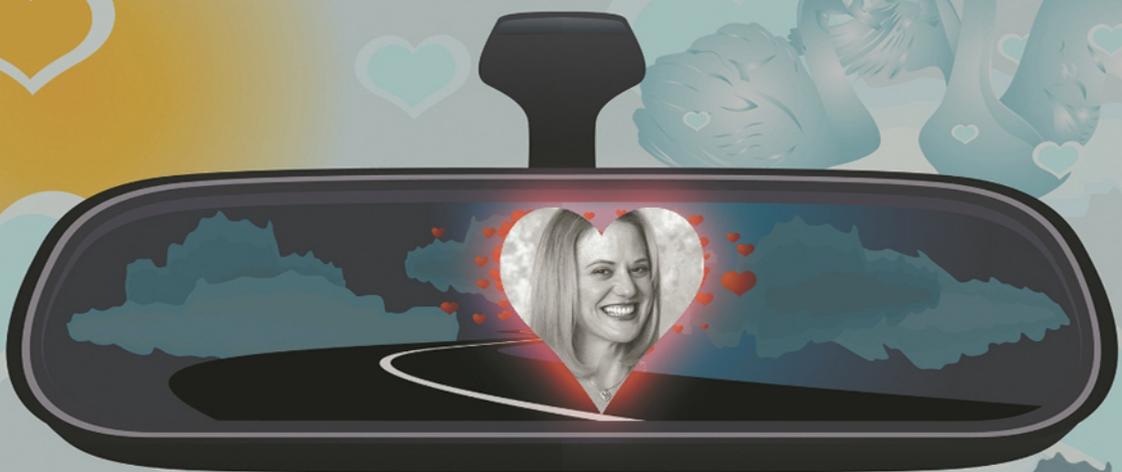


HELLO, 31



MARION SCHERER

Hello, 31

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For David, who lights the way for me

*You may rage against injustice, but you've
got to respect the sheer impact of time.*

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Prologue

Marion, a middle-aged woman, is standing on the sidelines of an elegant cathedral watching her younger self, Marion at age 31, walk down the aisle at her wedding. As a young bride she is tall, thin, and beautiful in a 1930s silk bias cut gown. With long blonde hair and the curvy, clinging dress, she is truly a sight to behold.

She cannot be seen to Marion 31 but exists as a spirit would, as a mist or a puff of wind. She waves at her younger self as though to wish her well. “Hello, 31.” Of course there is no response. She repeats herself a bit louder, “Hello, 31!”

The young Marion turns and looks as though she’s heard someone call her, but there is no one there and she turns back to the task at hand. Standing beside her is her father, and they are about to walk down the aisle. As the wedding music begins, her father is more nervous and confused than she and asks, “What happens now?”

“We walk down the aisle,” she answers. “Don’t you remember we rehearsed it last night?”

He seems nervous and a little shaken as he responds, “Oh ... I didn’t realize.” They’re moving down the aisle now as everyone turns to look at them. “What music is that?” he asks.

“It’s Howard Hanson,” she says. “‘The Cherubic Hymn.’”

“God, it’s beautiful,” her father whispers, and somehow they make it down the aisle. “Everyone’s looking at us!” he adds.

“Well they’re supposed to, Dad ... I’m the bride!”

Marion Now watches the procession like a proud mother marrying off her firstborn. “Gee, you look great, Marion! God, you’re thin!” Patting her round stomach, reluctantly she adds, “What the hell happened to my hair?”

CHAPTER ONE

The Turning Point

And that's how one chapter of my life began and another one ended. That day several decades ago (and if you think I'm telling you how old I am, you're crazy) marked the turning point in what I now see as the beginning of the second part of my life. But how I got here was an incredible journey, and I think it's worth noting to a lot of us boomers that all of what made us who we are is important to put down on paper before we disappear from the face of the earth.

I was born in New York City. We lived on 180th Street near the Juilliard School of Music, where my father was a student of piano, and my mother was struggling to become a nurse at Sloan Hospital until they realized that she didn't have a high school diploma and kicked her out. My parents were young and poor, but in some ways we lived very well—elegantly, in fact. Even though they told me a lot of their meals were had at the automat, where they could order hot water and add

packages of ketchup and call it tomato soup, they were in a sort of idealistic love. I sensed that somehow as an infant. But music made the fairy tale real. It was Bach fugues for breakfast with the metronome clicking, Chopin etudes for dinner, and recordings of Wagner and Schumann and Dvořák in between.

Once as a teen the music from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* was playing and my mother asked me if I felt okay, like sad or anything.

I said, "No, but why are you asking?"

And she answered, "When I was carrying you, and you heard this music you would kick repeatedly until the music stopped." I can't tell you what that was to mean to me much later in life, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

My dad didn't have a piano of his own and he often took care of me during the day while my mom worked odd jobs doing house-cleaning and nurse's aide stuff. Because Dad needed to practice eight hours a day, we scouted for piano stores on the streets of New York and later Chicago. The stores loved his playing because it would attract customers, and I would entertain myself by writing my name on the tops of dusty dark pianos lined up in the back waiting to be sold. I learned patience there, and when I couldn't take it anymore we had a pact. I would come to him and he would play my three songs, and sometimes when I was about three I would dance to the music. The crowd loved this. I would time my dance steps to the rhythm of his music and we would lock eyes at the end. We were a team, and we knew that we had won.

One day, as my mom told it, she came home from a house-cleaning job that she often took me along to and told my dad this childless couple was in love with me and wanted to adopt me. “She would have the best of everything,” they assured her. “And you’re young. You’ll have more children.” I think she thought about it because she told him about it. She said his answer was: “I guess you better not go back there anymore.”

Dear reader, you might now ask why I am telling you about my past. Because to tell you about the past is to allow you to be in the present and to hopefully allow me to change the future. There was a reason I needed to get to Marion 31. She needed all I had to say. You might say it was essential that I meet her. It was almost a matter of life and death.

And so what happened that day after that wedding when I was 31 was one big giant roller coaster ride, and as time passed I realized the tremendous mistake I’d made. It’s almost as though everything in my life categorized itself into saying: *Guess what? You made a mistake! And it’s just one of the many, many mistakes you’ll be making throughout the rest of your life! It’s just that for now ... you look really good making this mistake!* Isn’t that sad? Most women don’t realize how good they looked young until they get old. I loved the remark Tom Ford recently made about youth and beauty in women. He said a young and beautiful woman is a powerful force. And of course I’m paraphrasing, but it’s true. You walk into a room and people stop talking. They stare; you stop traffic. And then one day the rug gets pulled out from under you—and you didn’t do anything

wrong! You just got older—still beautiful and perhaps even more stunning with an inner beauty and graciousness that transcends a lot. But it can sometimes take decades for women with very low self-esteem to even get a glimpse of self-worth, and by then society's pundits say they are over the hill. And nobody cares. You're still you; it's just that you are no longer young. But I am getting ahead of myself again. Back to the task at hand.

That night, my first wedding night, I came the closest I've ever been to committing suicide. I'd placed a bottle of God knows what kind of pills in the alcove where the phone resided in our beautiful 1930s apartment and called my agents because I was upset that they hadn't attended my wedding. I got their answering service and just hung up and passed out from too much champagne. Oh, the drama!

Years afterward I forgave my agents because what they wanted from me was my potential. And that's fair enough! Except that for me there was an unspoken request that it also include my soul. I remember I used to get so frustrated that the goddamn camera captured every crevice of my face and my silent critique of the stupid material I was auditioning for. Many friends advised me, "Just read the script, get the job, and you can laugh all the way to the bank!"

Potential, potential, potential. I used to shake my head. Every time another person told me I had potential I thought of Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*. "I coulda been a contender!"

The next morning my husband and I were going to Europe for our honeymoon, and so the first day of our married life began with me saying, "God, I feel sick!" Ted's response: "Oh boy. Your breath is bad!"

But get on a plane we did that very afternoon, and off to London we went. It was a grand time. Once on the train in London we traveled to Normandy, France, overnight and our honeymoon suite car was a most unromantic place. My husband spent the night with his nose glued to the window as the London train got onboard a ship at Dunkirk to arrive at Normandy in the morning. It felt like D-Day without all the troops! From there we traveled to Paris, where we were ill-received, and then to Switzerland, where I got a great recipe for Swiss fondue, and finally to Munich, where I couldn't believe the size of the beer steins at the Hofbräuhaus where Hitler used to hang out and Ted was too hungover the next day to tour the camps at Dachau. Thank God I wasn't ready to see that then. Like I said, it was a grand time.

Nothing prepared me for what was to come.

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