

CHAPTER 5

IMAGE: AGEING GETS A MAKEOVER

*Whoever controls the media, the
images, controls the culture.*

—ALLEN GINSBERG

Let me walk you through a candid-camera prank that went viral across the Arab world.

A frail, elderly woman dressed in a floral housecoat shuffles into a pharmacy in Beirut, the capital city of Lebanon. She approaches the counter at the back and asks for Viagra. The pharmacist, who is in on the prank, looks at her with feigned disbelief. ‘Viagra?’ he says.

‘Yes, Viagra,’ says the woman, with the matter-of-fact tone of someone ordering a tube of toothpaste.

‘Who is it for?’ asks the pharmacist.

‘For my man,’ says the woman. ‘He is older than I am.’

The pharmacist looks amused, and slightly alarmed. He asks if her lover has health problems or takes other medication, and the woman replies: ‘No, he is a Tarzan.’

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She wants the most powerful dose of Viagra and asks if her beau can take four of the little blue pills at the same time. 'Of course not. Do you want to kill him?' exclaims the pharmacist.

Her deadpan reply: 'No, I don't want to kill him: he's still good in bed.'

Watching the clip, even with no knowledge of Arabic, you can see why it racked up millions of views on social media in Lebanon and beyond. The reactions of the real customers in the pharmacy are comedy gold. They squirm, they smirk, they giggle and guffaw. They exchange looks of disbelief, disapproval, disgust. One squeezes his eyes tightly shut as if trying to erase from his mind the image of octogenarians indulging in chemically enhanced sex. Another crosses herself and mutters, 'May God help us all.' When the elderly woman asks a young man if Viagra really is all it's cracked up to be, he dissolves into laughter. 'How would I know,' he says. 'I'm 20 years old!'

The clip comes from a hit Lebanese TV show called *Ich Ktir*, or *Live Long*. Its premise is simple: secretly film seventy- and eighty-somethings carrying out pranks that play with age stereotypes. The 30 episodes screened since the launch in 2016 have included elderly people buying pregnancy tests, shopping for high-end laptops and posing as shaky-handed medics charged with taking blood samples from terrified patients. One featured an old couple inspecting lingerie in a park. Revolutionary stuff in a country where cosmetic surgery is de rigueur and fresh, young faces dominate television.

The producer of *Live Long* is May Nassour, a 43-year-old

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Lebanese with a penchant for mirrored sunglasses and high heels. When we meet up over minted lemonade at a café in Beirut, she tells me the show has a dual purpose: to make people laugh and to torpedo the stigma against ageing. 'When you are older, people think you have no more role in the society – you are inefficient, you have nothing to say or contribute, you are boring and miserable and unattractive – and that is so unfair because it is not true,' she says. 'For the first time on Lebanese TV we showed people in their 70s and 80s being funny and playing pranks and in situations where they have power over other people – and that changes perceptions.'

Change is just what the doctor ordered. Ageing has a serious image problem, and not just in Lebanon. In our youth-obsessed world, to grow older is to vanish. Unlined faces and young bodies monopolise the visual landscape, from advertising and social media to movies and television. To make matters worse, when older people do get some airtime they are often rendered as boring clichés. Complex, nuanced characters in later life, especially female ones, have seldom been a staple of Hollywood movies. Now in her early 60s, Juliet Stevenson, an English actress with a rich body of work behind her, sees the road ahead narrowing: 'As you go through life it gets more and more interesting and complicated, but the parts offered get more and more simple, and less complicated.' In 2016, when Getty Images, a leading stock photo agency, used web-crawling technology to explore images of older people online, it found them routinely depicted as more alone, less happy and more sedentary.

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Or else engaged in stereotypical activities such as knitting, cuddling a grandchild or sipping tea in bed. Rebecca Swift, Director of Creative Insight at Getty, was chastened by the findings. 'It showed that we are just not visualising older people with the same richness and diversity that we use to visualise younger people,' she says. 'Instead of representing ageing in a genuine way we are reinforcing stereotypes.'

This matters to more than just image curators like Swift. What we see in movies and advertising, on television and online, shapes how we feel about ourselves and our place in the world. When older people are ignored, or dished up as caricatures, ageing becomes anathema to everyone. There is also a cramping effect on those already experiencing later life. If you routinely witness your generation reduced to narrow, unappetising stereotypes, your inclination to age boldly wanes. Bungee jumping, starting a new business, falling in love, backpacking round Asia, even just being happy – anything that fails to fit the Older Person Script feels like less of an option.

Ageist stereotypes can even curdle into self-fulfilling prophecy. It is well documented that exposure to racist and sexist assumptions causes ethnic minorities and women to perform less well in tests. Ageism has a similar effect. Studies have shown that encountering unflattering age stereotypes can cause older people to walk, talk and think more slowly. In an experiment at the School of Kinesiology and Health Science at York University, researcher Rachael Stone asked older test subjects to climb a flight of stairs. Later, she had them repeat the exercise after reading a fake article on how

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ageing erodes stair-climbing ability. On every measure, from speed to accuracy to balance, their performance worsened.

Something similar can happen with memory. The message coming at us from all sides is that later life is a bewildering blur of 'senior moments'. Result: as we age we frequently assume our memories are worse than they actually are. That leads to relying on aides-mémoire, such as a cookbook when making a favourite recipe or GPS when driving a familiar route. And that delivers a double whammy: First, it slows us down unnecessarily, reinforcing the myth that ageing is all about cognitive decline. Second, it can cause our memory to degrade through disuse.

Thankfully, though, the mind-over-matter effect can work in the other direction. The science shows that just believing we have slept well not only makes us feel more rested but also gives us a cognitive boost. Experts call this 'placebo sleep'. Something similar can happen with ageing. Studies show that those with a more upbeat image of growing older tend to look after themselves more. They perform better on memory and motor control tests. They can walk faster and stand a better chance of recovering from disability. They also live an average of seven and a half years longer. 'If we can get people to think about ageing in a much more positive way and not as this inevitable cascade of decline then we could start to see really impressive feats of function in older people that wouldn't be just exceptions to the rule but would just be, "Well, that's what older people do now,"' says Joe Baker, the kinesiologist we met earlier.

The point here is that we can, to some extent, think

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ourselves into ageing better. This may even be true when it comes to warding off the most frightening illnesses. When researchers at Yale University studied people with a gene variant linked to dementia, they found that those with a favourable view of ageing were 50 per cent less likely to go on to develop the disease than those with a gloomy view. Becca Levy, a professor of epidemiology and psychology and the lead author in the study, held up the results as a call to action: 'This helps make the case for implementing a public health campaign against ageism.'

How can we give ageing an image overhaul? By sharing the visual landscape more evenly among the generations. By depicting later life in all its nuance, richness and variety. By shining the spotlight on those who are grabbing the longevity revolution with both hands and redefining what 'older' looks like. The good news is that all of the above are happening around the world.



Live Long has given ageing a better name in Lebanon. After two hit seasons, the cast are now so famous they struggle to prank the public without being recognised. 'People come up all the time wanting an autograph or a selfie,' says Nassour. 'Many fans tell them the show has changed how they feel about ageing.' To tap that shift, brands are scouring Lebanon in search of older models to feature in their advertising and Lebanese production companies are hunting for seniors to front TV shows in genres ranging from comedy to cooking.

The template they have in mind is the 86-year-old star of

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the Viagra sketch. Her name was Jeanne d'Arc Zarazir, but everyone in Lebanon knew her simply as Jaco. She was a gifted prankster, keeping a straight face even as those around her surrendered to fits of laughter. Viewers saw her pose as everything from a rapper to an AK-47-wielding commando. Joie de vivre was her calling card and she had a knack for making later life seem enviable. When she died in 2017, news bulletins carried loving tributes and replayed her highlights from *Live Long*. One obituary described her as 'the funniest woman in Lebanon'.

By chance, I was the last person to interview Jaco before her death. When I arrived at her home in Beirut, she was frailer than she had been on *Live Long*. Her skin was almost transparent, her legs were riddled with sores and she was walking with a stick. But she still greeted me with the same smile – wry, mischievous, faux innocent, a tooth missing in the middle – that made her a TV star. It was a day of stultifying heat and her three cats were snoozing on the shady patio. We sat on an outdoor sofa and my first question elicited a bolt of coquettish wit. When I tried to confirm her age, she shot back: 'How old do you think I am?' Halfway through our chat, a doctor dropped by to check on those leg sores. As he counted them aloud – one, two, three – Jaco laughed softly and asked: 'Are you counting my scabs or my cats?'

Jaco found TV stardom in her 80s after an unremarkable life. Apart from a brief stint working as lady-in-waiting to the wife of a Lebanese president in the early '60s, she earned her keep by renting out the top floor of her house. No marriage,

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no children, no career. Yet the seeds of *Live Long* were always there: throughout her life, Jaco refused to be boxed in by age. 'I have never thought about whether I was young or old,' she told me. 'I have been content my whole life because I have just made the most of whatever age I was at the time.' That message resonated beyond the small screen. Throughout her brief TV career, fan mail poured in from across the Arab world. A young woman in Tripoli, a city in northern Lebanon, wrote: 'You have inspired me to stop worrying about my age. I am going to enjoy growing older now. Thank you!' When I asked Jaco, whose real name translates as Joan of Arc, if she was a role model, an ironic smile crept across her face. 'If I am, then it is only by accident,' she said. Either way, she clearly understood the toxic grip of ageism – and the power of shows like *Live Long* to loosen it. 'When you only ever see the young living life to the full then you suspect that growing older must be awful – and if you suspect growing older is awful then it will be awful,' she told me. 'We did a good thing by showing another way to age.'

Live Long is not alone in trying to present a bolder portrait of later life. Under Swift's stewardship, Getty Images is now leaning on photographers to file more images of older people doing things that go beyond the stereotypes of wise granddads and knitting grannies. She wants more stock shots of them using new technology, launching a company, exercising and playing sports, dancing and flirting, or even just laughing. She wants more images of middle-aged women doing more than motherhood. 'As a business we are starting to realise that we have a powerful voice and that we should be using it to

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represent the amazing diversity and possibilities of ageing,' says Swift. 'We want to have images with more colour, more dynamism and more activity to challenge the old stereotypes and give people the courage to age in their own way.'

Photographers hoping to fill that brief would do well to hang out with Paulina Braun. After a decade working on social and arts projects, the soft-spoken 34-year-old morphed into Poland's leading crusader against ageism. Like Nassour in Lebanon, she is on a mission to help both young and old make the most of our longer lives. 'I want to challenge the idea that ageing is a problem and that it means becoming useless and invisible,' she tells me. 'Showing older people doing things not normally associated with older people is a good way to do that.'

To see what that means I hop on a plane to Warsaw where Braun is throwing a party on the lakeshore at Wilanów Park. Towards the end of the evening, four Polish rappers put on a show that will later be described on social media as 'epic'. Clutching microphones close to their mouths, weaving among the small crowd with hip-hop swagger, they spit out lyrics like bullets. The fans, fuelled by beer and vodka shots, merge into a single, ecstatic monster, arms stabbing the air in unison, mouths firing lyrics right back at the performers. With rain pouring through the leaky roof, everyone is soaked and nobody cares.

If you're picturing a sea of youngsters, try again. The guy manning the decks is in his 80s and many of the revellers are sporting silver hair. At the very front, close enough to be hit by stray spittle from the rappers, three elderly women

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are swaying in time with the teens and twenty-somethings, laughing, punching the air, shouting rude words from the songs.

It is a surreal tableau that knocks me off balance. My first thought is a blast of weapons-grade ageism: What on earth are those oldsters doing in a sweaty mosh pit at their age? What if they have a fall and break a hip? My next thought puts things right: They're having fun like everyone else so why shouldn't they be here? I can easily picture Jaco in the middle of that madding crowd. When I recount this thought vector to Braun, she nods approvingly. 'That is exactly the kind of response I'm aiming for,' she says. 'You have the ageist reaction first and then you start to question it.'

Braun is always finding new ways to put older people in the public eye. She hosts intergenerational dance parties like the one at Wilanów Park everywhere from schools and hospices to nightclubs and town squares. She runs senior speed-dating events and an academy where older people learn to DJ. She also set up Poland's first casting agency for the over-60s. Everything she does is pushed out through social media and the traditional press. The morning after the Wilanów party one of the eighty-something women from the mosh pit appears on national television in a segment on the surprising things older people get up to in the summer. Thanks to Braun's casting agency, mature faces are popping up more frequently in Polish music videos, advertisements, films and YouTube clips – and they do so as characters rather than caricatures. In a recent commercial for Redd's beer, an eighty-something woman comes up with a cheeky ruse to jump a long queue

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at a beach bar: she pretends to faint, prompting everyone to rush to her rescue. The final scene shows her triumphantly sipping an ice-cold brew in a deckchair. You feel Jaco would approve. Another ad, shot like a beautiful piece of art-house cinema, shows an elderly couple outwitting the Grim Reaper with brushes and paints bought from Allegro, a leading Polish online retailer.

Braun's prizefighter is an 80-year-old bon vivant named Eryk Mroczek. He rides shotgun in her media interviews and attends all her dance parties, often sporting a pair of Jack Nicholson shades. Her casting agency recently landed him a plum role in a Polish film. Though he clearly loves the spotlight, he regards himself as a foot soldier in the war against ageism. 'Seeing me having fun can change the image people have of ageing,' he says. 'It can inspire them to make the most of their lives whatever age they are.'

Thanks to Braun, jobs once monopolised by youth are opening up to the not-so-young. A seventy-something graduate of her Senior DJ Academy is now a fixture on the Warsaw clubbing circuit. In my youth I would have run a mile from a DJ past pensioner age, but today's clubbers seem more open-minded – and not just in Poland. Ruth Flowers, a retired shopkeeper in England, learned how to spin records at the age of 68, dubbed herself DJ Mamy Rock and went on to play the biggest clubs and events in Europe, including the Glastonbury festival, before her death in 2014. Every week, Sumiko Iwamuro, aka DJ Sumirock, reigns over a trendy club in Tokyo's red-light district. She is 82.

The party at Wilanów Park has DJ Roman, a retired

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electrical engineer in his 80s. When he spins the decks, the dance floor fills with people of all ages throwing shapes to 'Boys Boys Boys' and other classics from the 80s and 90s. The scene reminds me of the Roubaix velodrome, where it was hard to guess a cyclist's age on the track. What you notice first on the dance floor at one of Braun's bashes is people's clothes, their style, how they laugh and move, rather than their age, which makes a big impression on the younger party-goers. Beata, a 22-year-old student, came to Wilanów Park for the rappers but fell for the older crowd. 'I always think old means boring but the women here are so elegant and everyone is crazy and having fun,' she says. 'It makes me feel like "old" should not be such a dirty word.'

Even the performers are whistling the same tune. After the final encore, as the crowd – young, old, middle-aged – dissolves into the Warsaw night, I fall into conversation with one of the rappers. His stage name is Ero and tonight he is clad in the hip-hop uniform of beanie and baggy trousers. He is 36 years old.

Is it weird belting out foul-mouthed rap to a crowd studded with people who look like your grandparents? I ask. Does it send the wrong message to your fans? Does it kill the buzz?

He takes a drag from a bottle of beer and thinks for a moment. Then he shakes his head. 'Not at all, because age is a number that people care less and less about nowadays,' he says. 'You can be 18 or 80 – what really matters is what you bring to the party.'



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One thing older people bring to the party nowadays is money. Having built up savings, and buoyed by solid pensions and surging property prices, many have cash to burn. Not all, of course: plenty are just scraping by or living in outright poverty. But as a cohort, this generation of over-50s is loaded. They make up a third of the UK population yet hold nearly 80 per cent of its wealth. By 2020, households headed by over-60s could be spending \$15 trillion worldwide. Even if the financial prospects for future generations seem less rosy, this moment in history is tailor-made for recasting ageing in a more favourable light. Why? Because money commands respect. It bestows power. Money talks.

And the world is listening. Wherever you look, pop culture is opening up more caricature-free space for older people. Singapore's National Day Parade now features a 'silver section' for performers over the age of 60. The video for Miley Cyrus's song 'Younger Now' looks like a party Braun might throw, with couples of all ages dancing up a storm. A television channel in the Netherlands is preparing to launch the world's first over-60s version of *The Voice*, the all-conquering sing-off show.

Cinema and television are also making more room for older characters who go beyond the cardigan-clad clichés of yesteryear. From Silver Screen in Europe to Legacy in the United States, festivals featuring films about all aspects of ageing are thriving. In 2018, the French movie *I Got Life* was hailed round the world as a breakthrough for portraying a woman in her 50s grappling boldly and amusingly with ageing, sexism and the menopause. That same year,

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Girlfriends premiered on British television, with three sixty-something actresses playing the kind of juicy roles that Juliet Stevenson pines for. More actors are also landing action-hero roles later in life. Storm, Wolverine and Black Lightning were all played by forty-somethings; Tom Cruise is accepting impossible missions in his 50s; Liam Neeson is channelling his very particular set of skills in his 60s. Some action-film franchises are now built around older casts, with stars like Helen Mirren, Bruce Willis, Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger duking it out with the bad guys in the various instalments of *Red* and *The Expendables*.

Over the last decade the average age of Oscar winners has risen across all acting categories. In 2018, the winning lead actor and actress, as well as those in supporting roles, were all aged between 49 and 60. Frances McDormand took the best actress gong for her gritty portrayal of a foul-mouthed, grieving mother in *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*. She described putting her un-Botoxed, 60-year-old face on the silver screen as a public service. 'I'm really interested in playing my age,' she said. 'I like being my age. I kind of have a political thing about it.' In the same Oscar season, Lesley Manville, then 61 and a losing nominee as best supporting actress for her role in *The Phantom Thread*, hailed a sea change in the pop-culture depiction of later life. 'You can have a lover at 60. You don't have to be shoved in a corner in a cardigan doing knitting,' she said. 'That's because film and television-makers realise that there is a huge audience of women who want to go to the cinema or turn on the telly and see stuff that doesn't alienate them, that embraces them, that isn't just

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about gorgeous twenty- or thirty-somethings, that represents their lives.'

To court that older dollar, brands must find new ways to address and portray ageing consumers. This is a big ask. Advertising and marketing are dominated by twenty- and thirty-somethings and many boardrooms remain wedded to the belief that the only market worth pursuing is the youth market. There is also a lingering suspicion – which studies have shown to be false – that older consumers are so stuck in their ways as to be impervious to advertising. According to the Boston Consulting Group, fewer than 15 per cent of companies have a specific business strategy for the over-60s. Nearly 70 per cent do not take rising longevity into account when planning sales and marketing.

The result is a whole lot of advertising that either ignores or patronises anyone over 40. Even campaigns aimed at older consumers are packed with younger models and actors. Many more cars are bought by the over-50s – remember those ageing suits – but when was the last time you saw anyone with grey hair in a car ad? Such ageism can backfire. Whenever I see a teenager modelling clothes clearly aimed at someone my age I feel a flash of annoyance. Crest discovered that nothing irks older consumers more than being pushed into a ghetto when its toothpaste for over-50s flopped. Bridgestone learned a similar lesson when it launched golf clubs aimed at pensioners.

Thankfully, though, brands are starting to wise up and move with the times. Amazon and Netflix now profile their customers based on taste rather than chronological age. A

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recent campaign by Kiehl's, an international skincare company, hit back at the notion of being defined by how old you are on paper. Its tagline was 'Act Any Age', and the video featured people across the generations dancing gleefully in front of purple balloons showing the age they feel.

Other brands are experimenting with age-blind advertising. A recent Virgin Holidays commercial features people of all ages charging into the ocean on a tropical beach. The 'Me. By me' campaign by clothing retailer TK Maxx shows shoppers of every generation trying on garments in sunny Cape Town.

Saga, Britain's best-known brand for the over-50s, has completely changed its tune. Long the butt of unflattering jokes about ageing, it relaunched its flagship magazine in 2017 with the slogan: 'We are not a brand for old people, we're a brand for people who are getting on with life after 50.' The ads for blended food and stairlifts were moved from the body of the magazine into a pull-out leaflet and replaced with more aspirational copy. The editorial tone is now more upbeat, with articles on exercise, travel, careers, shopping, romance and sex. The man behind the shift was Matt Atkinson, a trim fifty-something who competes in Ironman competitions and runs 60 miles a week. 'In the past we were reinforcing negative stereotypes about ageing,' he said at the time. 'Our aim now is to talk about ageing in a way that inspires our readers to think of themselves as bigger rather than smaller.'

Even beauty and fashion brands, which often seem genetically in hock to youth, are starting to embrace people from Planet Later Life. Many now use older women to hawk

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cosmetics, flooding the visual landscape with the lived-in faces of Charlotte Rampling, Helen Mirren, Twiggy, Jane Fonda, Ellen DeGeneres and Diane Keaton. Older models are also becoming a fixture in fashion catalogues and on catwalks. H&M, a global clothing giant, hired a 60-year-old woman to model its swimsuits. The face of Spanish chain Mango is also in her mid-60s. The star turn of 2017 London Fashion Week was a 72-year-old with a silver bob. Ten years her senior, writer Joan Didion has modelled for Céline. Nor is it just older women grabbing the spotlight. My favourite example of the trend for later-life models is a Chinese actor and performance artist called Deshun Wang. In 2015, at the age of 79, he broke the internet and was dubbed ‘the world’s hottest grandpa’ when he strutted down the catwalk topless at Chinese Fashion Week. In his YouTube clips, he looks confident, sexy and like he’s having the time of his life – everything I hope to be at 79.

As well as striking looks, these older models have something else in common: they are not pretending to be young. They are at ease with being and looking older, which means they can be role models both for their peers and for younger people seeking a reassuring vision of their own future selves.



When it comes to overhauling the image of ageing, social media is a godsend. The Web now bristles with depictions of later life conceived, curated and controlled by those who are actually in it. Mary, Josie and Teresa – aka the Golden Sisters – have racked up millions of views for the YouTube

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videos of them chatting amusingly about pop culture over lunch. Since parlaying her passion for raver clothes into online stardom at the age of 85, Helen Ruth Van Winkle has amassed more than three million followers on Instagram, fronted an ad for Smirnoff vodka and become the muse for makeup brand Urban Decay. In Asia, people are using social media to upend the traditional view that later life has to mean moving in with your children and devoting all your time to looking after the grandkids. Ms Q, a retired schoolteacher, backpacks round her native China in her 70s. 'Why do elderly Chinese people have to do housework, and look after their children and grandchildren?' she says. 'We should have our own lives.' As tech-savvy as any millennial, she chronicles her travels online and stays in touch with her family via video calls. A short film about her trip to Quanzhou, a city in southeastern China, drew more than 11 million views and helped spark a national debate about ageing. Many Chinese took to social media to hail Ms Q as a role model for later life. 'An independent, enchanting woman . . . her age is not an issue,' wrote one. 'I hope I can be like her when I'm old,' said another.

In neighbouring Japan, Tsuyoshi and Tomi Seki, a sixty-something couple who go by the moniker Bon and Pon, are using Instagram to put a fresh spin on later life. More than 700,000 followers of all ages lap up quirky photographs of the pair wearing simple clothes in matching colours and styles. Propelled by their online stardom, which comes garlanded with hashtags such as #greyhair and #over60, the couple have also published books about the joys of later life and launched

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a range of clothes and accessories. In a less commercial vein, Kimiko Nishimoto is shaking up the Japanese view of ageing with slapstick selfies that go viral. My favourite shows the eighty-something hung out to dry on a washing line. Others feature her wiping out on a bicycle; wrapped up in a bin liner; being run over by a speeding car while reading a newspaper; smiling through the bars of a cage dressed as a gorilla.

Is there a danger that older people are being repackaged for the amusement of younger ones? Sometimes, perhaps. Most of those YouTube videos of seniors smoking weed for the first time or guessing how sex toys are used come with a young interviewer asking leading questions out of shot – and thus strike a patronising note. But many others do not. People like Nishimoto, Ms Q and the Golden Sisters are clearly no one's patsy. They are having a ball – and entirely on their own terms.

At the same time, millions of older people with zero celebrity cachet are filling up social media with images of themselves doing things that reduce the ageist stereotypes of yesteryear to rubble: splashing through mud on an obstacle course; wearing cool clothes; running a food truck; fixing a motorbike; playing Xbox; volunteering in Africa; studying for a big exam; dancing the night away. Each may only be seen by a handful of followers yet the numbers are irrelevant. What matters is that every image – even the traditional ones of cuddling grandchildren or knitting – adds another brushstroke to a portrait of later life that is rich, textured and specific – and therefore dignified. A portrait that says: 'Younger is not always better and ageing my way can be pretty wonderful.'

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The tail is now wagging the dog. When I ask Swift what informs Getty's rethink on ageing, she answers with a single word: Instagram. 'Nowadays older people are taking charge of their visual language in a way they never have before,' she says. 'We see how they want to be visualised and how they visualise themselves and that's giving us some really good cues on how to produce our own imagery.'



As we overhaul the image of ageing, we would do well to remember the words of Germaine Greer: 'Nobody ages like anybody else.' Not everyone can be Wang or Jaco. We may not have the looks, talent, temperament, connections or health to follow their lead. To avoid portraying ageing as a game of winners and losers, we must depict it in all its shades. That means toasting the superagers without turning them into an unattainable gold standard. Those working to redefine what 'older' looks like understand this. Even as Braun cuts a swathe through the Polish media, seasoning her patter with catchphrases such as 'older is better' and 'it's cool to be old', she is careful to acknowledge the pitfalls of ageing. 'Along with the good stuff there is also loss, illness, death, tough stories,' she says. 'Ageing is not just dancing and partying.'

Creating an honest, inclusive image of ageing means depicting decline, disability and suffering in ways that reassure and dignify – rather than blame – those enduring them. It also means shining more light on the ordinary, humdrum moments that make up life at every stage. Ageing, after all, is not a binary choice between dazzling and drooling,

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between winning at Instagram and wasting away in a nursing home. 'What we really need is many more images of the ordinariness in between those extremes,' says Lorna Warren, a sociologist and expert on ageing at the University of Sheffield. 'Most of us spend most of our lives being mundane and we should embrace that. Sometimes I just want to be mundane fifty-something Lorna slacking around in her track bottoms. It's not boring; it's not shameful; it's the stuff of the majority of our lives. We should have space to be mundane as we get older.'

The truth is we are only just beginning to rebrand ageing. In every prank on *Live Long*, Jaco and her friends hold all the cards and have the last laugh, which is a welcome leap forward. But even as they poke fun at ageist assumptions they also trade in them. In other words, by playing on stereotypes about older people – they are sexless, techno-illiterate or have shaky hands – the show brings those same stereotypes to mind. In an ageist world, the line between laughing *with* Jaco and *at* her remains a fine one.

We are on the right track, though, not least because many of those updating how we see ageing are doing so with a sense of humour. Laughter is a potent tool for changing minds, toppling stereotypes and puncturing the status quo, which is why authoritarians and dictators hate being laughed at. Sometimes ageing sucks and finding mirth in the darkness can ease the burden. When Phyllis Diller quips: 'I'm at an age when my back goes out more than I do', we can all laugh – and maybe feel a little less worried about growing older.

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That is why the longevity revolution is fuelling a boom in ageing-based humour. In Japan, the doyen of this trend is 66-year-old Yoshihiro Kariya, who delivers his high-energy stand-up routine dressed in a red tailcoat and sporting a rakish ponytail. Fans, mainly in their 60s and 70s, lap up his cruel quips about everything from death to disease to dwindling libidos.

My favourite example of later-life gallows humour comes from Diane Hill. Working with an artist in Coventry, England, the 56-year-old came up with a series of tongue-in-cheek emojis showing the less-welcome aspects of ageing. One depicts a woman wincing with back pain. Another is a bottle of memory pills. A third is a blingy character who represents 'spending the kids' inheritance'. The icons are known as 'emoldjis' and could soon be popping up on a smartphone near you.

Having a sense of humour can even help us age better. Laughing boosts the immune system, reduces pain and combats stress. A study done by psychologists at the University of Akron in Ohio revealed that people with a good sense of humour lived about eight years longer than their crabbier siblings. As George Bernard Shaw put it: 'You don't stop laughing when you grow old, you grow old when you stop laughing.'

What made Jaco so compelling was that she never stopped laughing. She made the most of ageing by embracing its many upsides, while accepting the drawbacks with equanimity and her trademark wit. Even the Shakespearean decline of the final lap failed to dim her lightness of spirit. The human body can be a sorry sight at the end of life, and

IMAGE: AGEING GETS A MAKEOVER

seeing Jaco's up close and personal shook me more than I expected. Even as I relished her company, I felt unnerved, even repelled, by her physical state. Towards the end of our meeting, Jaco caught me peeking at a scab on her shin. She held my gaze, her expression tender, forgiving. She laid a hand on mine. 'It happens, ageing. *C'est la vie*. You just have to get over it and embrace all the good that being alive can bring you at every age,' she said. Then, in a flash, that famous smile returned. 'And if that doesn't work, just go to the pharmacy and get yourself a double dose of Viagra.'

I want to go out of this world just like Jaco: laughing at the dying of the light. Whether in movies, television, social media or advertising, seeing more and more people thriving in later life makes it easier to do just that.

As I gathered my things to leave her sun-soaked patio in Beirut, Jaco prepared to join her cats in a siesta. I put a final question to her: What one thing in the modern world has made ageing better for you? She thought for a moment and then pointed to the smartphone in my hand. 'There is your answer,' she said. 'I would not be sitting here with you now were it not for all this new technology.'

Food for thought in a world that tells us that tech belongs to the kids.