

Preface

When I turned forty, I went to Cuba. It was a sponsored trek, raising money for the mental health charity, Mind. I didn't know anyone else who was going. Perhaps unsurprisingly, several other people had gone in milestone years. I fondly remember spending one evening with three other women: one turning thirty, one fifty and one, Pam, was just sixty. She had two grown daughters, and was a widow. I had two young daughters and was divorced. We didn't have a lot else in common. Our lifestyles and backgrounds were very different. We had grown up at opposite ends of the country. Our paths were unlikely to have crossed were it not for this trip. We got on like a house on fire.

Coming home, we met up two or three times over the following couple of years. Our lives didn't naturally overlap. I never met any of her family. So I was all the more saddened when her daughter rang me unexpectedly to tell me that Pam had died after a short but brutal illness. She was only 63.

I think my short friendship with Pam planted the seeds for this book. My time in Cuba was a strange bubble of intense experience, not connected with any other part of my life. I have not stayed in touch with anyone else from the trip. Without her, I don't share any memories of it with anyone. I wasn't in contact with home for the ten days I was there. The days were filled with strenuous walking, beautiful scenery, music and laughter as well as oddly deep conversation with strangers. Pam and I discussed everything that mattered to us: relationships, friends, independence, home, children, finance, curiosity, age and health. We howled with hysterical laughter like teenagers. We shared experiences which formed jewel-like memories for savouring later: the sunrise over the sea; startlingly bright star light; the sounds of a makeshift band floating across a hot and sunny farmyard; the taste of tropical fruit ripened on the tree.

Rolling forward a few years, with fifty lurking just beyond the horizon, I can feel the stirring of another stage of life. This isn't necessarily unpleasant although it is not exactly comfortable. It is a time of restlessness, curiosity, some shifting sands (and waistlines). I began to reflect that our lifestyles today don't always build in the opportunity to hear from women who have been there first. I spend a lot of time with my own generation, but not as much with others. My conversations with my mother and aunt are not quite the same as they are with other women of their generation. And I also realise how much I have benefited over the years from conversations with women (and men) half a generation ahead of me. They were not my parents and not my contemporaries. It gave them an interesting perspective.

I found I kept thinking about it. I set out to find twenty women, all at least ten years older than me, who were willing to chat to me about what matters and what doesn't, as they look back.

A word about men

I like men. The women I interviewed like men. We all know wise, funny, kind and endlessly supportive men and value them immensely. There are times when male physical strength makes me feel both valued and safe: the offer of a steady or helping hand for instance. I rarely feel offended or patronised by such gestures, or by well-intentioned and polite acts of kindness such as holding a door open or offering me a seat.

I struggle with the word *feminism* because of the connotations it can have. Despite my best efforts, word association still brings terms like 'strident', 'bra-burning', 'anti-men' and 'extremist' to my mind. But equality is extremely important to me. Some struggles for equality have been forceful or violent and from what I can tell, needed (and perhaps still need) to be. Some women have demonstrated extraordinary courage in standing up for all of us. Winning equal voting rights was shockingly hard work. So is winning equal educational, health and economic rights for girls and women around the world. These fights can be bloody and are far from over in many arenas.

My experience has been blessed by comparison. My expectations and opportunities for education were equal to my brother's. I have had many male colleagues and friends who have treated me as their equal. I have never felt owned or objectified and I have rarely felt overtly discriminated against.

I *have* had occasions where I have felt dismissed, ignored or over-ridden by virtue of my gender whether men (or women) intended to or not. I am well aware of systemic biases in many of our organisations and institutions, and threaded throughout our culture and society that keep inequality alive. Some are more subtle than others.

As I get older, I am increasingly aware that age adds another potential inequality to the mix. Being an older woman could hold a double whammy. Semantics aside, if feminism means believing in economic, social and political equality with men I am a feminist. Gender equality to me doesn't mean men versus women, or men and women being the same. Likewise, I don't expect (and wouldn't want) people in their sixties, seventies and beyond to be the same as those in their twenties – but I do believe in their economic, social and political equality. This book is my way of exploring what older women have to say, and helping me to work out what I think and feel about my own way forward.

It is difficult to separate out the ageing from the gender issues. No doubt some aspects of the conversations and what I've written apply equally to men. But I feel that women in particular are still in the early stages of developing acceptable or desirable models of ageing. This is a luxury previous generations of women didn't have. In the UK, women did not get equal voting rights until 1928, a year after the oldest of my interviewees was born. In addition, it was only two years before I was born that the contraceptive pill was made freely available in the UK. It wasn't until 1974 that the introduction of family planning clinics could begin to break down some of the taboos around single women and contraception.

In historical terms, these things alone have led to very recent and dramatic changes in what life might look like for women of any age. It is only now that women brought up with these changes are reaching older age. If I'd been interviewing the mothers and grandmothers of my group of women, almost all would be married, not employed outside of the home, subservient to their husbands (comfortably or not), unlikely to have been educated and probably a mother many times over. Their single or childless sisters would probably have been consigned to primary carer role for the extended family.

My grandparents were born early in the twentieth century. They were all, bar one, from large families. Their mothers' lives were taken over, or cut short by, the demands that this entailed. They are shadowy figures in my understanding of our family tree. By the time they reached sixty, the women who were still alive would either have occupied the matriarch role or have been quite simply worn out from hard work and life-long restriction. Of course healthcare advances have also changed the landscape of older age for men and women alike.

The whole concept of older women with energy, choice, education, and much closer to equal status with men is therefore relatively new, and still evolving. There isn't much of a road map. The generation I've been interviewing is at the cutting edge. It feels important to me to hear what they have to say about it.

Why *these* women?

These particular women were drawn to me, and me to them, by an informal process. Some are friends of my parents, some are parents of my friends, some were recommended via wider networks as inspiring women to speak to. I only knew four of them in any depth beforehand. One of those is my mother. They are not a sociologically representative sample. They are women whose life, experience or outlook resonated with me for some reason. I do not want to emulate any one of them as I grow older but there are aspects of each and every one that I admire or recognise or that I hope rub off on me.

One of the main things that they have turned out to have in common is that they are all curious about the world and themselves. They all value education highly and are life-long learners, both formally and informally. Many have professional qualifications too. For several, their formal higher education took place long after they left school. I was the first in my immediate family to go to university, as were many of the women I spoke to.

Curiosity clearly is not always about formal education either. Pam, who I introduced at the outset, had little formal education but her zest and curiosity for life was evident in everything I saw her do or heard her say.

None of the women live in poverty though the majority were born into modest circumstances. I would say that education, over one or two generations, has been the single biggest factor in changing those circumstances. The lifestyle they can afford now has been earned, by them and sometimes by also supporting their husbands' careers, rather than given to them.

In demographic terms, these women range in age from sixty to eighty-five. Three quarters of them were born and raised in the UK, the rest have started or continued life in India, New Zealand, USA, Germany, South Africa and the Netherlands. They cover the whole political spectrum. Sixteen of them have children. Nine are grandmothers. Fifteen of them currently live with a partner or husband. I wouldn't describe many of them as exactly retired. Some still do paid work, and some do voluntary work. They are all actively involved in their families and communities, and many of them are developing their creativity like never before.

There have been high points and low points. Between them, these women have received national honours and awards, raised hundreds of thousands for charity, published books, nurtured gardens, won elected office, been at the most junior and senior levels in their organisation, completed degrees at all stages of life, set up and run businesses, worked in factories, worked as cleaners, employed cleaners, supported others, raised children, cared for the sick and dying, challenged Government policy, held exhibitions and appeared on our national stage and television. They have had adventures and misadventures. They have dealt with major setbacks and disappointments. More than one is lucky to be alive now after serious accident or illness. Some have suffered heart-rending bereavements, and some have experienced significant moments of despair. All have cooked, cleaned and bottle washed to some extent at some time, some more than others. Some have travelled far, some stayed close to their roots.

This may make it sound like an unusual and remarkable group. It *is* remarkable. But I believe, from my experience as a psychologist and from observing women around me, that it may not be as unusual as it sounds. I

suspect we would all be surprised by what we discovered if we took *any* group of twenty women over sixty and listened to them properly.

Whilst I hesitate to use the word ordinary, these women do not consider themselves to be anything unusual. I deliberately did not set out to find celebrities, even though some of them are well-known in their fields. I am not a celebrity. I wanted to listen to women who offered some resonance with my life. Of course, barely into most of these conversations, I quickly confirmed what I knew would be the case. Every story is unique and interesting. I was confident that would be the case at the outset and I wasn't disappointed.

These are the women we might stand next to in the queue for the ladies' toilet, or sit next to on the train. We see, but probably don't notice, them in supermarkets and cafes. In a busy and fragmented lifestyle, it is all too easy to overlook what they have to offer. Older women can be dismissed as eccentric, grumpy or quiet, or are only familiar in their relationships to other people – mother, grandmother, aunt, wife. We need to challenge our perceptions and our prejudices.

What this book is about

I have taken a very personal approach to this book. It is not a description of these women's lives and experiences. It is a book about my reaction to what I heard and how that is changing my own ideas and intentions about how I want to live my life from fifty onwards.

The whole project has been more therapeutic for me than I had expected though in hindsight I don't know why I am surprised by that. The support, challenge and inspiration I have gained from listening to these women's reflections has altered how I see myself and other women around me.

It has made me think hard about what I hope for me, my female friends, my daughters and their friends, and my mum. Interestingly, it has also made me think about what I hope for my husband, his son, my dad and my brother. I have especially begun to reflect on women's place and influence in the wider world, and the way men and women work and live together.

It has made me feel more accepting of the past, content with the present and more optimistic about what lies ahead. I'd love you to come along with me - we'll become bolder and wiser together!