Katherine Barrett

Old Before Her Time


Pre-reading Questions

1. In your opinion, what exactly is an old person? Who or what helped to shape your attitude about age?

2. What do you think when you see old people on the street? Do you talk with them or ignore them? Why? Would the way elderly people dress (e.g., well, modestly) influence your willingness to talk to them?

3. When an old person is on the bus, do you offer him or her your seat? Do you open doors for elderly people? Do you make fun of them? Do you ever think about what it will be like when you grow old—or do you think you will never age?

This is the story of an extraordinary voyage in time, and of a young woman who devoted three years to a singular experiment. In 1979, Patty Moore—then aged twenty-six—transformed herself for the first of many meses into an eighty-five-year-old woman. Her object was to discover
firsthand the problems, joys and frustrations of the elderly. She wanted to know for herself what it's like to live in a culture of youth and beauty when your hair is gray, your skin is wrinkled and no men turn their heads as you pass.

Her time machine was a makeup kit. Barbara Kelly, a friend and professional makeup artist, helped Patty pick out a wardrobe and showed her how to use latex to create wrinkles, and wrap Ace bandages to give the impression of stiff joints. "It was peculiar," Patty recalls, as she relaxes in her New York City apartment. "Even the first few times I went out I realized that I wouldn't have to act that much. The more I was perceived as elderly by others, the more 'elderly' I actually became . . . I imagine that's just what happens to people who really are old."

What motivated Patty to make her strange journey? Partly her career—as an industrial designer, Patty often focuses on the needs of the elderly. But the roots of her interest are also deeply personal. Extremely close to her own grandparents—particularly her maternal grandfather, now ninety—and raised in a part of Buffalo, New York, where there was a large elderly population, Patty always drew comfort and support from the older people around her. When her own marriage ended in 1979 and her life seemed to be falling apart, she dove into her "project" with all her soul. In all, she donned her costume more than two hundred times in fourteen different states. Here is the remarkable story of what she found.

Columbus, Ohio, May 1979. Leaning heavily on her cane, Pat Moore stood alone in the middle of a crowd of young professionals. They were all attending a gerontology conference, and the room was filled with animated chatter. But no one was talking to Pat. In a throng of men and women who devoted their working lives to the elderly, she began to feel like a total nonentity. "I'll get us all some coffee," a young man told a group of women next to her. "What about me?" thought Pat. "If I were young, they would be offering me coffee, too." It was a bitter thought at the end of a disappointing day—a day that marked Patty's first appearance as "the old woman." She had planned to attend the gerontology conference anyway, and almost as a lark decided to see how professionals would react to an old person in their midst.

Now, she was angry. All day she had been ignored . . . counted out in a way she had never experienced before. She didn't understand. Why didn't people help her when they saw her struggling to open a heavy door? Why didn't they include her in conversations? Why did the other participants seem almost embarrassed by her presence at the conference—as if it were somehow inappropriate that an old person should be professionally active?

And so, eighty-five-year-old Pat Moore learned her first lesson: The old are often ignored. "I discovered that people really do judge a book by its cover," Patty says today. "Just because I looked different, people
either condescended or they totally dismissed me. Later, in stores, I'd get the same reaction. A clerk would turn to someone younger and wait on her first. It was as if he assumed that I—the older woman—could wait because I didn't have anything better to do."

New York City, October 1979. Bent over her cane, Pat walked slowly toward the edge of the park. She had spent the day sitting on a bench with friends, but now dusk was falling and her friends had all gone home. She looked around nervously at the deserted area and tried to move faster, but her joints were stiff. It was then that she heard the barely audible sound of sneaked feet approaching and the kids' voices. "Grab her, man. "Get her purse." Suddenly an arm was around her throat and she was dragged back, knocked off her feet.

She saw only a blur of sneakers and blue jeans, heard the sounds of mocking laughter, felt fists pummeling her—on her back, her legs, her breasts, her stomach. "Oh, God," she thought, using her arms to protect her head and curling herself into a ball. "They're going to kill me. I'm going to die . . . ."

Then, as suddenly as the boys attacked, they were gone. And Patty was left alone, struggling to rise. The boys' punches had broken the latex makeup on her face, the fall had disarranged her wig, and her whole body ached. (Later she would learn that she had fractured her left wrist, an injury that took two years to heal completely.) Sobbing, she left the park and hailed a cab to return home. Again the thought struck her: What if I really lived in the gray ghetto . . . what if I couldn't escape to my nice safe home . . . ?

Lesson number two: The fear of crime is paralyzing. "I really understand now why the elderly become homebound," the young woman says as she recalls her ordeal today. "When something like this happens, the fear just doesn't go away. I guess it wasn't so bad for me. I could distance myself from what happened . . . and I was strong enough to get up and walk away. But what about someone who is really too weak to run or fight back or protect herself in any way? And the elderly often can't afford to move if the area in which they live deteriorates, becomes unsafe. I met people like this and they were imprisoned by their fear. That's when the bolts go on the door. That's when people starve themselves because they're afraid to go to the grocery store."

New York City, February 1980. It was a slushy, gray day and Pat had laboriously descended four flights of stairs from her apartment to go shopping. Once outside, she struggled to hold her threadbare coat closed with one hand and manipulate her cane with the other. Splotches of snow made the street difficult for anyone to navigate, but for someone hunched over, as she was, it was almost impossible. The curb was another obstacle. The slush looked ankle-deep—and what was she to do? Jump over it? Slowly, she worked her way around to a drier spot, but the crowds were
impatient to move. A woman with packages jostled her as she rushed
past, causing Pat to nearly lose her balance. If I really were old, I would
have fallen, she thought. Maybe broken something. On another day, a
woman had practically knocked her over by letting go of a heavy door
as Pat tried to enter a coffee shop. Then there were the revolving doors.
How could you push them without strength? And how could you get up
and down stairs, on and off a bus, without risking a terrible fall?

Lesson number three: If small, thoughtless deficiencies in design were
corrected, life would be so much easier for older people. It was no
surprise to Patty that the “built” environment is often inflexible. But even
she didn’t realize the extent of the problems, she admits. “It was a terrible
feeling. I never realized how difficult it is to get off a curb if your knees
don’t bend easily. Or the helpless feeling you get if your upper arms aren’t
strong enough to open a door. You know, I just felt so vulnerable—as if
I was at the mercy of every barrier or rude person I encountered.”

Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, May 1980. Pat met a new friend while shop-
ping, and they decided to continue their conversation over a sundae at
a nearby coffee shop. The woman was in her late seventies, “younger”
than Pat, but she was obviously reaching out for help. Slowly, her story
unfolded. “My husband moved out of our bedroom,” the woman said
softly, fiddling with her coffee cup and fighting back tears. “He won’t
touch me anymore. And when he gets angry at me for being stupid, he’ll
even sometimes . . .” The woman looked down, embarrassed to go on. Pat
took her hand. “He hits me . . . he gets so mean.” “Can’t you tell anyone?”
Pat asked. “Can’t you tell your son?” “Oh, no!” the woman almost gasped.
“I would never tell the children; they absolutely adore him.”

Lesson number four: Even a fifty-year-old marriage isn’t necessarily a
good one. While Pat met many loving and devoted elderly couples, she
was stunned to find others who had stayed together unhappily—because
divorce was still an anathema in their middle years. “I met women who
secretly wished their husbands dead, because after so many years they
just ended up full of hatred. One woman in Chicago even admitted that
she deliberately angered her husband because she knew it would make
his blood pressure rise. Of course, that was pretty extreme . . . ”

Patty pauses thoughtfully and continues. “I guess what really made an
impression on me, the real eye-opener, was that so many of these older
women had the same problems as women twenty, thirty or forty. Prob-
lems with men . . . problems with the different roles that are expected
of them. As a ‘young woman’ I, too, had just been through a relation-
ship where I spent a lot of time protecting someone by covering up his
problems from family and friends. Then I heard this woman in Florida
saying that she wouldn’t tell her children their father beat her because
she didn’t want to disillusion them. These issues aren’t age-related. They
affect everyone.”
Clearwater, Florida, January 1981. She heard the children laughing, but she didn't realize at first that they were laughing at her. On this day, as on several others, Pat had shed the clothes of a middle-income woman for the rags of a bag lady. She wanted to see the extremes of the human condition, what it was like to be old and poor, and outside traditional society as well. Now, tottering down the sidewalk, she was most concerned with the cold, since her layers of ragged clothing did little to ease the chill. She had spent the afternoon rummaging through garbage cans, loading her shopping bags with bits of debris, and she was stiff and tired. Suddenly, she saw that four little boys, five or six years old, were moving up on her. And then she felt the sting of the pebbles they were throwing. She quickened her pace to escape, but another handful of gravel hit her and the laughter continued. They're using me as a target, she thought, horror-stricken. They don't even think of me as a person.

Lesson number five: Social class affects every aspect of an older person's existence: "I found out that class is a very important factor when you're old," says Patty. "It was interesting. That same day, I went back to my hotel and got dressed as a wealthy woman, another role that I occasionally took. Outside the hotel, a little boy of about seven asked if I would go shelling with him. We walked along the beach, and he reached out to hold my hand. I knew he must have a grandmother who walked with a cane, because he was so concerned about me and my footing. 'Don't put your cane there, the sand's wet,' he'd say. He really took responsibility for my welfare. The contrast between him and those children was really incredible. The little ones who were throwing the pebbles at me because they didn't see me as human. And then the seven-year-old taking care of me. I think he would have responded to me the same way even if I had been dressed as the middle-income woman. There's no question that money does make life easier for older people, not only because it gives them a more comfortable life-style, but because it makes others treat them with greater respect."

New York City, May 1981. Pat always enjoyed the time she spent sitting on the benches in Central Park. She'd let the whole day pass by, watching young children play, feeding the pigeons and chatting. One spring day she found herself sitting with three women, all widows, and the conversation turned to the few available men around. "It's been a long time since anyone hugged me," one woman complained. Another agreed. "Isn't that the truth. I need a hug, too." It was a favorite topic, Pat found—the lack of touching left in these women's lives, the lack of hugging, the lack of men.

In the last two years, she had found out herself how it felt to walk down Fifth Avenue and know that no men were turning to look after her. Or how it felt to look at models in magazines or store mannequins and know that those gorgeous clothes were just not made for her. She hadn't
realized before just how much casual attention was paid to her because she was young and pretty. She hadn’t realized it until it stopped.

Lesson number six: You never grow old emotionally. You always need to feel loved. “It’s not surprising that everyone needs love and touching and holding,” says Patty. “But I think some people feel that you reach a point in your life when you accept that those intimate feelings are in the past. That’s wrong. These women were still interested in sex. But more than that, they—like everyone—needed to be hugged and touched. I’d watch two women greeting each other on the street and just holding onto each other’s hands, neither wanting to let go. Yet, I also saw that there are people who are afraid to touch an old person. . . . they were afraid to touch me. It’s as if they think old age is a disease and it’s catching. They think that something might rub off on them.”

New York City, September 1981. He was a thin man, rather nattily dressed, with a hat that he graciously tipped at Pat as he approached the bench where she sat. “Might I join you?” he asked jauntily. Pat told him he would be welcome and he offered her one of the dietetic hard candies that he carried in a crumpled paper bag. As the afternoon passed, they got to talking . . . about the beautiful buds on the trees and the world around them and the past. “Life’s for the living, my wife used to tell me,” he said. “When she took sick she made me promise her that I wouldn’t waste a moment. But the first year after she died, I just sat in the apartment. I didn’t want to see anyone, talk to anyone, or go anywhere. I missed her so much.” He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his eyes, and they sat in silence. Then he slapped his leg to break the mood and change the subject. He asked Pat about herself, and described his life alone. He belonged to a “senior center” now, and went on trips and had lots of friends. Life did go on. They arranged to meet again the following week on the same park bench. He brought lunch—chicken salad sandwiches and decaffeinated peppermint tea in a thermos—and wore a carnation in his lapel. It was the first date Patty had had since her marriage ended.

Lesson number seven: Life does go on . . . as long as you’re flexible and open to change. “That man really meant a lot to me, even though I never saw him again,” says Patty, her eyes wandering toward the gray wig that now sits on a wig-stand on the top shelf of her bookcase. “He was a real old-fashioned gentleman, yet not afraid to show his feelings—as so many men my age are. It’s funny, but at that point I had been through months of self-imposed seclusion. Even though I was in a different role, that encounter kind of broke the ice for getting my life together as a single woman.”

In fact, while Patty was living her life as the old woman, some of her young friends had been worried about her. After several years, it seemed as if the lines of identity had begun to blur. Even when she wasn’t in
makeup, she was wearing unusually conservative clothing, she spent most of her time with older people and she seemed almost to revel in her role—sometimes finding it easier to be in costume than to be a single New Yorker.

But as Patty continued her experiment, she was also learning a great deal from the older people she observed. Yes, society often did treat the elderly abysmally . . . they were sometimes ignored, sometimes victimized, sometimes poor and frightened, but so many of them were survivors. They had lived through two world wars, the Depression and into the computer age. "If there was one lesson to learn, one lesson that I’ll take with me into my old age, it’s that you’ve got to be flexible," Patty says. "I saw my friend in the park, managing after the loss of his wife, and I met countless other people who picked themselves up after something bad—or even something catastrophic—happened. I’m not worried about them. I’m worried about the others who shut themselves away. It’s funny, but seeing these two extremes helped me recover from the trauma in my own life, to pull my life together."

Today, Patty is back to living the life of a single thirty-year-old, and she rarely dons her costumes anymore. "I must admit, though, I do still think a lot about aging," she says. "I look in the mirror and I begin to see wrinkles, and then I realize that I won’t be able to wash those wrinkles off." Is she afraid of growing older? "No. In a way, I’m kind of looking forward to it," she smiles. "I know it will be different from my experiment. I know I’ll probably even look different. When they aged Orson Welles in Citizen Kane he didn’t resemble at all the Orson Welles of today."

But Patty also knows that in one way she really did manage to capture the feeling of being old. With her bandages and her stooped posture, she turned her body into a kind of prison. Yet, inside she didn’t change at all. "It’s funny, but that’s exactly how older people always say they feel," says Patty. "Their bodies age, but inside they are really no different than when they were young."

---

**Post-reading Questions**

**Content**

1. What is the controlling idea of this essay?
2. How many times did Patty Moore dress as an elderly woman? In how many different states did she conduct her experiment?
3. Why did Moore want to "transform herself" into an "eighty-five-year-old woman"?
4. How did Moore’s relationships with elderly people help her to pull the pieces of her life together?
The grey hairs and bended backs only seem to appear when the weather is warm and bearable. When it’s cold and grey the jumbo jackets with the tight knit woolen jackets can be seen. The elderly like the rusted paint on the Massachusetts Bay transport trains seem to blend in with the background and go unnoticed. When one goes by their daily routine an elderly person seems not to be part of anyone’s concern. No one individual is ever seen having a conversation with seniors they do not know. Senior citizens become almost like background displays that no one ever looks at. The tragedy of them going unnoticed is very clear but the concept of the elderly not being appreciated and their stored up knowledge and wisdom is the true tragedy.

Sharon Curtin author of “Aging in the Land of the Young” describes this trend of going on unnoticed as being like “a fading rose” (272). The imagery of a fading rose can be envisioned as the beauty of the plant and its insignificance is almost disappearing. This statement coherently describes the inclination of aging causing the declination of a person’s importance and significance in society.

An elderly person most probably gets any sort of attention when they wheel across the bus or train a cart filled with groceries or empty bottles for which that fame is only short lived as each individual returns to their own concerns. No one ever wonders the reason why this 60 year old woman or man is moving around and doing such work on their own, where is their family? This phenomenon of the elderly going by their daily lives alone seems to be most prevalent in the United States. In most African nations the elderly become part of the family the minute their other partner passes away and they quickly join their children’s households. The concept of being alone as an individual is clearly in their last years is not one to be desired. The elderly are seen to be a burden and everything about the aging population leaves nothing to be desired as the media plays a generation that is young and hip to be almost the preferred. Botox and face lifts are
increasing becoming popular even in individuals who do not have a mere resemblance of a 
wrinkle on their faces, just for the fear of looking anything like the regular elderly people their 
see on the streets or their own elderly relatives. Curtin illustrates this idea by stating that “…the 
fear of growing old is so great that every aged person is an insult and a threat to society” (274). 
The author corroborates the point that growing old is not desired by numerous members in 
society if not all. The thought of being helpless and unable to fend for yourself, and potentially 
being incapable of tending to oneself accumulates fear in individuals and the media exploits this 
fear by advocating for younger looking skin and bodies.

Aging in the United States is a relative term because it means less time with your family and 
more time to yourself than one has ever had before in their life. Curtin describes the concept of 
aging as “to learn the feeling of no longer growing or struggling to do old tasks to remember 
familiar actions”. This illustration although describes some of the characteristics that are 
associated with aging does not fully account for what it really means. Aging relates to an 
individual coming to the end of the life cycle. Wisdom and knowledge being passed on to their 
grandchildren and sharing the experiences they had when they were younger with their loved 
ones and society and being the constant assurance for when one is on the right path or not. 
Although society’s priorities have changed the morals and life’s challenges are still the same, 
thus the elderly are a source of comfort and burden bearer for the community because they have 
been through it and could probably give more sound advice than the regular psychiatrist. 
Therefore to view the elderly as threats to society is not only despicable because these are the 
same individuals who bore and raised the society that is living today but it is also morally wrong.