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Dept: Memoir

HED: The age of love

Divorced for more than a decade, Beth Kaplan didn't expect romance to percolate again, much less with a man almost 20 years younger

By Beth Kaplan

I admired his pale muslin curtains, and he said, "Thanks, I sewed them myself." Not the kind of man I was used to.

But then this man – my boyfriend, for now – is from another generation. Nineteen years younger than I am, he is different from men in their mid-fifties, my age. Clichéd as it is, I have seen him cry. He is unashamedly emotional, he talks about his feelings, is concerned about my feelings and listens when I talk. He even remembers what I have said. I know because he has quoted me later, word for word.

Viewed rationally, our love affair makes little sense. People look, trying to figure out what we are to each other. When we first realized what was happening between us, it was harder for him than for me. For me, what a coup – a vigorous young buck. But for him, what? A lover only ten years younger than his mother. He confessed early on that having feelings for an older woman worried him. "Does it mean," he asked, "that there's something wrong with me?"

Yes, a voice in me replied. You should be with a beautiful young woman with a firm body and unlined skin; you should make a future together. "Love comes in all shapes and sizes," is what I said out loud. "There's no explaining it." But he should have a family; he needs someone younger. And I need to find another partner. The problem is, I want one just like him.

Well ... not completely like him. An older man would be more settled, with more options and freedom, more sophistication, probably more money. An older man would know himself and have answered lots of questions. He would be more or less done, as I am, with child-rearing and career anxiety, able to relax and put things in perspective. That would be good. But where will I find a man over fifty who loves to dance, who writes long emails full of chatty affection, who is trusting and funny, playful and tender and careful with carbs? Who, while we're at it, has a thick head of hair and a lean, strong body?

He was a volunteer fitness instructor at the Y. I took his class every other week for two years, gazing at him appreciatively, as at other male instructors; there is a lot of gazing at the Y. But there was no one quite like him. A friend of mine remarked, after his class, that she had never before been thanked for doing push ups; he always says thank you to his students after push ups. It would never have occurred to me that something could

grow between us, but when, by chance, we ran into each other several times outside the Y, I couldn't help but notice how interested he was in my work and life. How widely he seemed to smile before class, when I appeared in my running shorts. Was he more friendly to me than to other sweaty women? I hoped that he was.

And then I realized no, he couldn't possibly have singled me out; I didn't even know how to smile at a man any more, let alone flirt. Divorced for more than a decade, I'd had only one fraught relationship and a few invisible flings in all that time. My celibacy had led me to hate the word used against single people like a bludgeon - 'we.' All those couples, stuck to each other, going everywhere chained into pairs - how limited and boring. I loved seeing movies alone, free to digest in silence afterwards. Travelling alone was the best way to see new places, to meet new people. Besides, I was busy working and raising two children. No time for romance. No interest. No.

But this younger man warmed me. We took to bantering. One day, at the end of his fitness class, I dared myself to make a move, and walked from where I stood by the mats mopping my brow to where he stood in the centre of the room mopping his brow. We chatted, joked. I said, "We should have coffee some time." It was the first time in my life I had made a suggestion like that, aggressive to my generation, perfectly normal to his.

We had coffee, and discovered that we had seen all the same obscure documentaries; we both love documentaries. I waited for him to tell me about the inevitable girlfriend, but he didn't. We exchanged email addresses. There was no harm, surely, in us becoming friends and seeing a movie or two together. We saw a documentary, had brunch and supper and a drink, went dancing; we walked a lot, and talked a lot. Slowly, despite mutual reservations, we grew closer.

Now we are lovers and companions, and in a month he is returning to the other side of the world. He had made plans to leave before we began seeing each other, and he is still going. And I support his decision. I know exactly where I am and what I have to do; he has it all to figure out - work, past loves, future. Ill at ease with the language and the customs of this country, where he has lived for the past four years, he misses all that is familiar, and so, temporarily or for good, he is going home. He joked that if I came to his country to visit, he would not introduce me to his Muslim parents. "The age difference would not be the problem," he said. "The fact that you are half-Jewish would be the problem."

Perhaps he will find a wife there, and make a family. I can see the dark-eyed babies that he and some lucky woman will make; what a loving and lively father he will be. And I will send a wedding present; baby gifts.

Or maybe not. Maybe he will come back because there is no one quite like me, no one who understands and cares for him as I do, who is as open and supportive, because I have spent a lifetime getting here, to this place of relative peace. There are advantages to aging.

“I thought older people were different,” he said once, “but they aren’t. You are really about seventeen. You have a teenager’s heart.”

My heart may be young, but my body and mind are not. If only we could make a life together. If only we could celebrate our love with a commitment to a shared future.

But we can’t.