barbara still lives in the suburbs. Barbara and I are close, too, but not in the way that Lucy and I are close. Lucy and I understand each other better. Barbara and I could never have that kind of closeness. Honestly, I don't think that's entirely my fault.

When Barbara and I talk, it sounds like an argument, but it's really a conversation. With Lucy, it's a plain old conversation. My

daughter keeps tabs on me like I used to keep tabs on her when she was a teenager. I tell her, "For Christ's sake, Barbara, I'm a grown woman, and I can take care of myself!" She doesn't listen, though.

"Who is going to look after you if I don't?" she asks me.

"I can take care of myself," I tell her, even though I'm not quite sure that's true.

Lucy comes over about twice a week, sometimes more. She doesn't have laundry facilities in her apartment so she does it here. Those nights I'll make us a brisket and we'll eat and watch her reality shows while she does her laundry. Sometimes we'll leave the laundry and go to one of the quaint BYOs in the neighborhood. Lucy tells me all about her love life and her job designing clothing, and I listen. I listen to all her gripes about the boy of the week she thinks she's in love with. At twenty-five, Lucy has yet to have a serious boyfriend, and I'm so happy she hasn't. She has mentioned this boy Johnny lately, but I don't think there's anything serious to that. Who could take a person seriously when his name is Johnny, and not John or Jonathan? Barbara begs her to meet someone and settle down already, but I always pipe up and tell her she's got a lot of years ahead of her for that. I listen to her stories about work and who she's met and who she sold her clothing to and how much they bought. I love every minute of it. I always wanted to work with clothes like Lucy does. I used to know the inventory of Saks Fifth Avenue better than some of the women who worked there. My mother's best friend, Hester Abromowitz, worked there until she died. Hester outlived my mother and her friends by twenty-five years, and she always said it was because she worked. I loved Hester

very much and think of her often. Before Hester's funeral, her daughter Diane, who was much younger than me, asked if I would say a few words about Hester, so I spoke about her time at Saks, since that was where I saw her most. I talked about how she took such great care of her clients, most of whom were at the funeral, and about her great style. People always said I had great style, and I thought so, too, and always attributed it to Hester. Over the years I thought about taking a job sometimes, but I had Howard and Barbara to look after, and even though we had full-time help—Gladys—I still had my role. Also, in my time, you were looked down on if you had a job. I brought it up to Howard a few times over the years, and he laughed.

“What are we, poor?” he'd say and smirk.

A lot of times, Lucy will go out after she visits me. She'll go to meet her friends in a bar in the neighborhood, and I can hardly keep myself from telling her I want to go with her. Sometimes I joke to her that I'm coming along, and she eggs me on, saying, “You'd be the coolest woman there! Let's get you dressed!” Once, just once, I'd love to go with her and see what her nights are all about.

Lucy is also much smarter than Barbara gives her credit for. Barbara wanted Lucy to go to law school, like Howard, but I know that's not my Lucy. Lucy went to the Parsons School of Design in New York City to learn how to design clothes. She worked for Donna Karan *herself* for two years as her personal assistant, and then she moved back to Philadelphia last year to pursue designing clothing on her own. Oh, and you want to know what else she did? She took my last name! Okay, Lucy Jerome looks a lot better on a design label than Lucy Sustamorn.

How horrible is the last name Sustamorn? When Barbara first brought Lucy's father home and he said his name was Larry Sustamorn, I thought, *Oh, that's just pathetic. It sounds like "such a moron" if you say it quickly.* Try it—say the word *Sustamorn* ten times fast and see what you get. Anyway, Lucy Sustamorn became Lucy Jerome, and although her mother was a little hurt by it, she came around. After all, my Lucy has her dresses in some of the best shops in Philadelphia—Plage Tahiti and Knit Wit and Joan Shepp—and the new Barneys CO-OP on Rittenhouse Square is interested in her dresses. Barneys!

I know. I'm such a proud grandmother.

One of Lucy's favorite things to do is go through my closet and pick out styles she can copy. I've saved everything through the years, and boy do I have a closet to show for it. By the time I moved from the house in the suburbs, I had filled every closet in the house. Barbara's childhood closet held my Chanel and Halston suits from the sixties and seventies. The guest room closet held all of my beautiful gowns. My furs (when fur was acceptable to wear, and you weren't in danger of having those people throw paint on you) and other winter coats were downstairs. I had my own closet for all my shoes and the clothes I wear now.

"You could put this stuff up for auction!" Barbara told me when I started to pack up the house.

There was no way I would do that, though. My clothes contain my memories of all the good times. I don't have scrapbooks full of pictures of old memories; instead, I've got the closet of a lifetime. My Oscar de la Renta pale blue taffeta suit from Barbara's wedding; my gorgeous James Galanos white sequined one-shoulder gown that I bought for a black-tie affair Howard and

**adena halpern**

I went to New York once in the 1980s—Howard said he'd never seen me look more beautiful. I would never give up any of it. No siree, bob.

So I bought a three-bedroom apartment and turned one room into a closet. It took more than three months for the contractors to get it right, but when they did it became my favorite room in the world. Barbara doesn't understand it. Lucy does.

Lucy and I could spend hours in there together. She makes sketches of some of my dresses. She even copied a bright pink Lilly Pulitzer shift I bought on a trip to Palm Beach, Florida, in the 1960s, before Lilly Pulitzer was anyone in the fashion world.

Lucy calls it "the Ellie Jerome dress."

She named it for her grandmother.

When I think of my granddaughter, I glow.

And that's exactly why I'm jealous of her.

So tonight at my seventy-fifth birthday party at The Prime Rib, all I could think of was how much I wished I could go back in time and do it all over again in this day and age. Even for just one day. I wished that for one day I had my firm tush again, and my smooth, tanned skin. I wished that I could make mad passionate love to someone who only wanted to pleasure me. I wasn't asking for a lifetime; I didn't want to be piggish about it. I just wanted to have one day out of my miserable old-fogey life to experience the things that I missed out on and gain some appreciation for the things I took for granted. Do you know that I've lived for exactly 27,394 days? I figured that out on my calculator this morning. Out of all those days, would it really be a big deal to take one day off and really go crazy? What a wonderful wish! I thought it was highly creative. I would have shared the idea

with someone, but of course you're never supposed to tell your wish or it won't come true. Ha!

So that's what I wished for when Barbara and Lucy came walking in with that big birthday cake.

"I could only fit twenty-nine candles on it," Barbara told everyone and laughed. Barbara can get on my last nerve sometimes.

So I wished on my twenty-nine birthday candles.

I wished to be twenty-nine again for one day.

If I had that one day, I would change everything.

This time, I would do it the right way.

And I would never regret again.

