

Romance is still alive in older adults

By MARGARET STAPLEY

A 90-year old man who was eagerly embarking on a new career in wood sculpture recently told a TV interviewer, "When you stop dreaming and scheming, you're on your way out."

Seniors are starting to question the old song, "When I Grow Too Old To Dream" when it comes to affairs of the heart, too. They are not merely living longer these days.

A goodly number are realizing that you're never too old to

dream, that autumn and winter romances can be as sweet, if not sweeter, in some cases, than the loves of spring and summer.

They no longer feel it's expected of them to neatly fold and store away everything connected with youth when they reach the age once considered the cut-off point for the love-bug to bite.

It's the stories of some of them, Bill seems rather unusual to some I want to tell you about, Remember, the key word here is "romance." Read on:

Peggy finds love with Bill

Now we come to another Peggy, 67, and a widow for six years. What might make the instant attraction she felt toward Bill seem rather unusual to some is that, she knew he was blind before she met him.

"It was May, 1986 and Bill was

a new tenant in the seniors' residence where I lived," explains Peggy. "We had heard that a blind man was moving in and some other women and I knew it was him when we saw his sister helping him locate his mailbox by touch."

This Peggy, too, says she hadn't given much consideration before this to a new man in her life, but as soon as she saw Bill she knew she must have been waiting for him.

She thinks she surprised herself as much as the other women when she said right there and then, "Hands off, girls. He's mine."

Bill, 63 and divorced for 14 years at that time, hadn't thought at all about a new romance. He had been blind for 10 years and figured it was just kindness to a handicapped person on Peggy's part when she introduced herself with open arms, so to speak.

When I said that, of course, there was no way for him to know how beautiful she was, he answered laughingly, "We'll, I go by voices and the funny thing was that my initial impression of Peggy was that she sounded sort of what we used to call 'Butch' because of her deep and husky way of speaking. There certainly weren't any sparks flying for me at first."

Not so Peggy. Apart from being able to see how handsome Bill was, she knew in her heart that they were meant for each other and was determined to put her stamp of ownership on him.

"When, even after he started to show more than just a friendly interest in me, he continued to sometimes get me mixed up with another tenant and call me Jean, I clipped a clothes peg to his belt," laughs Peggy. "I told him what it was, emphasizing the 'peg' to remind him what my name was, and if he called me Jean one more time, we were through."

She didn't really mean it (he wasn't going to get away that easily), but she wanted to give him the incentive to chase and win her.

It worked. Bill never called her anything but Peggy again and it wasn't long before he said, "I think I'm going to marry you some day." To which Peggy replied, "Yes you are. How soon?"

It was very soon. By September of that year they were engaged, but there were still some pre-marital hurdles to be cleared.

One of them was meeting each other's family, a somewhat different undertaking than when we were young and took our "intendeds" home to have them accepted by our parents. Peggy and Bill now had to seek the blessing of their own children. "Bill was a bundle of nerves

over this," says Peggy. "Though we'd both agreed that nothing, not even our kids' disapproval, was going to stop us from marrying, he wasn't completely convinced about me."

So it was with a great deal of trepidation that Bill arrived at Peggy's apartment to meet the first of her daughters. After the introductions had been made, he felt the need to sit down and reached for a chair (by this time he thought he knew the layout of her livingroom fairly well). He misjudged and landed on his own seat on the floor.

Peggy burst out laughing, much to the horror of her daughter who couldn't believe her mother could be so insensitive toward a handicapped person.

But as Bill says, "What her daughter didn't know was that one of the things that I loved about Peggy was that she didn't treat me any differently than if I had my sight. I started to laugh, too, even before I found my feet, and that broke the ice."

It was clear sailing from then on as far as their children were concerned, but they still had to deal with the objections to their marriage by friends and acquaintances. Peggy, most of all.

She was stunned by the number of people who, on learning of her engagement to Bill, asked, "But why are you marrying a blind man?"

"I'm not marrying a blind man, I'm marrying the man I love," she told them. This was usually met by blank stares or variations on, "You'll be sorry. At your age especially. He can't do anything for you and you'll spend the rest of your life looking after him."

That response brings us back to the all too popular misconception that older women marry only for security, while older men, particularly those disabled in some way, marry to have someone to keep house for them.

Bill gives the lie to latter. According to Peggy, he is very independent, insisting on doing his share of the housework, including the laundry. Peggy says she has come to depend on Bill just as much as he does on her, if not more. She wouldn't dream of going anywhere without him.

"I hope I'm not too jealous when he gets his new seeing-eye dog," she sighs. "He'll be off to the store without me when we're out of something and what I particularly love are our walks, either holding hands for with my arm snuggled in his."

Peggy and Bill are one of the happiest married couples I know. One of the similarities between those two and the other Peggy and her Earl is that, while they are still relatively young seniors, none of them were "looking around" with an eye to finding a new life's partner. It just happened.

Peggy and Earl find each other

Peggy, sixty-four, lost her husband to a long terminal illness just a few months before meeting Earl. "When Earl first came to the apartment building on Elm Road, I opened the front door and welcomed him to his new home. He didn't make a startling impression on me at that time, I was just being friendly," says Peggy.

She was resigned to living alone for the rest of her life, even though her husband had made her promise not to go into a long period of mourning. Or to hesitate if she met someone she felt drawn to.

"I wasn't too hopeful of that happening," says Peggy, "but fate stepped in and deemed otherwise. A day or two after Earl moved in, he had to go out

and asked if I would take his key to let in the carpet layers and a desk he had ordered. Afterwards, we sat over coffee for two hours talking about every subject we could think of, feeling relaxed and comfortable in each other's company. Neither of us was looking for a mate — or so we thought."

Earl takes up the story. "At sixty-nine, after forty-one years in a less than tenable marriage, the realization hit me that most of the upper half of the hourglass was empty of sand. Separation was the only way out if I hoped to have any life at all."

But he as also resigned to that same life being one of "celibacy and table for one, please" until the fateful day he met Peggy.

"On one of my trips from truck to apartment, a lady with twinkly eyes and a saucy Scottish tongue greeted me with a warm welcome. I remember thinking to myself that I sure did like this lady, but nothing more. Somehow the boxes seemed lighter and the world brighter."

After discreet inquiries revealed the lady to be a widow and therefore unattached, Earl asked Peggy out for dinner or a show (just for company, of course) and she said yes.

The rest, as they say, is history. "Our relationship blossomed into romance," an almost unbelieving Earl told me. "We are so happy. Not as kids in the flush of first love, but as an older couple who have survived rock-strewn rapids and finally come gratefully to calm waters."

Peggy confirms this. "What we feel for each other may not be the fiery passion of youth, but the steady glow of a well-lit fire. I'm so fortunate to have had the love of two good men in my life." Reaching for Earl's hand, she adds, "I know we'll continue to be happy, despite some catty remarks."

Earl nods. "That's right. There are some, especially older people, who would like to see it fail, but we both know it was meant to be and nobody can prove otherwise."

Yes, Peggy and Earl have had to deal with a lot of criticism from those who still look on a December love affair as nothing short of scandalous. More so in their case because, although they can't be married until Earl is legally free, they've dared to start living together.

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