

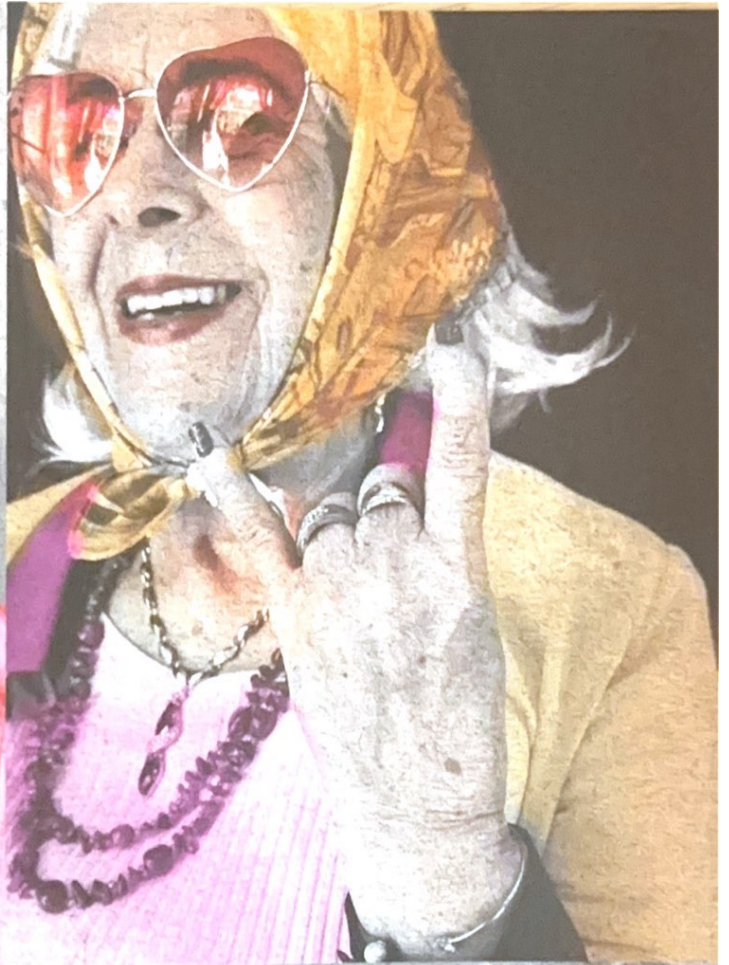
Help!

But could living as a 70-year-old for a week be the cure?

I'm terrified

Jennifer Savin, 32, had a sleepover in a retirement village to find out...

of ageing



**'Everyone okay with white wine?'
A voice calls from the end of our table.
Ten women nod enthusiastically.
'I'm just having the one,' I say – we've
already done a wine tasting today,
after all. It's not a popular opinion.**

**'Really? Just the one?' a voice to
my right asks.**

Around the table, talk ranges from films and mental health to cosmetic surgery and how dating apps have changed relationships. I feel content and relaxed, laughing with my new friends. We have so much in common, apart from one thing (and, no, it's not the wine): the majority of those I'm hanging out with are over 70.

Is it normal to start a 'facelift fund' in your 20s? I'm not sure – but I did. Now, I'm 32 and the small amount of money siphoned off is barely bringing much comfort. I'm hyper-aware that I've passed being eligible for a '30 under 30 list', have aged out of a young person's railcard and that all around me people are 'settling down' and are less available for spontaneity. Then there's the pressure of all the things we're supposed to achieve in our 20s and 30s: a house, a car, success, babies, the lot; the countdown is on.

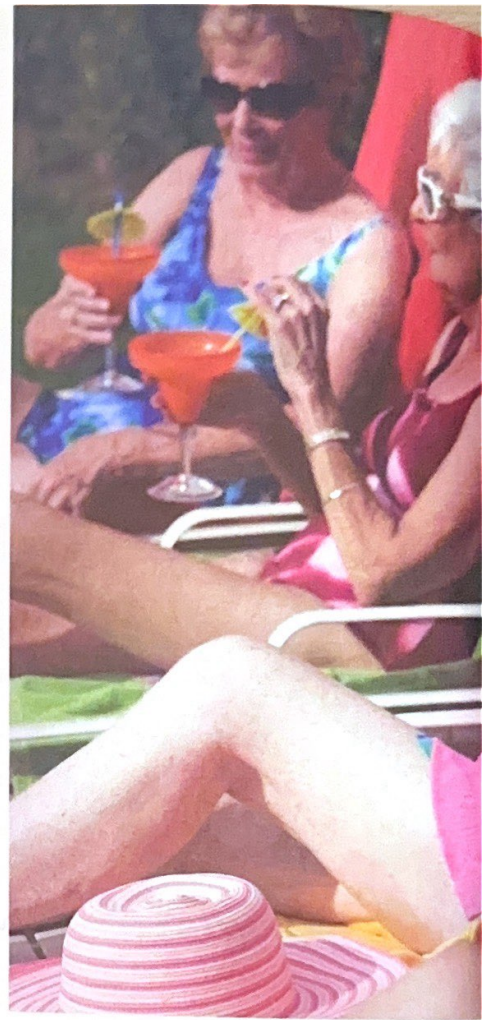
There's the (admittedly) vain stuff: I spend my mornings inspecting fine lines around my mouth in the mirror with trepidation and quickly trying to disguise any rogue grey hairs that I can spy. I know, I know, but... I've been conditioned to feel this way. Raised on anti-ageing adverts, I've long been told that youth equals beauty, and that, as a woman, my beauty is where so much of my value lies.

I remember a family friend, Maggie*, almost 80, once telling me she worried so much about lost job opportunities that she had a facelift before her 60th birthday. She cracked up when recalling texts she sent throughout her recovery – 'swamp woman has gone purple today!' – but added that, on a more serious note, 'it wasn't vanity – it had a purpose, professionally. It's sometimes harder for older women to be seen as credible.'

I'd love it if this was all paranoia, that it was in Maggie's head, in my head. But it isn't. 'Pretty privilege', where those perceived as beautiful are seen as more trustworthy – and can even earn higher salaries as a result – is alive and well (as multiple studies have proven). As for what many (though, of course, not all) find beautiful? Research has shown that older faces are deemed less attractive. A third of over-50s believe they've been rejected for a job due to age and, naturally, those figures are worse for women (aren't they always?): almost 80% of those surveyed by Women of Influence have encountered ageism.

And while I am still a decade, or two, away from experiencing that, there's a pervasive message that our 30s are 'old'. (Don't believe me? See the viral video of students on a night out being asked, 'What year does a person have to be born to be considered old?' and they confidently answer, 'Any time in the 1990s.')

We regularly hear female actors or models lament the loss of work as they age, reducing our exposure to much-needed role models, and there's a feeling that some activities or outfits are no longer 'appropriate' for certain groups. Clubbing? A bit tragic if you're over 35 (in the eyes of some). Sequin hot pants? Leave those



for the twentysomethings, please, Brenda – the 'all beige everything' aisle is one over, right by hormone replacement therapy! Is it any wonder that an estimated 900,000 anti-wrinkle injections are administered annually in the UK – with a 6:1 ratio of women to men?

Some positive change is happening, though. Pamela Anderson and her 'no makeup' red carpet looks sparked a much-needed conversation, joined by a deluge of silver-haired influencers of every race, style and flair fighting stereotypes on social media. One, Grandma Droniak, 94, has more than three million Instagram followers thanks to her videos, which include 'GRWM to meet my hot doctor' and dating anecdotes (she was once ghosted... because the guy actually died).

But where does that leave those of us who aren't celebrities or influencers? After all, you could argue that their version of ageing (often with a shedload of cash behind them) isn't what ours will look like. That it's unsustainable and unachievable. It's wonderful to be seeing



an influx of new older role models, but... if we're only praising them because they look 'good' ageing, is that necessarily progress? It does little to stop me from feeling like my facelift fund is a good investment, even though I know those emotions aren't healthy. Particularly as, the reality is: I'm not old. If national averages are to be believed, then I hopefully have at least another 53 years on this planet. And I don't want to spend them panicking that my relevancy is slipping away like sand through an hourglass. So, I set out to live my life like I was a 70-year-old to see what I could learn...

PARTYING WITH PENSIONERS

Waking up in my new 'home', I contemplate the day ahead. I could do a yoga class (they're held regularly in the stretch studio), sweat it out in the sauna or wander to the art room, filled with easels and paints. Or even head to one of the communal areas to try out events such as wine tasting, or simply to relax.

I've moved into (okay, temporarily) Bath Leat, a setup comprising 68 sleek apartments, starting from £400,000, which overlook the river Avon - specially designed 'for those enjoying life over 60' (even the chairs in the yoga room have been carefully considered for easy manoeuvring). Bath Leat is part of the Pegasus Homes portfolio, which has sites all over the country. The company is one of many appealing new later-living options: London now has Tonic Housing, the first LGBTQ+ affirming retirement community, and Villa Vie Residences boasts an all-inclusive 'retire at sea' cruise-liner option (from £1,300 a month... less than many spend renting a flat in London). Those who live at Bath Leat are busy. Many still travel, telling me how important it is to keep active, in both brain and body, and remain curious about life. During the day, I chat to Stella, a chic 77-year-old glass designer - if I had to choose, I'd say Joanna Lumley would play her in a film. I love her stories, about

how she modelled as a teenager and attended work Christmas parties in the Savoy. 'We all backcombed our hair, and the eye makeup went up like that,' she gestures, 'we looked like tarts - but we thought we were fantastic!' Stella says she doesn't feel 77, she has 'no concept' of it. She simply feels... herself. 'I'm not scared of dying, so I think from that point of view, I wasn't scared of getting old,' she shares, recalling her brushes with the spiritualist community, which proved comforting after the loss of her father and brother.

Stella views life in chapters, remaining optimistic about what's still to come, despite some big and difficult changes: her husband was due to move into the retirement complex with her, but is sadly now in a care home. 'I'm on my own, but I want to enjoy it, by looking at things in a fresh and exciting new way. [...] I don't want big things any more, or to be rushing around. I just want to be content.'

When talk turns to the fears that brought me to Bath (I feel a dunce confessing them, given what she's been through), Stella tells me I 'can't be frightened of something that is so far away in the distance', before adding, 'but I would say, don't avoid opportunities. It's like that book: *Feel The Fear And Do It Anyway*. I was once offered the chance to work

in Geneva with the United Nations.

I was too scared and didn't do it. I've regretted it ever since, thinking of how life might have been.' But her current life - one of creativity, community, tennis, swimming, family and friends - still sounds pretty ideal.

'I'm on my own, but I want to enjoy it by looking at things in a fresh and exciting new way'

Maybe my facelift fund ought to become my 'retire early' pot instead?

Over lunch in the shared lounge, I also connect with Lyn, a former teacher (one I'd have liked) and netball umpire who has survived cancer and the loss of her husband four years ago. 'In my 20s, I thought my life was mapped out. I got married, but then children didn't happen. So my husband and I adapted and developed our own lifestyle.' For them, that looked like 'growing into their strengths' and dedicating their all to teaching. 'I didn't ever have to ask if he liked something, because I knew he would. That kind of relationship is quite unique.'

Since his passing, like Stella, Lyn is living a new chapter. I'm quickly learning that we all have scope to reinvent ourselves no matter our age – but sometimes, it's by necessity rather than choice. Still, how full you view your glass is crucial. 'It's been a case of thinking, "Okay, what can I do now?"' Lyn says. 'As a more mature woman, you feel people stop inviting you to things.' But she's throwing herself into new experiences in her 70s, mentioning groups such as The Jolly Dollies, a network for widowed women. Keeping your sense of humour during the darkness is vital, she adds. 'Otherwise, what's the point? I can't take life seriously any more.'

Later that night, over dinner – where Annie, who coaxes newcomers to coffee mornings and who is 82, 'but feels no more than 25', offers me some of her greens and Lyn makes us all laugh (and gasp) with stories of her former pupils (one became a murderer, another a brain surgeon – she's seen it all!) – I realise nobody is distracted by their phones. We're simply there, existing. Enjoying good conversation. I usually struggle to meditate because my brain is constantly 'on', but that meal felt akin to 'zoning in, in order to zone out'. If this is what retirement was guaranteed to be like, then it'd absolutely ease many of my concerns for the future.

But, as I'm learning, old age is easier for some than others. All at dinner had experienced losses and difficulties, but still had their independence and were in high spirits. We can't – nor should – gloss over that not being a given. Starting at £400,000, these retirement complexes, unfortunately, aren't an option for everyone, and data shows that life expectancy declines for those living in areas of higher deprivation compared with their middle- and upper-class counterparts (by as much as 10 years when comparing some locations).

While meeting the residents assuaged some of my fears, it also prompted me to think about new ones (classic anxiety brain). Is my pension big enough? Why haven't I been worrying about my partner dying, loneliness, illnesses? My body breaking down, or struggling with an empty bank account? I send my boyfriend a voice note telling him I love him. Maybe our brains cling on to insane beauty standards because, in their own horrid way, they're easier to process than other elements of ageing?

HEALTH AND WEALTH

There's a trifecta at play when it comes to ageing 'well', confirms Dr Elizabeth Webb, head of research at Age UK. 'When we say "older people", we're often talking about 65 and up, the former retirement age, but older age starts when your health, financial or life circumstances begin changing. This could be [as early as] your 50s. Some people's lives are harder, and they age earlier.'

Dr Webb adds that, 'Older people can be stereotyped as frail and to be pitied, or active, wealthy and enjoying retirement. Actually, most people are somewhere in between. There's massive diversity in later life.' Keen to continue meeting more people, I head down to the Age UK Barnet centre for the over-55s.

There's chatter coming from a kitchen near the back of the room. Its citrusy-coloured walls are adorned with posters celebrating Black History Month and advertising new classes, including healthy cooking, which I decide to join in on one afternoon. Everyone seems to know one another well.

Gilda, Andy and Roger have lunch together once a week, usually sushi at a local place. I take a seat by them to help chop potatoes and am relieved when the banter flows easily, as Gilda, 88, jokes that Andy, 76, is flirting with me (he's not, but he is good-humoured; when I tell him I'm sorry about his wife passing away, he winks and jokes, 'Don't be, it's not your fault!'). Gilda, whose blonde hair is still styled to perfection, got in touch with Age UK Barnet after a fall and the charity helped to support her recovery. While she's dealing with other health conditions, she still walks when she can and does weekly seated yoga.

But we can't forget the impact physical ailments can have on our mental state, either – and as we age, for some, the problems do keep on coming. While researching this piece, I heard from older people who said they've contemplated



ending their lives because they felt unable to cope with their physical symptoms and the mental repercussions they had, held back only by the thought of their loved ones. But how many out there don't have the deterrent of family and friends? According to Age UK, more than a million older people say they're often lonely and there are about two million in England who have a care need that isn't being met, compounding the issue.

Gilda is another widow and says 81-year-old Roger – a former optician who wears a gold chain with a smattering of rings, along with retro aviators – is 'lucky' for still having his wife. He nods in agreement. The loss that comes with old age is a new tendril of worry that keeps cropping up, wrapping its way around my mind, overtaking concerns about wrinkles and relevancy. How do people cope with that?

Andy, who you can tell was a bit of a mod back in the day ('minus the Vespa', he confirms), lost his wife 11 years ago – and after getting sick of ready meals,

decided to master cooking. 'I knew where the stove was, but that was about it,' he explains. Now, he can make everything from coq au vin to curries, but it's the social aspect of the centre he loves most. Keeping connected is oversimplifying it, but so many older people have reminded me of the importance of community and perseverance when it comes to powering through bleak times. 'Every day when you wake up and feel a twinge or pain, you have to think to yourself, "Yes! I'm still alive!"' Andy says, recalling an uncle's outlook on ageing. Fun and new experiences count for a lot, too. 'I went to see my hero, Bruce Springsteen, in concert recently and stood for five hours,' he adds. 'I was probably more tired than him by the end, but you can't ever stop enjoying yourself. You must keep going to the concerts.'

On the way home, my chest aches. I want to call my aunt, Vicki. At 78, she's my oldest relative – and someone I should phone more often. I want to ask about her life experiences. She tells me about keeping her brain and body sharp by watching true-crime documentaries on her exercise bike, walking everywhere and eating well. Vicki recently married for the third time, too – although prior to meeting her now-husband, she dabbled in online dating. Turns out that it can be just as tragic no matter your age: 'It is just a lot of males wanting free sex. They don't want to know about you,' she recounts. 'They want to get you into a bed as soon as possible and I'm thinking, "I wouldn't touch you with a barge pole!"'

Our modern world, of not only online dating, but rapid news cycles, viral videos, accounts dedicated to zooming in on celebrities' faces to pick them apart and just constant *noise* isn't something Vicki – nor any of the others I met – had to contend with growing up. Our current pace of life, she says, is 'frenetic' and it could be causing us all to age more rapidly, too: our time is disappearing down the drain. We so rarely allow ourselves to pause or be bored. Vicki laughs when I say I have to schedule in downtime – 'That's an oxymoron' – and she's right. I think back to the lack of phones on the table at dinner in Bath. Time is so precious, yet so much of it is sucked away by screens.

The conversations I've had over the past few weeks have been nourishing. Why aren't we all having more of them, making more effort to bridge the generational divide? Thinking about that (at least partly) puts my stress about grey hairs into perspective. Ageing will be a process; I don't want to speed it up by thinking about it so much. When I ask Roger what advice he'd share with younger people, he words it perfectly: 'You

'You mustn't worry about the past or the future. The only way to survive is to seize the day and enjoy this moment'

mustn't worry about the past or the future. There's a mental attitude you have got to have, and the only way to survive is to seize the day and enjoy this moment.' Roger wishes he'd had an older mentor growing up, but candidly shares he's not sure if he'd have ever actually listened to one at my age. I laugh at the irony, but I'm taking serious notes from him.

It does us all a disservice to think that entire generations are homogeneous. It may sound obvious, but older people cannot be lumped into one category of person. None of us can. Still, we talk about 'old people' or 'young people' as collectives – but within that you have got Andy and his box-fresh Nikes, Vicki the 70-something bride and Annie, who appeared shy at first, but who happily asked a lone tourist on the next table to ours how they were finding their trip to Bath.

As for my 'facelift fund', I'm beginning to wonder if it's better spent on holidaying with friends. I imagine us sharing bowls of garlicky pasta around a sun-dappled table. Twinkly Ibiza beats drifting from a nearby speaker. An expansive sunset view that reminds us all of how simultaneously important and irrelevant our lives are. That, to me, is bliss. Through living as a 70-year-old, I've been reminded that at its core, life is about people – and that health and happiness is fragile. I want to invest in those I love, while we're still here, more than I do in unhealthy beauty standards or furthering an ageist society. ♦

