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Stop Telling Me I Look Younger Than My Age



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COURTESY OF ELIZABETH LAVIS

My first adventure with altitude at Nevado del Ruiz volcano in Manizales, Colombia.

I was at one of those horrible clubs when I first heard it.

You know the ones — bottle service in sweaty silver buckets with the veneer peeling off; startup bros and sales guys prattling on in indecipherable jargon; a tacky menu of tiny food littered with foam and microgreens. It was my friend's birthday. She was turning 30.

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She showed up with someone I didn't recognize. They looked effortlessly chic and fresh in crisp summer whites and gleaming Ray-Bans. He told me that he was on the "sixth anniversary of his 29th birthday." I was irritated at being made to do math and felt underwhelmed and insecure with my chipped nails and ripped jeans. He turned to my friend and said it — the statement I'd start hearing as soon as I leveled up to 30. "Don't worry about getting old, honey! You look 10 years younger than your age."

Now, having recently blown out the candles on my 39th birthday cake and made my wish (to climb Machu Picchu), I'm used to hearing that tired old tagline: "Happy Birthday! You ... look so much younger than your age."

First of all, it's inaccurate. I look exactly how my mother and grandmother both looked when they were 39. I have the wrinkles, laugh lines and graying hair that come with age, plus the phantom pains that crop up if I forget to stretch after exercising. I would much rather hit up the farmers market than the club these days. I feel every single year of my 39 on the planet, and it feels good. It feels comfortable.

Secondly, this exercise in delusion puts a premium on youth and insults growing older.

We disclose our ages and the ages of our friends like apologies then immediately slap on the absurd statement that we (or they) look so much "younger." This is ageism at its most insidious — cloaked as a compliment.

In an age where a 78-year-old woman sits at the helm of the House of Representatives, we default back to this sexist narrative? Of course, Nancy Pelosi herself has been the target of ageist attacks, which focus more on her 78 years on the planet than her history of policymaking. Donald Trump Jr. once referred to her as "tired old Nancy Pelosi," and there are baseless conspiracy theories haunting the kookier corners of the internet that she's going senile.

Is this why we insist on bowing to the dangerous myth that excitement, power, great sex, beauty and relevance die when the clock strikes midnight on our 29th birthdays? This link between desirability and youth was illustrated perfectly by Amy Schumer in her sketch "Last Fuckable Day" where Patricia Arquette and Tina Fey send Julia Louis-Dreyfus off in style with a glorious picnic and a celebratory cigar. Unfortunately, many women don't get a celebratory picnic and a deliciously melted pint of Ben & Jerry's. Instead, aging is deeply shameful and cuts to the core.

Age apologism is not exclusive to women, but we bear the brunt of it in Western culture. From old tropes about men aging "like wine" and women "like milk" to men's-rights-activist-style scare tactics about "hitting the wall," women are constantly told their value is intrinsically tied to their youth. As for that wall we're supposed to hit? It is more outlandish than Donald Trump's, yet we still believe in it. It's the bogeyman lurking in the closet. It's the paralyzing fear that we will someday cease to exist. That after 30, our personal Mayan clocks will start ticking down to a doomsday when we can walk down Fifth Avenue totally nude and no one would bat an eye.

Our attempts to stall the inevitable "decline" have resulted in a bloated anti-aging market that is only expected to continue growing. It has spawned the rise of catchphrases like "40 is the new 30." (Read: "You're not quite totally irrelevant yet.")

And it's responsible for some of the well-meaning but clueless jokes where older women are asked if they're "turning 29" with a wink and laugh, an attempt to put a little balm on the sting of advancing another year.

We tell our friends they look "10 years younger" to give them a pass for the audacity of aging, letting them know that while they might secretly be 42, they're 32 passing. In the right light. It's a way of telling our friends that they are still relevant. That age hasn't dealt the mortal blow quite yet and the look of youth is still on their faces — even if it's a mirage that disappears under close scrutiny.

What is meant as a compliment is really a steaming pile of internalized sexist horseshittery that compels us to deny that very thing that makes us so powerful. There is no wall after 30. There are brand-new vistas of self-awareness, inner peace and badassery. We're leveling up. No apologies are needed.



COURTESY OF ELIZABETH LAVIS

Made it to Machu Picchu!

This is why you need to stop telling me that I look younger than my age, and I will return the favor. We need to reject the harmful and hurtful garbage of internalized ageism, stop fetishizing youth and stop spoon-feeding each other crap like, "You look 10 years younger than your age." We need to stop making the natural progression of time anything other than what it is — a triumph, and a testament to our wisdom and experience.

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