

Jane Karakula

Not Yet

My body has made fifty revolutions around the sun. I've been spinning along, minding my own business and *bang*—I'm looking down the barrel to menopause. My new dread is the arrival of my first AARP catalogue. How did this happen? How did I get here? I'm on heightened alert for subtle changes. Everything is turning a lighter hue, except the teeth. Older gals already past the transition, secretly gloat over my aging angst. But you're moving into your crone years, they gleefully declare. My new male doctor asks me what I use for birth control. "Age," I reply.

There's comfort when occasionally addressed as Miss rather than Ma'am—perhaps due to my new contour—a bloated midsection that makes me look four months along. A friend tells me it's just the body storing up estrogen. Apparently I'm producing enough to be a donor bank for the entire northeast.

I've discovered the modern gal's girdle. It's like a wetsuit. It's smoothes out the cellulite, but eventually gives you varicose veins. Up until now, I've only worn bras recreationally. As a nine year old, I witnessed the launching of the women's movement on the nightly news, all the big girls hurling their bras into a burning heap. I longed to be one of them. Now I'm just elongated.

Apparently I never got over my teenage rebellion. I live what some would consider a bohemian lifestyle. I've never married. I belong to no one. I have no husband around to restrain me. I can vehemently express a political opinion with no one around to shut me up and drag me off. Needless to say, I don't get invited to a lot of parties. I've spent my entire adult life liberating myself from men. Now I get a thrill walking in front of construction sites.

I may have lost my appeal to a generation that sounds like a chromosome, but at least I've broadened my dating field to include the elderly. Whenever I visit my father at the nursing home, a number of male patients ask me if I have a husband. And not from social mores, but because they think they still have a shot.

My father, Frank, is of the Great Depression generation. Which at his

point in life is an understatement. He has pretty much taken up residence in a nursing home. I don't live close by, but I try to visit as often as I can. It's only one hundred and eighty miles away, but it does involve three modes of transportation—a ferry, a taxi and a rental car. The moment I step off the elevator to his floor, I'm hit with dueling scents of pungent urine and floral disinfectant. In the olfactory competition, the human smells win out. Walking down the ninety-degree corridor only enhances the odors. My initial instinct is to stop breathing, in fear of catching something—like dementia.

Frank's room is at the end of the line. The hallway is scattered with huge laundry baskets, stretchers, and medication carts. Throw in some wheelchairs and walkers and you've got a full-blown obstacle course. I never know whether to look at the patients and smile or pretend they don't exist. But I do a secret blessing as I squeeze by while glancing into the rooms of the bedridden elders. The cruel reality of the unequivocal and unchanging fact of the circle of life becomes apparent. I tell myself, go in a plane crash. I'll book a trip to Libya for my eightieth birthday.

After navigating one final wheelchair blockade, I arrive at Frank's doorstep. I find him sitting, just sitting, yet somehow engaged in this non-activity. My father, a former Marine, served duty in the South Pacific. He's tough, a survivor. He's not ready to go. Not yet. His constitution makes him hang in there. Or maybe it's my mother who makes him. He's not one of the drooling ones. It's his bottom half that has failed him. The legs can't walk anymore. I cheerfully say, "Hi, Dad." His eyes light up.

In a strange way, I almost prefer him in this state. It's the first time I've ever had complete access to him. Stoicism, a revered virtue from his era, is now what's considered, "emotionally unavailable." Not like the fathers of today where the young daughters of divorced parents get to go on "dates" with their dads. So now, our dates consist of manicures and pedicures. I have to perform them in his room, otherwise someone will roll up and assume I'm there to give my services to everyone. I'm pathetic enough to pick on old people in my head, *What do you think this is? A spa?*

Over all, the nursing home service is good. I see that it's much better to be in a community than to be home alone. At least everybody's all in it

together. Still, I have no intention of making it *my* final destination. I'm going to keep one step ahead of failing health. I convince myself, if anyone can defy the aging odds, it will be me. After all, not every senior ends up in a home. Take Granny D. She's an aberration, but an inspiration.

I'm upstairs in my cozy bedroom committed to my mid-day slug-like behavior, when NPR features a ninety-something woman, a political activist who walks across entire states on a personal political mission trying to get apathetic people like myself to vote. On her days off, she whips up batches of ginger cookies. Feeling slightly shamed, half her age, and gorging on boxed cookies, I decide to get up and start walking. As a matter of fact, I will walk across the entire length of this puny island I live on, thirty miles out to sea. Of course, I'm not walking to uphold the Constitution, just to save my lazy ass from old age. But it's a start, a fourteen-mile start.

I enthusiastically declare my brainstorm to a friend. He calls me Forrest Gump. My big inspiration comes at an unfortunate time—mid-February. Cold is one thing, but gale force is another. In the breezy warmer months the island bustles as a high-end resort, but in wintertime, it's like being on *Survivor*. I have to ease into this, start off with a few six-mile walks on the calmer days. Come to find out, the bottom of my feet start to hurt after only four minutes. I wonder what that old gal wears. I assume old leather boots. I need cushioning.

There's only one place on the island to purchase athletic footwear, so I go there. The entire stock looks like it's from the nursing home. The white ones I reluctantly end up selecting are so hideously bright they almost glow. I totally despise them, but buy them anyway. My friend Ann can barely contain her ridicule. "Oh, you got a pair of mall-walkers. Now all you need are the wraparound cataract glasses."

I, along with many other shallow women I know, am what my gay friend calls, "shoe sluts." A celebrity whom I'm slightly obsessed with from a former television show, a known shoe glutton, wrote into her contact to keep all the expensive designer high heels from all the episodes. After the show's six-year stint, the star ended up with tons of fabulous heels and boots, and had her personal assistant hire his personal assistant to photograph and catalog her fleet of footwear.

I don't have a catalogue. I just go to my closet and survey the motley collection. I chuckle of the memory the night Ann and I nicknamed each pair of shoes after a former boyfriend, and then lumped them into categories. There's the footwear that never quite worked out. I wanted them to. I was deeply attracted to them, but ultimately ended up getting fraught with blisters, no matter how many band aides. Then there are the ones I had every good intention of parting with, but at the last minute couldn't. And then there are those that work out at a later date. But that's very rare. Then of course there are the seasonal varieties. For me, there is always a storage issue both physically and psychically. So, settling for the detested bright whites, a.k.a. BW's, was ultimately traumatic.

The day arrives. Instead of the relentless wind, a lone bird chirps outside my bedroom window. The sky is clear blue. I lace up, drive to the eastern most end of the island, and walk to the bluff. The top layer of the ocean is frozen. It moves in one big rhythmic primordial motion. I decide to make it a Walking Meditation. Try out some of that Bodhisattva mind. I'll aim for pure focus and attention—to what, I'm not sure, but perhaps I'll discover *it*. With some anxiety, I leave my cell phone, watch, and ipod in the car. It's just the BW's and me. We head out, in the road, hugging icy snow banks.

It starts off pretty good. I'm in a confident mood, focused on my surroundings. A half-mile into it, I return to my natural state of *wild elephant mind*, which quickly shifts to panic. A cement mixer barrels toward me with no indication of slowing down.

Suddenly, I'm airborne, up and over a snow bank. In the 60 mph back draft, I shake my fist, damning the driver. After the truck is out of sight, I pray nobody saw my portrayal of Charlton Heston during some biblical plight. I get a grip and recommit to discovering the elusive *it*. The next hour is taken up by recalling every person who has pissed me off in the past five years. The hour after that, I pull out the list from the previous decade.

When I reach the mid-island section, humanity is in search of food. That's when the three-mile nightmare starts. The roads are tight with blackened snow banks. As I make my way around a bend, I look up and notice a driver in cell phone oblivion speeding toward me. With no place

to jump and a lagoon to my right, I freeze momentarily while getting hosed down. There are too many people around to go into my Heston routine. I take an enormous breath and hold it. That's okay, I tell myself. On the exhale, I curse her family, including siblings, first and second cousins, *and* the subsequent seven generations. Soaked and dripping in muddy slush, I continue on.

I realize there's a need to see a higher truth from the perceived attack. It's a gift, I tell myself. The BW's are transforming into a reasonable shade of white.

For the next two and a half miles, it's all I can do to avoid being killed. I am not having a good time. I take note of the unending stream of cars and trucks full of trash heading for the dump. All that rubbish whizzing by gets me thinking about the island's delicate eco-system. Perhaps I'll adopt ecology as my personal political mission. I'll walk across this island going door to door persuading people to commit to *true* recycling. Not sneaking their cans and plastics into their regular trash. I'll then walk across Martha's Vineyard and do the same, then I'll cover Block Island, Long Island, even Manhattan! Suddenly, I'm hit with a wave of exhaustion. I slog along. An aching spot on my right big toe becomes my focal point.

About five miles from my destination, I've had it. My right big toe is killing me. I'm hoping I'm not permanently damaging the nail bed. I knew the BW's were trouble from the get go. My pedicurist once dropped a huge heavy flowerpot on her left big toe and when she looked down, the toenail was standing up straight. That toenail took an entire year to grow out. She was one of the lucky ones. It ended up looking pretty darn good. At this point, I have three options—take my shoe off and get frostbite, start shifting my weight and create irreparable hip damage, or keep the shoe on and wait a year for a normal toenail to return. I decide on the year option. Eleven miles into it, I have an epiphany. I've discovered *it!* It is my achy fucking toe!

Twelve miles, I get beyond the pain and concern of disfigurement. At this point I'm down to the count. Exhilaration kicks in. My pace quickens. I slip into a fantasy of being at a marathon finish line with people cheering me on. Spending all this time alone with just myself and no other distractions has made me realize how pitiful I really am. Oh,

well, I'm all I've got.

Fourteen miles and four hours later, I arrive at the most western part of the island. It's flat and barren without a soul in sight. The road disappears into a large sand dune, which I climb. I feel a momentary awe the instant I spot the horizon. Sunlight is reflecting off a tranquil ocean. I take in an enormous breath. The exhalation coincides with a brief moment of accomplishment and relief. I got to the end. I wonder if my father and the old folks think that when they arrive at the nursing home. How did this happen? How did I get here? They say it's about the journey. Could be more about the destination. Wherever that is.

Jane Karakula lives and works on where she participates in local theater.