

BROOKE SHIELDS

*Thoughts
on
Aging
as a
Woman*

A photograph of Brooke Shields, a woman with long, wavy brown hair, wearing a white blazer over a white top and blue jeans. She is standing with her arms crossed, looking slightly to the right. The background is a solid pink color.

IS NOT
ALLOWED
TO GET OLD

Brooke Shields Is Not Allowed to Get Old

THOUGHTS ON
AGING AS A WOMAN

BROOKE SHIELDS

with Rachel Bertsche



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To all the women in this new era of life: It's an unexpected, scary, emotional, bittersweet time—and yet also refreshingly beautiful and exciting. Please give yourself room for mistakes, successes, and joy. Don't be afraid. Be excited for what's to come. And guess what? No matter what happens, you'll figure it out. You always have!

INTRODUCTION

The first time it hit me that I had reached “a certain age” was while strolling through the streets of downtown New York with my daughters. They are, if I may be so bold, stunning girls. Rowan is a strawberry blonde with curves to die for; Grier is six feet tall, all legs, and towers over me. They’re also funny, fiercely intelligent, thoughtful, and kind, though I guess those traits are less obvious to the casual observer.

On this particular day, we were walking side by side, me in the middle, and it was impossible not to notice the admiring looks from various passersby. Over the years I’ve become used to being recognized on the street, but this time was different: the looks weren’t cast in my direction, but at the two beauties by my side. I had every single feeling, all at once. *What are you doing ogling my babies I will cut you but also aren’t they gorgeous but also, wait, no one’s gazing at me? When did that happen? Am I over?* Protectiveness, pride, melancholy—it all smacked me upside the head in one quintessential New York minute.

There was also the time I was doing a photo shoot, and after a couple shots I took a peek at the monitor. “I think there’s some dust on the camera lens,” I said to the photographer, pointing to a weird line on my cheek. His response was something to the effect of a pitying “Awww, you’re cute.” There was no dust. That “something” was a wrinkle.

I didn't have my first child until I was thirty-seven. I went through a hard time after I had Rowan, suffering from postpartum depression, which I wrote about in my first book, *Down Came the Rain*. But with the help of good medical professionals and the right medication, I felt like myself again, more or less, by her first birthday. I had Grier when I was forty, and the ensuing decade felt, in a word, playful. That was a brand-new feeling for me. I remember thinking in my forties, *This isn't old at all! This is fun!* Keep in mind, I'd been treated like an adult (and was expected to behave like one) since I was a kid. At forty, it was as though my biological age finally aligned with the age I'd *felt* for decades. I felt mature yet still playful. I was firing on all cylinders, and at the risk of sounding like Maria von Trapp, the world seemed full of possibilities. I felt like I was being primed for a moment when I could finally pat myself on the back and say "You've earned it!" if I chose to take a break. Plus, I'd arrived at a place of self-acceptance. I actually liked my body and no longer compared it to the runway models. (I never did runway and believed those girls were "skinny," whereas I was considered "athletic"—in my modeling days, a euphemism for "not skinny.") At forty, relieving myself of being compared to others felt like freedom. Mine was a body to be proud of. This body gave me babies! This body could dance! I had curves and was okay with that! It wasn't exactly "I am woman, hear me roar," but I certainly felt like, "I am woman, hear me more."

And yet, as my forties progressed into my fifties, I began to notice that external perceptions didn't seem to match up with my internal sense of self. My industry no longer received me with the same enthusiasm I had come to expect. The vibe from casting agents and producers, but also my fans, was more: you need to stop time ... and maybe even reverse it. Case in point: at a routine dermatological appointment (to get a mole checked out), the doctor, unsolicited, waved his hand around my face and said, "We could fix all that..."

"All what?" I asked.

"You know, all the"—cue more hand waving—"you know."

What the hell? Who asked for your opinion? I thought as I heard myself say, “Thank you, but not yet.”

Maybe it took seeing myself through the eyes of other people to fully understand that, in fact, I was entering a new era of life. I mean, I was aware that some things were changing. I get tired now in a way I never did before. I literally can't read the fine print, and I hate it. I used to get mad at my mom for always misplacing her reading glasses, and now it's me saying “Grier, honey, have you seen my readers?” I like doing needlepoint and puzzles, which admittedly feels a bit geriatric. Am I in my mah-jongg era?? I need 2.5s for these granny activities!

And yes, sometimes I put on a pair of pants that once fit, and think, *God, this used to be so much easier*. Or I watch my kids, who can sleep until noon without stirring at the garbage trucks or sirens outside, and think, *Ah, youth. There was a time when I could go to bed without taking a pill or being up for hours in the middle of the night, what was that like?* And though these shockingly beautiful young women spend hours in front of the very mirrors I try to avoid, they still don't realize how fresh and perky and unaffected by gravity their bodies are—just like we didn't at their age. (I mean, the butt and the boobs! How did I not appreciate that when I had it?) They complain that they hate their legs, whereas my *knees* are now practically lower than my calves. How is that even a thing? We are always chasing, never appreciating, and what runs through my mind is, *Ugh, where is the justice?? Why are we forever criticizing ourselves and our bodies while seeking ridiculous perfection? Why do we never see how unique and special we are? And why, when we finally take the pressure off or count our blessings or just enjoy who we are, is it practically too late?*

But while I don't feel as invincible as I did in my youth, I also don't feel fifty-nine. When I was a kid, fifty-nine seemed so OLD, but it sure doesn't feel old to me now! When I say my age out loud, I know it may *sound* old to some people, but I truly don't *feel*, in any way, aged. Aging is a journey full of contradictions, especially in America. It's humbling and surprising and empowering and daunting and liberating. In plenty of cultures, older people

are revered. In Korea, the sixtieth and seventieth birthdays are considered major life events, marked by parties and feasts. In Native American communities, elders are often referred to as “wisdom-keepers”—they’re considered community leaders. In India, elders have the final word in family disputes. In the Henchy-Shields household, on the other hand, this elder is constantly told, “Mom, you just don’t get it!”

In fact, a March 2023 cover story of the American Psychological Association’s *Monitor on Psychology* described ageism in America as “one of the last socially acceptable prejudices.”¹ Brands trip over themselves to capture the coveted eighteen-to-thirty-four demographic, even though surveys have found it’s women over forty who have the most purchasing power: we have accumulated wealth, and we’re making 85 percent of the household-buying decisions.² The numbers for women over fifty are even more staggering: We control a net worth of \$19 trillion, and spend 2.5 times that of the average person.³ Women in their forties and fifties are treated like we’re invisible, even though we’re one of the fastest-growing demographics in the country. (One in four Americans is a woman over forty.⁴) We are ignored by brands, and when we are targeted, it’s for wrinkle cream or menopause supplements. Talk about shortsighted.

This notion of invisibility is so widespread, so pervasive, that it has become the namesake of a social phenomenon, aptly dubbed “invisible woman syndrome.” The gist? When we are no longer deemed sexy or able to contribute to society by birthing and raising young children, our value diminishes. We are overlooked, ignored, or worse, not seen at all.

And the older we get, the more extreme it gets. An analysis of nearly eleven thousand ads featuring over twenty thousand people in 2021 and 2022 found that those featuring women over sixty years old amounted to a whopping 0.93 percent of all advertisements.⁵ You read that right: *less than one percent* of all advertisements feature women over sixty, even though the 2020 census found that one in six people in America is over sixty-five.⁶

According to a survey of women over forty by the advertising agency Fancy (which is specifically focused on marketing to a female audience), most women over forty feel that brands “underestimate their spending power and intelligence while overestimating their preoccupation with appearance.”^z We are, it turns out, more than just a demographic obsessed with looking younger. We embody vitality. We are smart and vibrant and powerful and ambitious. We are experienced, confident, capable, and complicated. We are running shit.

The truth is, I still can't quite get over that I'm using words like “aging” and “elder” in the same breath as I talk about myself and my friends. I'm not even sixty! I may not be playing the ingénue or the girl next door or even the first love, but I'm not exactly the grandmother in *Titanic*.

And yet, no one knows what to do with me. After all, Brooke Shields is not allowed to get old. The sixteen-year-old Calvin Klein model? *Time* magazine's face of the '80s? It's sacrilegious! I remember seeing a picture of what Marilyn Monroe would look like if she were still alive today, and it was truly impossible to wrap my head around. But she died looking like Marilyn Monroe. For me, as my body and face change in all the ways they should (don't get me started on my thinning, graying eyebrows), there is this sense of *How dare you? That was never the plan, young lady!* And, to be totally honest, there have been times when it's made me feel like a disappointment. Maybe you've felt this way, too—maybe you were an athlete in your youth, singled out for your form and speed, and now you can still swim or run or play tennis or whatever, but not at the same level. You're still strong, but you had the audacity to grow older, to change, to slow down a bit, to *not* die young or stop aging entirely. You survived, and it should be celebrated, and yet there's a sense that you're not as valuable or exceptional as you once were, and therefore you're letting people down. And these reactions can cause us to feel disappointed in ourselves, too. I look back sometimes and feel like I've done something wrong because I no longer have the body or the

face that I used to have. And yet, if I did anything drastic to hold on to my looks from my youth or to stop aging, I'd be judged or chastised for that, too.

Generally speaking, at fifty-nine, I feel more confident than I ever have. I'm more comfortable in my skin and have stopped comparing myself to *this* ideal or worrying about *that* expectation. But I'll admit that even as I'm experiencing this newfound sense of satisfaction, I have to remind myself, sometimes daily, that I am good enough. The old negative tapes are lying in wait in the Walkman (remember those!?), ready for me to press play at any moment. But I also realize that if I don't wear makeup or the "right"-sized jeans and someone has a problem with it, that's on them. And yes, I continue to exercise and take care of my skin, but I think of it now as a privilege, because it makes me feel better. Do I sometimes wish that all my bits had remained higher and perkier? Or that I had the same skin that appeared on the cover of *Life* magazine in 1983? Of course I do! Who doesn't miss the gifts of youth? But this is a body—and soul—that has carried me through *a lot*, and I'm not ashamed to admit that I think I deserve some credit for this life well lived. We do all this work and get through hard times and suddenly you have a line on your face, and that one little wrinkle carries more weight than decades of accomplishments.

I'll tell you, it took me a long time to have the guts to say that I deserved a bit more respect. Something began to shift in me around age forty. I started to own myself and my narrative in a new way. I'm not sure what it was that finally clicked, though becoming a mother probably had something to do with it. What I do know is that gaining that deeper sense of identity allowed me to speak up when others tried to diminish me. It's allowed me to look within and identify patterns and break cycles. It's allowed me to take on new risks and challenges. I know who I am and what I have to offer, and I've stopped hoping or trying to be different, or something that I'm not.

Of course, as proud as I am of how far I've come ... there is still so much that I want to do. I want to pile into a camper with my daughters and my husband and take a cross-country road trip (although we'd probably end up killing each other, and the romance of the Porta Potti would surely wear off

quickly). I want to learn to play an instrument. I want to get back to being fluent in French (it was my college major, after all). I want to travel to places I haven't been. The list goes on.

All of this is doable, because there's a lot of freedom that comes with age. It's more fun to take a dance class when you can truly let yourself dance like no one is watching. It's more fun to go out with friends when you aren't worrying if you said the wrong thing or if people are talking about you behind your back. It's more fun to go to a restaurant alone when you realize that no one is wondering why you don't have a companion ... that no one is looking at you at all, because they're all dealing with their own shit. And while, yes, my body is a little creakier than it once was, and it's not as easy to lose weight, the truth is I can still do almost everything I used to do. And the things I can't, well, I don't really want to. I don't want to surf (more on that in chapter 3). I don't want to ski, unless it's somewhere sunny and the trail is long and relatively flat—I just don't feel like exposing myself to freezing temperatures, fighting scary moguls, and navigating with the gear. But I don't feel limited. I'm happy that, at least for me, the moment for more intense, competitive activities has passed, and the moment for new emotional beginnings has arrived. I don't have to prove myself anymore. This is it. This is me! And if there is something I want to change, then I can make the decision to do so.

What I've come to realize—not only from my own lived experience but also from conversations with other women my age—is that these “later” years are all about coming into your own and pivoting in the directions you've always wanted to go. You can finally live the life you intended to, because you no longer have to act in accordance with external timelines, something that is part and parcel of being a woman. I don't have to get married by this date or have kids by this age or get a certain job before that milestone. My time is my own.

And yet—this newfound gift has come as a bit of a surprise. After all, the narrative we've been served for years is that it's all downhill for women after a certain age. As I hit my midfifties, I grew increasingly curious about the

disconnect between how this age feels and how it's portrayed in our culture and society. I talked to other women my age who felt the same tension I did—both personally empowered and systemically dismissed. And this idea of being collectively ignored ... it irked me. I started connecting even more with women over forty, online and on social media, because I wanted to dig into what makes aging hard and what makes it great. What began as an online community to discuss health, aging, sexuality, relationships, and just plain living—to dish about all those things you can't say to anyone except your closest girlfriends—evolved into a hair-care brand, Commence, and a new business. So here I am, a first-time CEO in my fifties, inspired to start a business—and write a book!—all because of society's most uninspiring take on women my age.

My first two memoirs, *Down Came the Rain* and *There Was a Little Girl*, were at their core about overcoming obstacles: first, postpartum depression, and second, losing my mom. But there is nothing to “overcome” about aging. That's the whole point! This time of our lives is something to enjoy and revel in, not something to merely survive. So if those books were about how I persevered through tough moments, this one is about how I took ownership and agency of a moment I'd been *told* would be tough, but really is rich and complex. But come on, life is complex. This book is about embracing an era that has been billed as an obstacle when, in reality, it's a stimulus. Yes, it has new and difficult challenges, but it doesn't have to be viewed as torture or a time to throw in the towel. I'm not trying to stave off this period, or deny it, or pretend I'm not in it. I'm taking the whole mess of it and reminding myself, and hopefully other women, that we have the elements we need to thrive. The story we've been told is, in a word, bullshit. We are the narrators of our next chapters.

For too long, women have talked about aging only in whispers and behind closed doors. Maybe it's because we've been embarrassed or ashamed. Maybe it's because we don't think anyone would want to hear what we have to say. These are understandable responses to our treatment by society, but they only serve to keep us isolated and disempowered. Recently,

I had the pleasure of attending an intimate “couch conversation” with Gloria Steinem where she was talking about the challenges of being a woman today. The younger women in the room were eagerly asking her, “But how can we fix it? How can we be a force for change?” And she reminded us that “every important movement started in a room like this—in a basement, or a living room.” When we step out from behind those closed doors and use our voices to talk about the misunderstandings, the underestimations, we’re already starting to change them. Maybe even fix them.

As far as I can tell, these decades in our lives are a time to be celebrated. Sure, there will be some hot flashes (been there!), but we can wear layers. (Or take hormones, which I have done, but more on that later.) I can tell you that the discomfort of those moments is far outweighed by the delight that comes from making intentional friendships, pursuing new interests, discovering our peak confidence, and giving ourselves permission to make changes to our lives.

In 2023, my dear friend Ali Wentworth produced a documentary, *Pretty Baby*, about my life. Watching it, and seeing just how much I’ve been through, I couldn’t help but feel proud. I’m not saying everyone should make a documentary about their lives, but I hope you can look back at how far you’ve come, how much life you’ve lived in order to get to this moment, and give yourself credit for the feat that it is. And then I hope it gives you the jump start you need to figure out how to enjoy this new stage of your life. Because the time is now! If there is something you want to change, now’s the time to change it. If there’s something you want to stop, now’s the time to stop it. If there’s something you want to do, now’s the time to do it.

Being relegated to the sidelines, as misguided as it is, also offers us more room to fully be ourselves. There’s less pressure. We can push boundaries when we’re moving through the world without the watchful eyes of, well, everyone. In *Why We Can’t Sleep: Women’s New Midlife Crisis*, author Ada Calhoun reconsiders all the so-called negatives of getting older. “Could we see ... our newfound midlife invisibility as a source of power?” she writes. “There are great advantages to being underestimated. Two of the best

reporters I know are women in their fifties. They look so friendly and nonthreatening, if you notice them at all. They can lurk in any room without usually wary people remembering to keep their guard up. Then they write devastating whistle-blowing articles. The world ignores middle-aged women at its peril.”

At fifty-nine, I’m the one making the calls in my life—not my mother or the media or Hollywood or my family—which is something I’ve never felt before. And this should be true for all of us. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done, or what you think you’ve done (good *or* bad), or even what you always wanted to do. This is a new time. The same rules don’t apply. Is that disorienting? Maybe, but I like to give it a different spin: We can make our own rules.

Previously Owned by Brooke Shields

REWRITING MY OWN SCRIPT

In early 2023, I got a call from Wayne Gmitter, longtime agent of Broadway legend Tommy Tune, who had a proposition for me: a two-week one-woman show at the Café Carlyle, a New York institution and cabaret lounge that once hosted the likes of Bobby Short, Elaine Stritch, Liza Minnelli, and Eartha Kitt. The regular booker at The Carlyle was on maternity leave, Wayne told me, and he was filling in. Getting me to headline a show was at the top of his agenda. Wayne thought the offer was a no-brainer—a show at The Carlyle carries prestige, and I’d never done it. I’d had a ten-day engagement at Feinstein’s, another cabaret club, in 2011, where I performed a compilation of songs from the seven Broadway shows I had done. While the show was well received by audiences, the critics basically said, “She’s no vocal powerhouse but she’s funny and she’s a good storyteller.” Obviously that hurt. I’d like to see those critics get up onstage and bust their asses doing something they’d never trained for and still manage to sell out every night! Reading the reviews, I remember thinking, *Seriously, what more do they want from me? I need to be pretty and funny and a good actress, glamorous and the girl next door ... and now I need to sing like Barbra Streisand, too?* (As you can probably tell, I’m still a bit scarred.) Did I want

to subject myself to that kind of pressure and scrutiny all over again? The answer was a no-brainer to me. The answer was obvious: NO.

I declined Wayne's offer. He called back. I said no again. He called back again. I tried to explain to Wayne all the reasons why I couldn't do it. "I don't have a show," I explained. "I'm not just going to get up there and do Broadway standards again."

"Think about it," was his response.

I told my husband, Chris, that Wayne had called with an offer, and I shared my reservations. His immediate reaction? "You have to do it. It's The Carlyle!"

"You're supposed to tell me that I don't have to do anything I don't want to," I responded.

"You'll be great," he said. He brushed it off as such an easy undertaking.

Then Tommy Tune called. Tommy is a longtime mentor of mine. He cast me in *Grease*, where I played Rizzo, in one of the earliest examples of Broadway stunt casting. (I felt guilty about it at first, because I knew I was taking a job from real triple-threat actors, but I also knew my purpose and countered any judgment about my casting by working my ass off. I may not have been the most seasoned Broadway performer in the room, but I could study and learn from the best while keeping a show from closing by filling the seats and doing all the press. No one could beat me when it came to work ethic.) Tommy is the reason why I have a Broadway history and career, so when he talks, I listen. "Brooke, you can't say no," he said. "I believe in you."

There were, as far as I could tell, a million reasons to say no. First of all, it costs the headliner money. You pay for the band, the orchestrations, the writing, the director. Also, I didn't need it. It wasn't like I was trying to rebrand my career as a cabaret star. It wasn't necessarily on my bucket list, and honestly I worried people would judge me harshly once again. But at the end of the day, every excuse I came up with was pretty lame. It wasn't like my schedule didn't allow for a two-week engagement. (As it happened, the show's run took place during the SAG-AFTRA strike, so I was lucky to be working at all. Theater is a different guild, which meant I wasn't violating

any union guidelines.) It didn't take place out of town. I lived a twenty-minute Uber ride away from The Carlyle, maybe thirty minutes in today's traffic. If singing was something I hated doing or didn't get enjoyment from, even then it would seem more reasonable to say no, but the truth is that I love to sing! And when I sing songs that are in my range, I'm really proud of my sound. Plus, the skills that come from doing a one-woman show are something I wanted in my toolbox as a performer.

No, none of these were reasons not to do the show. There was a much simpler, and much deeper, reason why I was resisting: I was scared. I knew, deep down, that I was afraid of being critiqued; afraid of not finding my unique sound, one that was independent of the Broadway characters I had played in the past. Afraid of facing my own insecurities. Afraid, ultimately, of failing.

Before I go any further, let me be clear that this is not a “say yes to everything” book. One of the joys of getting older, as far as I can tell, is the ability to say no to the things you don't want to do. It's empowering to know what you want and go after it, but it's just as empowering and important to know what you *don't* want. It has taken me a loooooong time, and plenty of therapy, to understand that I don't have to take every opportunity that comes my way just to keep proving my talent. I know, finally, that declining an offer doesn't mean that I'm giving up, or that I'm a failure, or that I'm not ambitious. I used to think sleeping in was lazy—it meant that you weren't maximizing your day. You could have used that time to exercise or clean your closet! Today I say, fuck that—sleep in! Enjoy it. But saying no to something I *do* want to do, out of fear alone? That ate away at me. It seemed senseless. It wasn't how I'd lived my life thus far. In fact, that's long been an MO of mine: if something scares you it probably means you should do it, because you'll feel so good about it afterward.

Ultimately, I realized, I was terrified enough that I had to say yes. Well, shit.

Doing a one-woman show at this point in my life felt almost symbolic. In many ways, independence was the one thing I had been missing for the bulk of my existence. So much of my life had been lived in relation to other people. My mother, my husband, my kids. My mom was a hugely controlling force in my life. I used to think that if she died, I would die. That was how tethered I felt to her. When I married my first husband, Andre Agassi, I walked into another controlling, rigid relationship, and for a while I did whatever he said. Divorcing him, and then losing my mother, put me on a journey of investigating what I guess is life's big question: Who am I? But in the time between the divorce and my mother's death, I'd gotten married, again, and had kids—so the answer seemed to be “I'm Rowan and Grier's mom. Chris's wife.”

And then Rowan went to college, and Grier became a teenager who was perfectly capable of fending for herself, and I woke up one morning and felt hit over the head with the notion that *Oh God, I have no context for this period of my life*. When I was a kid, I was always expected to act older—be more mature, more sophisticated, handle the situation, deal with his or her addiction, be the professional. And it was so important to me, back then, to prove I could do it. All of it. I could achieve achieve achieve in my career and outside of it. I was an old soul in a young kid's body, in part because I had to be but also because it seemed to be my nature. I couldn't be derailed! (Rowan has this, too. She came out of the womb like a shark. The first thing she did upon entering the world was case the joint. I remember my girlfriend Lyda, who was in the room when both my daughters were born, saying, “Oh my god, she looks so unimpressed.”)

When I finally had kids of my own and got to sit on the floor and play with them, it all felt so new and joyous; my life felt full. But my kids no longer need me in the same way. When I go to their school, I see the younger moms meeting for coffee and having playdates, a reminder that, *oh, I'm not at that stage of life anymore*. My husband is a wonderful partner and we've always been supportive of each other's independence—but my role as a wife has also evolved, now that we aren't raising children together so much as

witnessing their young adulthood together (though luckily he's never expected me to cook a family dinner every night, as I don't have that gene, so there's no change there). It's freeing not to have external pressures or timelines around marriage or fertility or parenting, but it's also confusing. I think it's human nature to try to understand your place in the order of things, and my place felt increasingly unclear. It felt like this ... limbo, maybe. Or nirvana. Or hell?!? I couldn't tell, or I couldn't decide. I'm not trying to wax philosophical, but as I entered my midfifties, I very much wondered, or at least felt like the world was wondering: if I no longer have working, producing ovaries, and if I'm not saying yes to society or someone else's desires or needs, do I have value? If the same familiar rules don't exist for this period of my life, do *I* exist?

Finding yourself in that nebulous place, in that wondering, is uncomfortable because it's unfamiliar. For years, I'd just put my head down and moved forward, checking off the boxes on the timeline of how it's expected a woman should live her life. Yes, I know mine hasn't exactly been typical—I had my first job a month before I turned one, I starred in my first movie at nine—but I've held myself to the same standards as many of my peers. I went to college, went back to work, got married, had kids, raised them. And I'm still moving forward, but something major has shifted. I used to put everybody else's needs ahead of my own. As a kid I was constantly burdened by obligations, whether to family, societal pressure, the demands of my industry, or even the public's expectations of who I was supposed to be. Then children entered the picture and—poof!—I practically became a robot. I may not have cooked all the meals or driven the carpools or attended every sporting event, but I was still the one the kids wanted and needed whenever anything went wrong ... or right. I was MOM. I was the comforter, the fixer, the healer, the listener, the juggler of all things family. And now, for the first time in over fifty years, I have become the hub of the wheel for myself rather than only what keeps everyone else's lives spinning. And this new normal is, at least initially, as scary as it is liberating. Motherhood is an identity, but it's also a shield. I can't tell you how many times I've hidden