

On Becoming 40

by Gillian Kerr

Years ago, I bought my first car over the phone, sight unseen. I asked a man to find me one and told him what I could afford. He called me a day later to say he had found “a beaut.” We made a deal, and ten minutes later he had processed the first payment on my Visa card.

“That’s terrible!” said a family friend. “A man should have helped you. You don’t buy cars that way. You negotiate.” But the car was fine; it was a barely used two-tone grey Mercury Topaz that ran very well. However I did notice that I was unique among two-tone topazes owners - almost every other was a sixty-five-year old man.

I hadn’t given the car purchase much thought, because back then I didn’t think I needed to become a practiced negotiator with a used car salesman. As a young unmarried woman, I still considered myself to be in the departure lounge of life, waiting for my ‘other’ to arrive. I was waiting to board the big flight of marriage so that I could take off to the real beginning of my existence. I paid attention to information and subjects that I thought I might need on *that* trip, and didn’t pay attention to becoming expert about too much else. I worked, made friends, got on life, but all the while I kept vaguely informed about a life I thought lay ahead, the one with a husband, children and house with garden. I took note of great styles for slimming swimwear, ways to make a man think he’s funny, memorable wedding video ideas, babies names that sounded like they would still be cool twenty years later, what to do with turkey leftovers, and how to plant shrubs. All this I picked up in passing from friends, family, or osmosis. I stored all these important and useful tidbits carefully in my memory bank. Other things that I expected my ‘other’ might be expert in, like how to buy a car or negotiate a mortgage or buy life insurance, I didn’t build any files.

I am going to be 40 this year. And I am still an unmarried woman, though perhaps not so young. It’s time, really, that I took off with whatever cargo I have, even if I haven’t got files that are ready for the trip. I don’t think anyone will argue that 40 is no longer the age of the ingenue; it is not an age to be spent in a departure lounge. At 40, innocence isn’t really something you can make work for you anymore, it just comes off as stupidity. Whether it’s money or infidelity or cars. “Poor thing, she didn’t know,”: that’s just not something that really sticks well to a 40-year-old woman.

Nevertheless, expectations for me are modest. “Why don’t you get yourself a smart little condo?” asks my mother, advising me to move away from my tree-lined street, where there’s “no place to park”, and out of the old, draft-plagued Victorian I live in. Get a nice brand new little place. Little. Nice. These are the words that are used. A friend who remembered the Topaz incident recently insisted on helping me negotiate the payments on a new car. “So easy on the gas” was the explanation for her recommendation. Easy. I hear that a lot. Like it’s OK that I don’t try too hard or risk too much.

Economically speaking, this is all very sensible. As I move forward with my foot print on the world it is recommended that it is appropriately sized. Right sized. Single serve. Alone, it’s as if I am leading only half the life I am supposed to lead, like there’s this ghost of the ‘other’, of another existence that is meant to be coloured in beside me, but isn’t. As I have imagined the ‘other’, so has everyone else. “It’s just me,” I might say

to a waitress, as I take a seat in sidewalk café with my book. There is no one to fill in the space opposite me.

But something is happening. The spaces opposite me seem to be disappearing. Lately when I go to dinner parties, I don't notice so much that I am the fifth person and there isn't a sixth. After all this time, there is a lot I really know. I participate in the flow of every conversation. I access the files that allow me to chat away about decorating shows on television. But now I even drift into topics that I once believed were the unique expertise of the 'other' - like mutual funds, mortgage rates, and sometimes even cars. I am even commanding on these topics, because, I guess, I have decided to own them, to be in the space where they are. I have an opinion about almost everything that might interest a person engaged in the full circle of life: I care about politics, traffic, waterfront development, family history, the future of cloning, old books, new shoes. I want to know. I want to know about going beyond that ghost, to know about taking chances, making risky leaps, breaking hearts. And nothing feels 'little' about it. I have become my own 'other'. And I take up space.

I'm making plans for the party to celebrate my birthday. I am going to design my own 40th birthday party martini, and am working on some ideas right now. I might go for something exotic like an iced tea blend, a tropical juice brew or a blend of liqueurs. I don't know what's going to be in my martini just yet and I have no idea how the next 40 years are going to turn out. I just know that nothing will be half size. I'll take it in big gulps and things might get a little risky.