Going Gray

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“For old people, beauty doesn’t come free with the hormones, the way it does for the young. It has to do with the bones. It has to do with who the person is.”
—Ursula Le Guin

I did not feel old until last week when my gynecologist told me that my vagina was turning gray. She was not being metaphorical. That was the same appointment when the receptionist asked me to update my personal information on a new form and a “date of death” box was added right there next to the “date of birth” box. I suspected that aging might be disorienting, but I had hoped for a subtler shift into downgrade.

I was sitting in the waiting room of the gynecologist I have seen for twenty-five years. I fill out the same form every year, with the same address, same insurance, same emergency information. My details never change, as much as I’d like to think that my life does. As my hand flowed numbly across the page, I was hardly reading the boxes until I reached the one that said “date of death” with three empty spaces to fill in the day, the month, and the year. There it was right at the top of the form, not buried somewhere in the “office use only” section with an abbreviated code that presumably someone else might fill out in the distant future.

Did anyone in the office with a pulse even read this new form before they handed it over from behind the sliding glass window? I had no problem with the addition of a gender-neutral box, but forgive me for thinking that a person’s date of death should remain private until it actually happens.
The door to the back office opened and closed with a train of women in various stages of hormonal urgency. I settled in for a long wait. Because Dr. Channing had been described as the Bay Area’s “go to gyno” in several glossy, non-medical magazines, her practice had been overtaken by a rising tribe of urban parents. The first-timers waddled around heavily, making wide strokes over their belly in case anyone doubted they were pregnant, while their attentive husbands rushed ahead to open the door. Enjoy it while it lasts lady, I called out silently behind them. Miffed about the death question, I kept myself from whispering to the woman next to me who leaned over her swaddled football with hyper-focused attention that it was fun to name them, not always fun to have them.

The busy office usually didn’t bother me because it translated to Dr. Channing giving the world’s quickest pelvic exams, but the teeming waiting room and the overwhelmed back office made me think that as I wend my way through the middle years, it might be time to find another doctor. While I waited for my five intimate minutes with Dr. Channing, I watched two women march up to the receptionist to announce that they were there for a 2:30 appointment, the same appointment time that I had. I wondered if one of us might get offered a free pelvic exam at a later date if we’d give up our examining room to someone else. Despite the wafting clouds of estrogen and cattle call crowdedness, despite the date of death question and the fact that all of Dr. Channing’s scales were at least ten pounds off, for a moment I was appreciating the unspoken equalizer that everyone was waiting around to be splayed out and felt up.

Dr. Channing swept into my room with a blur of eye contact and my open chart. She had not aged a day in twenty-five years. Blunt blonde hair with a few gray roots, pencil thin in her scrubs, hermetically sealed face. She was all business with a flawless brow and a tight smile.

“What a day. Have you been waiting long? So, how are things with you? It looks like there’s been some starts and stops with different hormone replacements?” The door had not yet swung all the way closed by the time Dr. Channing pirouetted from the sink to the stool in front of my open legs while putting on her gloves.

I braced myself for the assault of hands and tools and tried to answer the question with the calm confidence I had practiced in the car. The truth was, she scared me. Her cool efficiency and rock star gynecological success colliding with my fleshy nakedness and
stay at home status made me forget all the questions I had forgotten to ask her a year ago. I liked to map out our conversation in advance.

“Yes, I decided that hormone replacement just isn’t for me. I mean, not yet, I think. It just…doesn’t work for me. I think I’d like to maybe skip the hormones, or at least put them off until…”

I trailed off because nothing was happening on her end of things. She seemed to just be sitting there, looking at me. But not the talking end of me.

“Um, is there a problem?”

“Oh no, no problem. I’m just noticing things.”

“And things are looking…all good?”

“Yes, everything’s fine. There is just some thinning and slight discoloration.”

“You mean, on my…. On my chart? On my kneecaps? Where the hell was she talking about?

“Your vagina is turning gray and showing the early signs of atrophy that accompany perimenopause. It signals a drop in estrogen, which is one of the reasons that hormone replacement might be a good option for you, but it sounds like that hasn’t worked well.”

It was one of those moments that I’d replay for a long time, and someday might even think was funny. But right then I was trying to feel good about being forty-five years old and hearing this straight talk from her or anyone else peering between my legs. I decided to stick with my script and process this new information later.

“Yes, I guess if I had known I was going gray…or was getting discolored or whatever…maybe I’d feel a little differently, but yes. I think I want to try other things like acupuncture before I get too far into hormones. They made me crazy.”

“You can let me know when you change your mind.” I could hear the smile in her voice as she stood up and scribbled on my chart. The sound of her beeper signaled the end of the appointment, and as she slipped out the door I think I heard her say, “Try eating more soy.”

On the drive home I decided the first thing I had to do was make sure I could still seduce my husband. Because the truth was, it mattered less if he had noticed this anatomical reality about me than the fact that I knew it now. I would have to befriend my gray vagina in order to break through to the mojo waiting on the other side of it. Feeling sexy is seventy percent attitude and thirty percent
I practiced improvisation. I was going to have the best sex of my life that night, despite my…atrophy. Ever since my husband and I had had a memorable night early in our marriage when we pulled apart a dripping roasted chicken straight from the oven and ate it with our hands while the rain beat against the windows, food as foreplay was an unfailing ritual. He would be blindsided because it was a Tuesday and normally we’d have hamburgers, so I veered into the “must get laid” aisles at the store and plucked up more of a Saturday night feast: herb roasted lamb chops, risotto with caramelized vegetables, a fruit galette smothered with that orgasm-inducing Mexican chocolate gelato and a big old bottle of wine. Cocktails, too. The kids could put themselves to bed.

So I had a plan, and that felt good, but something else stirred around and unsettled me that afternoon as I pulled into the driveway and got ready to chop vegetables and jump my husband. It was that damn form, that piece of meaningless paper with the three empty spaces for the date of death. For my date of death. It wasn’t the idea of my death that upset me, but the fact that there was this date out there with three spaces for the month, the day, and the year, and someday a person who never knew me would fill in that box; they will know this little sliver of information that is one of the most profound and intimate details of my life. Of all the smallest threads of data that we hang onto about ourselves, isn’t it strange that we just can’t know what’s in that one little box? I can tell you everything else about my life, but that box stays blank until some stranger fills it in and files it away.

And that is when the acorn tears started falling into the risotto. I was filled up, filled with all the heat rising from the pan, the smell of the rich broth, the blessed middleness of my life. I wouldn’t have traded anything for the moments I stood there stirring that risotto in front of the stove. The pure sensuality rose up from the bubbling grains and seeped into my bones; it had a full and curvy wisdom to it. It was not young, and it was not old. As I stood there crying and stirring, I had a picture in my mind and a memory of standing in a darkroom next to my dad when I was about eight years old. I watched an image arise out of the chemical waters, and as it became a photograph I recognized myself in the picture, taken a year earlier as I hung from a branch in an apple tree. As the photograph floated there in the water, I saw for the first time a younger version of myself—ah…so that is who I am! My mental photograph has shadowed with age, but that day in the darkroom began the lifelong choreography between my past and
present self. Sometimes, even in those middle moments of life, I want to sneak back to that darkroom, dump my longing for a more youthful version of myself at the door, and peer at that girl in the photograph with nothing else but a child’s wide-open curiosity. Ah—so that is who I am.

The broth ran out but my tears kept the risotto bubbling, and it was a good thing that my husband walked in the door before things got too salty. A wet mess, I dissolved into his arms.

“You didn’t tell me I was going gray.”

“I think that is a matter of opinion.” I loved him so entirely at that moment for not asking any clarifying questions. I reached up, he leaned in; we met in the middle.