

Gliding Gracefully into Gravity

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“You Don’t Look Your Age...and Other Fairy Tales”

by Sheila Nevins.

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A SIZE TWO walks by with the right answer to a film we are working on. She is beautiful. She is young. She gets it right. “Terrific,” you say. It is not her fault that she is perfect and smart and half your age.

And the bronchitis lingers. You caught it from her. She whipped it in a week. You’re onto a thousand coughs and a thousand sleepless nights. She didn’t mean to have a great immune system.

Philip Roth depresses you. Does he have to be so brilliant about exits and ghosts? Why does Zuckerman have to be an aging curmudgeon and incontinent while forgetting to change his urine-stinking diaper? Any one of these signs of decay would have been enough.

And how about the woman who grabbed you on the Saks escalator? You didn’t need an outfit anyway.

“Sheila, Sheila. Sheila Nevins. Remember me? Audrey Melznik, we graduated the same year from Barnard.”

“Oh, yes, Audrey. Of course, I remember you.” (I don’t.) Children? Yes. Grandchildren? Five. Wow. All boys? Great. Harvard? Great. Oh, sorry. Two husbands. One dead. Oh, sorry. Life. Gottagottago.

Audrey Melznik is old. She is my age. Her hair is gray. She is plumpish. She let herself be old. I hate her. Or do I respect her? What the f--- am I so upset about? Damn it. Who needs Audrey Melznik anyway?

Is it the twenty extra pounds I gained since college that’ve got me in a tizzy? The high- heeled shoes that now hurt? Didn’t used to. Is it the affair I do/don’t want and, anyway, it’s too late. Is it the look on a baby colleague’s face when I draw a blank on a name or don’t know the band called something- or- other? “Oh, yes. I think I’ve heard of

them.” Liar. What is it that panics me so?

I think it’s death. Not probably. Death. And age. Why can’t I face aging with grace? Does anyone ever whistle anymore? I want to meet Mother Time with a pas de deux. A curtsy for the scythe. A refined readiness. That’s all. Is all. Why, oh, why can’t I . . .

I want to celebrate the longevity of my life. My mom never made it. My dad gave it to cigarettes. Why am I hiding? I am a product of magazine covers that screech: “Young at any price. Buy me!” The saleslady who says the ill-fitting clothes look great on me and make me look young— Sold! To me, the fool who buys the spiel. Please, God, I’m an atheist who wants to look young. I have enough Botox in me to detonate Iran.

Why can’t I go gracefully into gravity? This aging terror. Why can’t I bellow on Times Square to the disinterested passersby, “Sixty, seventy, eighty, ninety, one hundred . . . and counting.” Say it. Say it loud. Who am I fooling really? The health plan told the doctor and he knows. The dentist sees my teeth and he knows. And Google told Wikipedia. What’s the big secret?

The secret is I don’t want to say good-bye. I don’t think it’s fair to have worked so hard and given up so much time to not have more time.

If they can make a car without a driver, why can’t they make a me that goes on?

So that’s the secret. I’m angry that it’s almost over, just when I understand I’ve just begun.