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No One Really Tells You The Hardest Part Of Getting Older

The older I get, the more I realize how much I don't know. But there's one thing I know for sure.



Linda Caroll · [Follow](#)

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No one ever died wishing they'd worked more, she said, rightness written all over her pretty face.

Dig taken.

I don't know, I said.

No one ever died wishing they'd watched one more episode of *Friends*, either I say and she rolls her eyes.

No one ever died wishing they'd kept the house cleaner, either I say.

Untold hours folding laundry, sweeping floors, mopping floors, and pushing the mawing beast to hoover up dust bunnies that will magically reappear in the same damn spot again next week, and the week after.

But we keep doing it, don't we?

Did you know, I say, if you spend an hour every day cleaning the house and live to the ripe old age of 80, you'll have spent over one thousand days of your life cleaning the damn house?

What could you have done with a thousand days?

Face pinched, she won't look at me, but I keep talking because I never did know when to shut my big mouth.

And does anyone appreciate it? I mean, really.

Beyond the cursory '*thanks, Mom*' and '*great dinner, honey*,' does anyone really and truly appreciate that this is how you're spending the hours of your one wild and precious life?

Time is a currency. I say softly.

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She shoots me a look and I exhale breath I didn't know I was holding.

See, this is why we're blood, I tell her. Because you'd never tolerate having someone like me in your peripheral vision if I wasn't blood and her face tells me I scored but the win falls flat.

Let me tell you something, I say and she finally looks at me.

Isaac Asimov once said if his doctor told him he was dying, he wouldn't lament, he would just type a little faster.

I can't wait until it's too late, I say so quietly it's almost inaudible.

She doesn't say a word, but I see something flicker in her eyes and around her mouth, and for one tiny moment in time, I feel seen.

I was all of ten when I regaled Mom with my brilliant math skills. I was rocking my baby brother to sleep while she gathered up supper dishes. He was a surprise menopause baby and oh, how she treasured that little boy, never mind that she was already a grandma.

Mama, did you know you've been pregnant for six whole years of your life?

The look on her face instantly told me I'd said something terribly, horribly wrong and inappropriate, but I wasn't even sure what, or why.

I know, she said and filled the sink to wash the dishes.

Kissing his head, I laid him in the crib and grabbed a dishtowel. I'll help, I said. Standing beside her, drying dishes, I asked the big scary question.

Mom? Do you ever wish you didn't have us?

Waiting, my lip quivered.

Oh sweetheart, she said. Hands still in the dishwater, she leaned over and kissed my head. Lifted my chin with a wet hand to look me in the eye. No, she said, she doesn't wish that. Never, not ever. Not even for one single minute, sweetheart, she said. You kids are my everything.

I'm not sure I believed her. Not until I had my own.

Mama, she said.

I look at her, delighted.

What did you say? Say it again!

Mama, she repeats, pointing a tiny finger at me. I scoop her up and dance around the room. Yes, I tell her. Yes, I'm your mama.

I phone mom and when she picks up, I don't even say hello first. *She said mama*, I blurt and we laugh. Mothers, both of us.

We put a growth chart on the wall and got a book for all the firsts. Walked at nine months, used full sentences by her first birthday, and learned to read before preschool, this precious, precocious child of mine.

They say having a child is like taking a little piece of your heart and letting it walk around independent of you and they're not wrong. I didn't know I could love so much. So, so much.

And to think Mom tried to talk me out of all of this, back when I was dating the boyfriend I would eventually marry.

You're so young, she'd said. So young.

We need to stop raising our kids on fairy tales. What a shock to grow up and realize the fairy tale works backward.

After you wear the pretty white gown and glass slippers and say I do, you get to be the version of Cinderella from the beginning of the story, cooking and cleaning until you drop, weeping, into a corner somewhere.

There's no fairy godmother so we wash diapers, dishes, and laundry and push the mawing beast to Hoover the dust bunnies, but not when the baby is sleeping because, trust me, you really, really need her to nap.

And somewhere along the way, a year or ten later, we start to wonder if this is all there is. Not that we don't love our kids, because we do. With every fiber of our being.

But still. We remember who we were, once upon a time.

Before we were wives and mothers.

Me, I was born half-wild.

Running wild, climbing trees while the others played house and had tea parties. Rode bareback before I started school and Mom was so angry at Dad for allowing it. But look at her, he'd said. Look how happy she is.

I wish that child would wear shoes, Mom sighed but I still don't.

They start when you least expect it, the dreams. Maybe the thousandth time you're washing dishes, or pushing the vacuum. Maybe you see something on tv or in a magazine, and suddenly? There they are.

I could see it so clearly.

Flying down the road at breakneck speeds while cars flew by going the opposite way, getting the hell out of dodge. Wind screaming through my hair as I pointed the eye of the camera into the eye of the storm.

Laying in a field, so still that wild birds mistook me for just another dead tree and perched on my head while I lay utterly still, watching for the wild animal that would inevitably appear for me to capture on film.

I remembered the camera I'd bought with my babysitting money at all of thirteen. When I whispered those dreams to Mom, she said she knows. She wanted to be a nurse, once upon a time. So much she could taste it.

It's not just women, lest you misunderstand this as a feminist rant.

I can still see him bent over a blueprint. He was so smart, I believed he could move the world if he chose. He dreamed of being an architect, designing the kinds of buildings they show in Architectural Digest.

He'd buy them with his pay from packing groceries on Saturdays.

But he met a girl. I threw rice at their wedding. Then he folded up his dream and tucked it in his back pocket. Got the job that would give his family security instead of uncertainty. Because he, too, loved.

Last week I saw a woman crying about a filter on TikTok. The filter made her younger. Oh, that little face, she said. That precious little face.

She didn't even turn off the camera when the tears started. It wasn't a lament on aging. You know? Aging is a gift.

It's not that we enjoy aging. Not that I'll enjoy wrinkles when they show up. If my siblings are any indication, it will be some time yet and I'm grateful to my parents for the genes.

Give me aging over the alternative.

But that little face? She still had her whole life in front of her.

No one tells you the hardest part of getting older.

It's not wrinkles or grey hair. It's not the five or ten extra pounds.

You wake up one day and everything changed. No more little faces around the breakfast table. No 6 AM hockey practice. No dance recitals, sleepover parties, or class trips. Not a single argument over curfew.

It's all done. Faded into history.

Oh sure, there are tradeoffs. Grandkids, maybe. Less laundry. Delightful Saturday lunch and shopping with this amazing adult you made.

But your life? There are holes in it they used to fill.

And now they don't.

So you reach into your back pocket for the dreams you were going to chase one day, when you finally had time. Only to discover they're gone, too.

In the flurry of adulting, parenting, and bill paying, you didn't even notice when your dreams slipped through the hourglass.

Gone. Along with the sands of time.

That's the hard part.

I asked Mom, once, why she never became a nurse after the kids grew up. She sighed and said twelve-hour days had no appeal to her anymore. She did enough of those as a mother. I nodded. Understood.

What do you do then, with your pockets empty of dreams?

If you're one of the lucky ones, you find a new dream.

Most people don't.

They just fill their hours with television and routine. Know what the top regret of the dying is? They wish they'd had the courage to live a life true to themselves instead of doing what other people expected them to.

I can't die that way. I can't.

But I don't have to. Julia Child started cooking at 51. Laura Ingalls Wilder started writing the Little House books at 65. Grandma Moses didn't pick up a paintbrush until she was 77.

I still work, because of divorce, inflation, and bills.

I still push the mawing beast, because houses don't clean themselves.

And so I sit, typing as the sun sinks behind the old maple tree outside my window and wake with the robins to draw in the early morning light.

I may well die wishing I'd worked a little more.

I don't know.

I don't have a crystal ball. The older I get, the more I realize how much I don't know. But there's one thing I know for sure.

Time makes us no promises.

Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life? — Mary Oliver, The Summer Day

Hey, I'm Linda and you can read more of my stories here.

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Written by Linda Caroll

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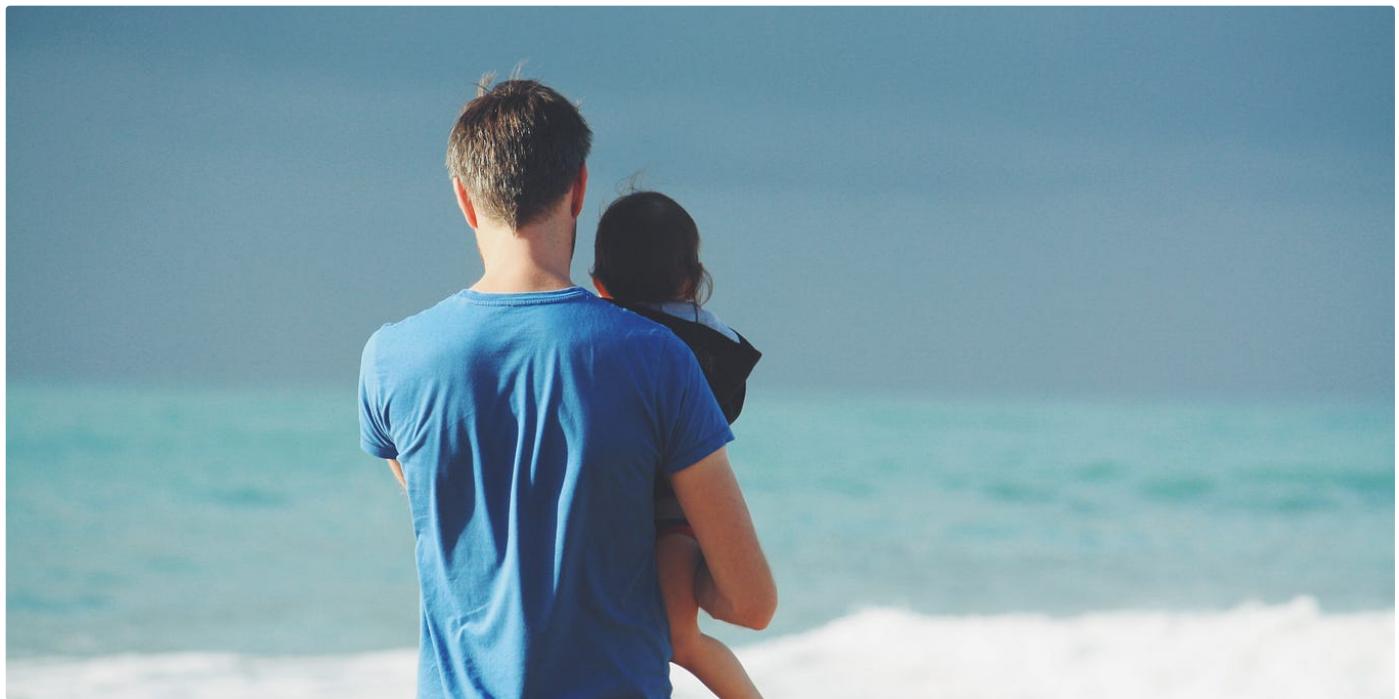
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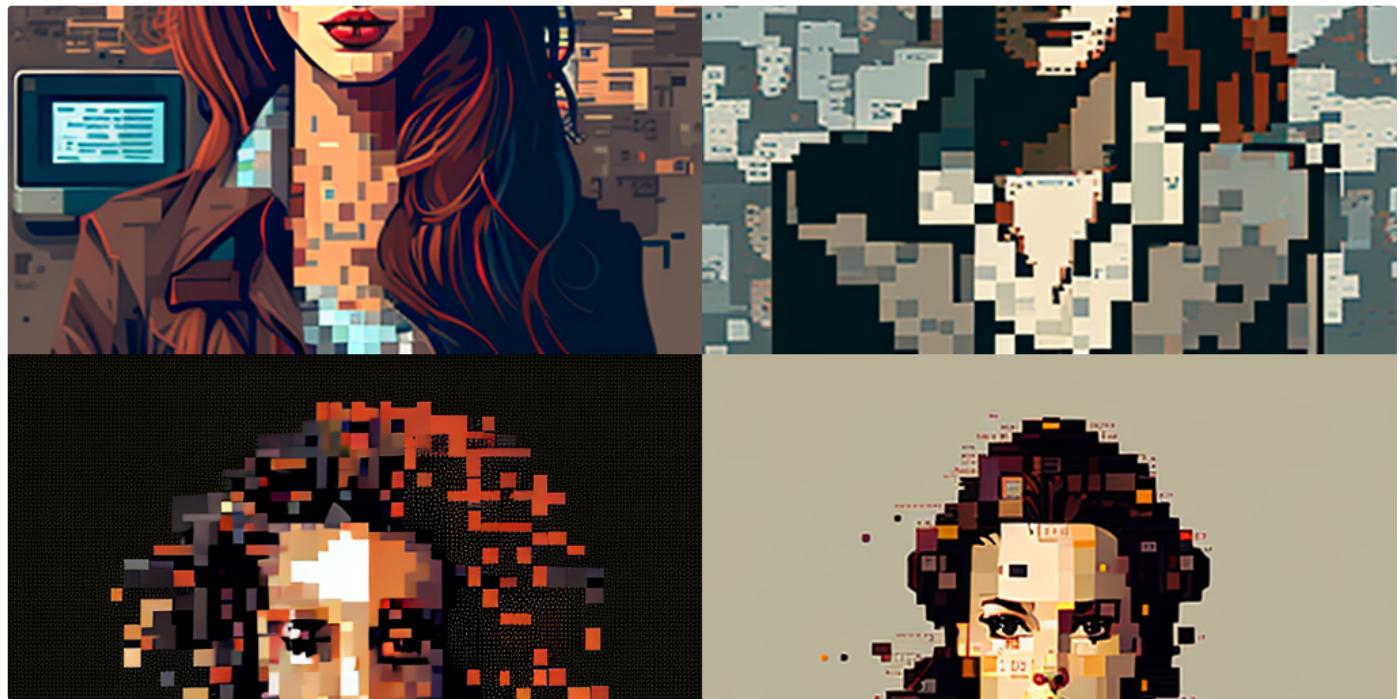
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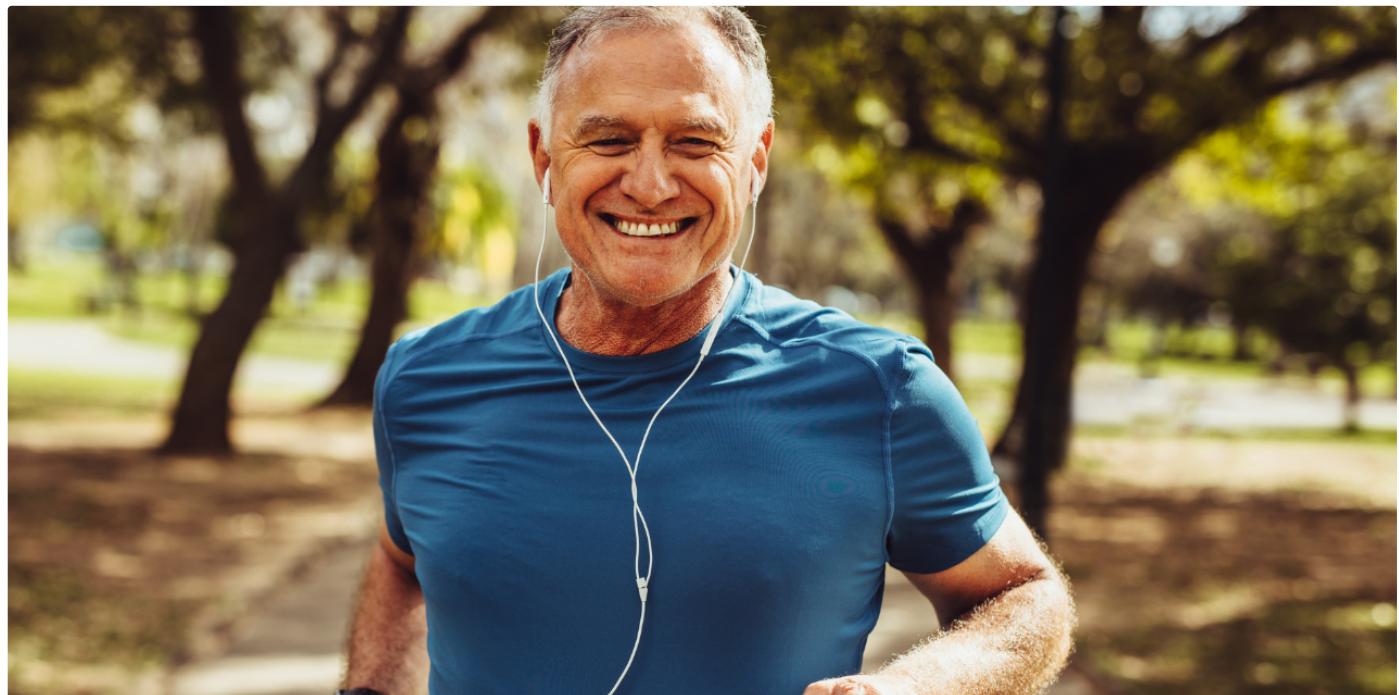
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