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In a Role Reversal, the Older Generation Tests the Limits

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Who's coming to dinner at your house this Thanksgiving?

A friend calls me in distress because her mother-in-law wants to visit. Hers is not the usual mother-in-law story about messing up the old family recipe for cranberry jelly. This is the new mother-in-law story about the merry widow with a new boyfriend who is a decade younger: "Here's this other guy . . . Is he going to carve the turkey?"

Traditional family rules and rituals are being turned upside down. But it's not the young who are defying social conventions; it's the old folks who are behaving like young people.

"It's just weird being around the two of them," my friend continues. "They are making goo-goo eyes at each other. They're like teenagers in the throes of passion. It's all kind of overwhelming. It's very strange for the kids to watch this. We don't expect this with someone who's that age. It's freaky."

Medicare moms and dads -- grandmas and grandpas to the youngest generation -- aren't supposed to act like this. My friend and her husband have a teenage son. How do they explain this to him?

The big question as the visit approaches: Where do Grandma and her boyfriend sleep? Together? In the double bed in the room next to the kids -- or over the garage in twin beds where there's no chance of their bumping into the rest of the family?

In the days of Archie Bunker, the younger members of the family were the wild ones. They showed up for holidays with tattoos, long hair, outrageous clothing; they brought home their live-in boyfriends and girlfriends and spouted the philosophy of free love and do your own thing. The elders were shocked.

Now the wild ones are often the elders, and the ones who are shocked are the adult children who grew up on the wave of social liberation but never thought an anything-goes lifestyle would one day apply to their parents.

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"It's hard," my friend says. Here I am, she explains, "being judgmental of somebody's behavior. You start to feel like the cranky elder."

This generational flip-flop is showing up at family tables (and bedrooms) thanks to longevity, which is rewriting the personal script of aging and overturning stereotypes that once placed older people in the rocking chair, where they were to go gently into irrelevance.

No more. You say you want a revolution? One of the biggest changes in family life is a surge in re-mating at older ages. Because of longer life spans, there is a swelling pool of codgers and codgerettes who are looking for love in all kinds of places, from school reunions and courses in Chinese art to Bible study groups and online dating services.

It's a "thicker remarriage market in recent decades that allows greater remarriage following either divorce or the death of a spouse," conclude University of Pennsylvania researchers Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers in their report on marriage and divorce in the Journal of Economic Perspectives, published earlier this year. Not to mention the increases in cohabitation and going steady among the Social Security crowd.

With all this re-coupling among the grandparents, Thanksgiving dinner can become the proving ground for the new American family. The Responsible Generation -- parents between ages 35 and 50, in the squeeze play of raising children and making a mark in the workplace -- now face the Rebellious Generation of people over 60.

Divorce, though relatively rare at this stage of life, can cause havoc with holiday traditions. What happens to the family when parents break up after 40 or 50 years of marriage? It's a tremendous shock to adult children. And which parent has a place at the table? This comes up every holiday: Who is going to take Mom? Who is going to take Dad?

Another shock is to see how good old Mom may change after a certain age: She loses weight, buys sexy clothes, gets a different hairdo -- frosty, hip, short. When the kid self kicks in, Mommy changes.

And it's not just mommies. Older men, too, start to think they are Marlon Brando in "Last Tango in Paris." (Bad ending, guys. It's a warning.) But there is no age limit on finding your inner kid.

And that changes the balance between the younger, responsible generation and the older, rebellious one. Who are the wise pillars of the family now?

Keith Laken of Winona, Minn., remembers how, before he got married, he asked his father about sex. His father's reply: "Don't worry about it, son. Nature will take care of it." Forty years later, the situation reversed. His father was a widower, and at 84 he met a woman who would become his girlfriend. He turned to his 60-year-old son and asked: "Is there anything to Viagra?"

"I thought about saying, 'Don't worry about it, Dad. Nature will take care of it,' " Laken says with a laugh. But Laken is the one who knows the facts of life. After being treated a decade ago for prostate cancer, he developed erectile dysfunction. He and his wife, Virginia, are the authors of "Making Love Again: Hope for Couples Facing Loss of Sexual Intimacy." Laken could give his father good advice.

That's how crazy family life can get in this new age, when adult children have to tell aging parents about the birds and the bees.

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