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Like Fine Veggie-Wine: Dating and Marriage After 50

by Ann Gibson

Photo courtesy of Stone Studios, Stevensville, Mich.

Immediately after my graduation from Andrews University in 1970, I went to Singapore to be an accountant for the Far Eastern Division. There were a large number of single women working at the Division at that time—women who had been married and were now widowed, and those who had never married. One of the latter was Marion Barlow, a delightful woman in her early 50s from New Zealand. Those of us who were in our early 20s often discussed how the men of New Zealand must have been nuts to have allowed such a jewel to escape their island and come to Singapore more than 15 years earlier.

One night all the single women were summoned by the Division President's wife to the home of the assistant treasurer. Wondering what could be the nature of such an invitation, we gathered long before the appointed time.

Mrs. Eldridge, the Division President's wife, spun a parable about a red bird and a blue bird and a love bird all singing at the gate—a parable that was lost on most of the audience. Finally, she blurted out: "One of you is getting married soon!"

We stared at each other. It was as if we were reexperiencing the Last Supper in a modern-day format. "Is it I?" we asked. Eventually, Mrs. Eldridge directed our attention to Marion. She was the one who was going to be married soon—to a long-time friend whose deceased wife had been a classmate of Marion's in school. In fact, Marion had been in their wedding.

The room exploded! Women rushed into the night to share the good news! A woman in her 50s could fall in love and get married!

Of course, no woman in that room in Singapore so long ago ever dreamed

that she would marry equally late in life! After all, if you were under 50, you knew you would marry long before reaching that advanced age. The thought that Marion's story might be repeated was unthinkable. At least to me.

That was until I received a phone call from a long-time friend living in Missouri, whose wife I had been very close to. In fact, I had been the maid-of-honor in their wedding. She had passed away, and now my friend wondered if he could write to me. One would not refuse a letter from an old friend, I reasoned, and so I said "yes."

Now letters go quite unnoticed by those around us. They come quietly to one's mailbox. One does not have to make announcements on campus when one receives a letter. This was a great relief; since I was older, I did not wish to disclose any unusual activities in my

personal life. A university campus can be a great glass box.

One of our first face-to-face meetings got a bit complicat-

ed. My friend Larry suggested that we meet in Illinois—approximately halfway between Missouri, where he lived, and Michigan. Larry's mother and sister and her family were visiting him in Missouri, and it was important to get them out the door in good time for him to take off to meet me in Illinois. We agreed

that he would call as soon as they drove out his driveway, and I would then leave Berrien Springs. Everything went according to plan except that neither of us considered that his mother would call him once she reached her home in Wisconsin, just to let him know she had arrived safely. Thus it happened that Larry's mom called his house and found no one home. She was not concerned initially, but when she tried to call in the middle of the night and there was still no answer she began to worry. By morning she was frantic: something must have happened to her son after she left! She called Larry's sister to ask if Larry had said anything to her about leaving town. The answer was "no"—he had said nothing. That was when Larry's mom decided to call the sheriff.

The Missouri sheriff was duly summoned, and, after he inspected the house, he called back to Wisconsin to report that no one was home, nothing looked disturbed, and that the car was gone. Larry's mom, however, was not satisfied. She was sure that the sheriff had not looked closely enough, and perhaps Larry lay dead at the foot of the basement stairs! She insisted that the sheriff check the house at regular intervals. Finally, when Larry returned

home from our rendezvous late the second day, he was met by the sheriff, who demanded, "Call your mother!

She is worried about you."

So much for dullness when dating at 50!

Eventually, word of our relationship began to spread around campus. There was a certain amount of disbelief that I could be involved in serious dating.

When one of my friends heard the news, she

told another friend that I was being courted. The second friend assumed that such a statement indicated I had



Photo courtesy of Stone Studios, Stevensville, Mich.

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received an interesting job offer. "No," cried the first friend, "she is being courted by a MAN!"

What Happens When You Wait

This is what happens when you wait beyond the standard marrying age. First, people cannot conceive that love happens to those past thirty. I could not believe it for Marion, and most of my friends could not believe it for me.

Second, love happens when you are busy doing something else. The letter arrives in the mail when you least expect it, and you may be as surprised as your friends to find a male voice on the phone when you lift the receiver. One thinks more about getting married at twenty than one does at fifty, and it may take a bit of time to get back into the twenty-something frame of mind. But it is possible!

Third, it is much easier to date at fifty. If the relationship doesn't work out,

you know you already have a good life. Shortly after we started dating, I told Larry I was very happy being single and that I was not interested in getting married unless marriage brought something better—more fun, more laughter, more companionship, more fulfillment. Being older, I understood that marriage does not make life possible—that one can live without a husband. At fifty, one should marry only if it makes life better.

Fourth, it is much easier to laugh. On one of our early trips together, Larry encountered an 18-year-old waitress who took quite a liking to him. She managed to brush against him at every opportunity while serving us breakfast. Larry was so embarrassed, and at a younger age, I might have been mortified. Instead, I found it very funny.

Fifth, weddings are easier to plan at fifty. You know people who can help you with the wedding—people who design wedding programs, bake wed-

ding cakes, do video recording, provide music, have access to old cars for transportation. Perhaps the strangest thing about a wedding at fifty is that your friends and/or your children bless your marriage, not your parents. The "family" that attends your wedding is a composite of your past, and includes many friends who have shared major portions of your life. As these people gather from all parts of the country and from all periods of your life, the wedding becomes a thread that ties together so many pieces of the past. This makes it very exciting and particularly meaningful.

After the Wedding

Putting two households together can be a challenge. Larry is a librarian, in charge of collection development at AU's James White Library. But he had been in charge of his own collection development for years! Thus an entire



Photo courtesy of Stone Studios, Stevensville, Mich.

although I do not have the same amount of time that I had before. One friend, who also married after fifty, mentioned that her most difficult adjustment was the loss of financial independence. She quit working when she married, and the first time she had to ask her husband for money was very difficult. I avoided that dilemma by continuing to work. After so many years of being financially independent, I think leaving my job would have been a very difficult adjustment.

Before marriage, my life was full of many friends, and so was Larry's. Now we both have many new friends who literally came with the marriage. My single friends from Singapore will get together for

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holidays, and Larry has been officially adopted into the group (affectionately known as the "Singapore Singles"), maintaining his role as the token male quite gracefully. My family life has changed as well. I am an only child, but Larry is one of seven children. Through marriage I have inherited five brothers and one sister, plus spouses and kids, and scores of aunts, uncles, and cousins. Although I would have inherited these people whether I married at twenty or at fifty, it seems age makes it easier to accept them for who they are, and to accept the relationship they

offer, rather than wishing for something else.

Before marriage I did many things, including extensive traveling. But many times I did it alone. Now I have someone to do things with. The things we do together are as routine as washing dishes and as exotic as finally seeing local places I never quite had the nerve to explore alone, like the Curious Kids Museum in St. Joseph, Michigan. In the case of doing dishes, I get conversation as well as help! In the case of the Curious Kids Museum, I can play with trucks on the "moon's" surface and listen, without embarrassment, to another parent explain to their child that the "big kids" are playing with the trucks right now.

For me, marriage at a later age was beneficial because by the time I chose to be married, I had lived long enough to begin to understand what is really important. Differences between people that would have seemed almost insurmountable at twenty are not that difficult at fifty. Age can bring rigidity in one's ways, but it can also bring perspective. Larry and I choose to focus on perspective and enjoy the advantages of building a partnership.

So marriage after fifty is not only possible, it's terrific.

Marion was one of the first people I told when Larry and I began to seriously consider marriage. I wanted her perspective, since she too had married in her fifties so long ago. Her response was very heartening! "It was the best thing I ever did," she wrote. "May you be as blessed as Cam (her husband) and I in your new life."

Thank you, Marion.

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library came with Larry to Berrien Springs! Unfortunately, I already had a library of my own, plus I had inherited my father's library. Almost nothing in our respective libraries overlaps, so virtually nothing could be eliminated. As Larry said, "You can't pack away any of your books! Look at all the things right here in the house that I haven't read!"

So the first task after the wedding was to begin to put the material goods of two households together. And in the process, you begin to put two lives together. These lives, like the households, are full and almost nothing can be eliminated. So one learns to stretch in ways one never imagined.

There are, of course, adjustments. The house does get twice as dirty and there is twice the laundry. Larry likes real food, not just a bowl of cereal at the end of a busy day, so cooking is a required art. My initial fear of losing privacy and quiet time to myself by getting married was overrated,