

A love-letter to life

"Some age that seemed so far away ..."

B Y R O D B A R R O W

In younger years you play and play,
The future brighter, day by day.
Then, suddenly, you're gay and gray;
Some age that seemed so far away.

You ask: "Was youth as wisely spent
As school tuition, groceries, rent?"
My joints are stiff, my back is bent.
Get-up-and-go, got up and went!

I'm diabetic (pills, not shots) ...
My hair is growing thin in spots ...
My heart does thrilling dits and dots ...
But still and all I've lots and lots ...

To be so very grateful for.

I've had, for over 20 years,
The love and laughter, tears and fears;
The dream that fades and reappears;
That wrap itself in mist, then clears.

At 40, sans companion clone,
I made my peace: "I'll live alone"
But wait! I thought I heard the phone ...
Just someone selling pom ... or pone.

(My hearing's going, too, dammit!)

But now, at nearly 63,
The things that once eluded me
Just wait like presents on a tree
Each day for me to wake and see.

R. J. stepped in and changed my life ...
Carved hearts on trees with loving knife ...
Erased the black marks in my life!
Straight friends: "Who's husband and who's wife!"

(They never get it right!)

Cold weather finds us tightly curled,
Like cats, against the snowy world,
While spangles Old Man Winter hurled
Keep summer's webs all jeweled and pearled.

So ... not all words are warm or wise.
And not all blessings "in disguise,"
But there is stardust in my eyes
And I'm the luckiest of guys.

An now, when all the fires are banked,
The old Victrola needle's cranked,
R. J. and I, our forces ranked,
Give thanks and know that we've been thanked!

As a native Oregonian, I can truly say that it's a long way from Roseburg to Portland. At least the way I travelled: via New York, Venezuela and England. Fresh out of Roseburg Senior High, where I was editor of the school newspaper, I was, at 18, the first foreigner ever to write a column in his own language for the oldest daily paper in Venezuela, Maracaibo's *El Panorama*.

Years

At 26, I started my singing career with the Ken Foeller Orchestra in Fort Worth, Texas, where I had just replaced a guy named Pat Boone as resident vocalist at WBAP-TV. I've had the privilege of singing in Caracas, Venezuela, Folkstone, England, Phoenix, Las Vegas and Los Angeles, where I worked at a leading ad agency, was awarded a two-year contract with TAG Records and designed a line of greeting cards for Bonjour Prints using the "Little People" cartoons developed during my stint as an Oregonian copyboy.

At 30, I sailed to England on the Holland-America Line's flagship New Amsterdam, as publicist for Tacoma channel swimmer Bert Thomas.

At 40, though I am an incurable nester, who has always loved cooking and entertaining and

forever hated being single, I finally turned my back on a lifelong search for the perfect duet, determined to make the best of a solo performance. What a bitch! Too young to take the veil and too old to play the field! (Man joins nunnery! Film at eleven!)

It was October, 1967, and I had joined my two gay siblings in Seattle—a younger brother and my twin, Ron. Suddenly I was invited to a New Year's Party by someone I'd never met, someone who'd heard about the three gay brothers from mutual friends. Early New Year's Eve day, Ron flew to Los Angeles to start life with his lover, George. My younger brother, then resident manager of Seattle's Edgewater Inn, had parties to oversee all over the place. So I went to the party with the couple who'd first mentioned my brothers and me to R.J.

As I walked down the stairs in my fringed buckskin boots and the fringed Pendleton-style plaid shirt Ron had made me for Christmas, I heard someone say "Well guess who's gonna be dessert!". The voice was an ex-lover of R.J.'s who, as it turned out, hit the pie right on the a la mode!

No, we didn't get together that night. Or for that matter, for several weeks. But, genuinely impressed that anyone would invite a stranger to anything as intimate as a New Year's Eve celebration, I called R.J. the very next day and then followed it up with a thank-you card. After that, we talked on the phone nearly every day for hours at a time, discovering shared interests in art, theatre, literature and music (he's a brilliant painter and writes the most gorgeous poetry).

There were dinners out, climaxing with one at the Red Carpet, where Roy had taken me to say good-bye. He had resigned himself to a solitary life in his neat little home in Montlake and, much as he liked me, didn't see that I was reason enough to break the comfortable pattern he'd very happily established for himself. He hadn't counted on a stubborn Taurus who, once he's made up his mind something's worth fighting for, just digs in for the fight!

He very politely pointed out, first of all, what he thought were the physical disadvantages. I told him that if I wanted to fall in love with a fat, bald headed old man that was my business! On the 2nd of next February, we will celebrate 23 of the happiest and most rewarding of my 62 years.

Really, I feel like the luckiest person alive. I've lived out almost all of my fantasies. I've got most of the childhood garbage in the dumpster. I do the two things I love most for a living. I write and I sing. I'm married to a talented painter who has turned out to be the perfect person for me to spend these shining moments, days and years with. Oh, we've had our sharp corners and scratched egos. You're bound to have. It's how and when (and where) you put on the bandages that sometimes makes all the difference. One thing about real love. You can kiss the bumps and bruises and make them well.

But enough about me. How about you? This column is to be an open forum for older gays. We solicit your contributions: comments, complaints, reminiscences, tributes to outstanding personalities in the gay and gray community, reminders of laudable achievements by older gays, paeans to lovers past and present, trips you've taken or would like to take ... whatever.

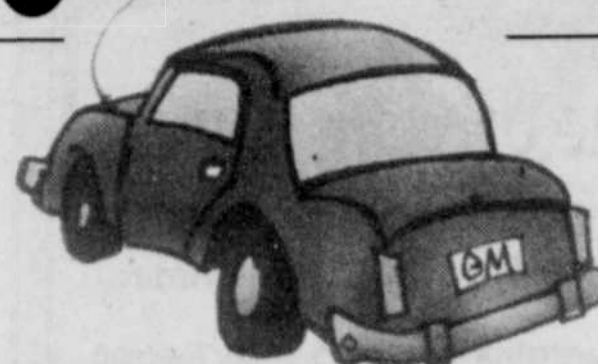
All of us at *Just Out* would like this column to be a love letter to life. Whatever you decide to share with us, we sincerely want Just Years to be yours!

We're looking forward to hearing from you. Please write us at PO Box 15117, Portland, OR 97215.

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"I haven't done a gay character yet, no. Chances are it won't happen. It's probably too late now. When they do cast for it, they tend to cast young. It might be the ageism in gay culture itself. Like, I'm a viable sex-symbol as a heterosexual character, but over-the-hill as a gay one."

-Paul Newman talking to the *New York Native*.



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