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Grumpy Old Women

Judith Holder

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GRUMPY OLD WOMEN

Judith Holder has a distinguished career in television, having produced some of the funniest people in the business, including Clive James, Billy Connolly, Dame Edna Everage, Victoria Wood and Lenny Henry. She also ran the *After They Were Famous* strand on ITV for four years and originated all the big reunions, including the award-winning reunion of the seven children from *The Sound of Music*. Judith was responsible for the bright idea of putting celebrities in a pickle – sending Joanna Lumley to a desert island, for example, where she coped alarmingly well. More recently, she investigated the diet industry in *Victoria Wood's Big Fat Documentary*. She has performed her own comedy pieces on *Woman's Hour* and *Home Truths*, and is featured in BBC2's *Grumpy Old Women*, which she wrote and produced for Liberty Bell Productions where she is currently Head of Features. She lives a life in big knickers in Northumberland, where big knickers are all the rage.

GRUMPY OLD WOMEN

JUDITH HOLDER

BBC
BOOKS

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Dedicated to women of a certain age everywhere, who are so often misunderstood, and to my own two trainee Grumpy Old Women, Siena and Ellen Parker.

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Foreword

WHEN I WAS ASKED to be part of the *Grumpy Old Women* TV series I wondered just how much grump I had in me, but once the camera started rolling I realized I couldn't stop – just about everything and anything niggles the hell out of me. But surely this wasn't meant to happen to us – we were the first generation to be liberated, indulge in a spot of free love, put flowers in our hair. And now look at us – mad as hell . . . but rather cute and irresistible with it.

The average grumpy day begins when I leave the house for work. I get to the end of my drive and I can't turn on to the road, because the geniuses who only live to blight my local traffic system have placed a bus stop directly opposite the existing stop, on the narrowest part of a busy-to-busting main road, on a curve, 400 metres from the worst traffic lights in North London. Not a good start.

Twenty minutes later I'm at last on my way to rehearsals in Waterloo. I will be in reverse for much of the journey as I'm faced down by one hideous, fuel-guzzling, air-polluting, four-wheel-drive people carrier after another. Needless to say, the roads are peppered with temporary lights, gaping holes, orange cones by the thousand and not a single working workman anywhere to be seen.

My next grumpy moment occurs in the lavatory, where I become engaged in hand-to-hand combat with an industrial-sized toilet-roll applicator the size of Pavarotti. There I am, bent over, my hand curved back on itself like a Balinese

temple dancer, flailing away at a perforated piece of paper I can neither see nor reach.

During the day my grumpiness increases. I can take any amount of Anglo Saxon expletives, but what I can't tolerate is someone telling me that I'll be 'sat' over there, as if I were a plant pot, or pronouncing the letter 'h' as 'haitch'. Aaargh! Or waiters waving 14-inch pepper pots in front of my nose - as if I want 14 inches of anything. Or baseball caps worn back to front by the large and the aged - they're not dumb enough worn forwards? Which only leaves television and this foreword isn't long enough to house my despair.

There is a bright spot on my frowning horizon: the truly marvellous, the truly cathartic, TV series *Grumpy Old Women*, which is made for women like you and me - a little bit older, and maybe a little bit fatter, but inside still the eighteen-year-old we were when we forced ourselves into a pair of hot pants. So here's to *Grumpy Old Women* - God bless her and all who sail in her . . .

Yours, incredibly grumpily,
Maureen Lipman

Introduction

DISCLAIMER

For the purposes of my Auntie Dorothy I would like to stress that any references of a sexual or crude nature in this book are as a result of extensive research on my part into other people's lives and experience, and not my own.

GRUMPY OLD WOMEN are a little bit older than they were, they're a little bit fed up – quite a lot fed up, actually – and this book is dedicated to this hitherto silent majority of women of a certain age who find the whole business of being a grown-up infinitely harder than they had imagined. Age itself is irrelevant. They may look a teeny bit middle-aged on the outside, but on the inside they are the young, fragile and entirely irresistible women they were in their 20s. They may not wear thongs or sex-kitten bikinis any more, but it doesn't mean that deep down they aren't every bit as gorgeous and irresistible as they were all those years ago. This book is for those wonderful women – they might be 30, or 40 or 50 or much older – who share a special serenity and wisdom that means that they are nearly always right. They nearly always know best . . . and I am proud to be their self-appointed form captain.

This book is also for the people who are lucky enough to live with women like us. It can be their guide map to understanding the true depths and beauty of our (sometimes not apparent to the naked eye) charm, intuition, affection and sheer bloody wonderfulness.

So how does it feel to be a Grumpy Old Woman? Well, for a start, it seems like only yesterday that you were raving it up to 10cc and the Bay City Rollers, only five minutes since you were scrutinising the problem page in *Jackie* magazine to try to glean more information about the docking procedure of sexual intercourse, and no time at all since you were doing your hair in flick-backs like Charlie's Angels. But then look what happened – you got older and a little bit fatter, and suddenly you got grumpy. Boy, you got grumpy. And now just about everything gets you in a bad mood. Some days you are so mad that you walk past a pigeon and feel like giving it a good boot up the backside for no reason at all; if you see someone up a ladder, the idea of kicking it away from under them appeals for no reason other than that it would make you feel momentarily better; and if you were on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*, you'd agree in rehearsal to wave when they introduced you, but then sit on your hands when it came to doing it for real. Just out of spite.

You thought that you were supposed to mellow as you got older, to become mature, serene and all-knowing, but the truth is that these days you are boiling mad, and if you could *find* the rolling pin, you'd brandish it in traffic, and clip people round the ear with it when they annoyed you. Which is all the time. Everyone. And everything. It's just as well they don't sell guns at Argos.

Just in case you're not sure whether you, or the woman you are buying this book for, is a Grumpy Old Woman – here are some of the things to look out for:

SIGNS OF BEING A GRUMPY OLD WOMAN

- Your bra size is practically a telephone number, and you now shop in the underwear department from hell.
- If you sat on a beanbag, you might need to call the emergency services to get you out.

- You say to people, 'That shows my age,' and they no longer contradict you.
- You are the litter police.
- Shop assistants cower in fear as you storm up to their counter to return shoddy goods.



- Market researchers in the street with stupid clipboards ignore you - you've been ignoring *them* for years, anyway.
- Little bits of your face start to sag and give you that really grumpy look often seen on the sort of women who

push their way in at jumble sales and get all the bargains.

- You have to put your reading glasses on the end of your nose, and glare over them like the headmistress in *Please Sir*.
- You remember *Please Sir*.
- You are plucking your facial hair on an hourly basis. It's all right for men – they're *meant* to have a moustache.
- You complain a lot.
- You like a nice fountain pen.
- You become a morning person.
- You start to enjoy pottering.
- You develop the Edward Heath double chin.
- You start collecting used margarine tubs and used plastic bags.
- Young men are afraid to be left alone with you lest you pounce.
- You like a slip-on shoe – saves all that bending.
- You find Terry Wogan less annoying.
- You order your first pleated skirt from a catalogue.
- You are secretly rather pleased that your daughter has an orthodontic brace that looks like part of the waste disposal unit because – let's be honest – it makes you look a bit better.
- If you wore a thong, you might look like a Sumo wrestler.
- You buy attention-seeking bags and shoes on the basis that they do them in your size, and send out what you believe are fun and funky image messages.
- Easy-care fabrics start to appeal.
- Your pubes start to go a bit straggly, a bit grey, a bit sparse.
- In the (very) unlikely event that you went pony trekking, everyone else would be given normal ponies and then they'd bring out a carthorse big enough to tow a juggernaut for you. That's code for 'you now have a fat arse'.

THINGS THAT BUG GRUMPY OLD WOMEN

These things are just the tip of the iceberg you understand – a full list obviously wouldn't fit into a book, dur . . .

- Grumpy Old Men. Women have every reason to be grumpy. Men do not. Deciding whether to comb over, whether to tuck the shirt under or over the beer belly, or experiencing some frustration with superglue is about as bad as it gets for men. (Mind you, superglue *is* annoying.)
- People who say 'bear with me two seconds' when you know they are going to be 15 minutes.
- Stupid Americanisms that have polluted our language, such as people asking the waiter if they can 'get' the soup to start . . . What do they mean? They want to go into the kitchen and get it themselves?
- Things that claim to be 'home-made' or 'farm fresh' when you know they are the entire opposite, as in they have come from the freezer in the cash and carry.
- Stupid words at the end of a name that are supposed to convince us that something is hugely better than it was. Our Jobcentre has just been renamed Jobcentreplus – the only difference being that there are now laminated floors, a lot of yellow and green paint, and fewer staff to help you.
- Coffee-vending machines that have run out of cups but still take your money while pouring all your coffee down the plughole.
- Needless and pointless signs that are supposed to be helpful, such as 'Warning – deep water' situated right next to the sea, or 'Beware – tripping hazard' on a perfectly visible step, or 'May contain nuts' on a whole nut bar of chocolate, but which are really only there to protect someone from litigation.

- Sellotape. Especially the behaviour of Sellotape during the Christmas period.
- Child-proof aspirin bottle tops that you need a child to help you to open.
- Stupid pyramids of apples that people put on counters at pretentious beauty parlours – not because they think you might like an apple, but just because they think it looks chic and expensive. I always help myself to the bottom one . . .
- Pointless stickers on the backs of cars. I saw one today that said 'Twins on Board'. Good job you told me, otherwise I'd have slammed into the back of you.
- Jane Asher and her stupid marvellous cakes.

If you're still not sure whether you, or the woman you are buying this book for, embody the requisite degree of grumpiness, listen out for some of the following.

GRUMPY OLD WOMEN TEND TO SAY . . .

- Is it me or is it hot in here?
- I shan't be coming here again.
- I can remember those flared trousers first time around.
- *How* much?
- What a rip off.
- It's a disgrace.
- What's for lunch?
- I want to talk to the manager.
- You're too young to be the manager.
- Bonking (when describing others – obviously).
- I'm 'popping' out. (Only middle-aged people 'pop'. It's very Valerie Singleton).
- I could murder a nice cup of tea.
- Let's have a sit down.
- Cheerio.
- Cheers.

- Struth.
- Hasn't it been cool for the time of year?
- The hit parade.
- Spending a penny.
- Naughty but nice.
- We can't go on meeting like this.
- Whoops.
- Right you are.

GRUMPY OLD WOMEN SPEND LITTLE TIME . . .

- Sicking up in the street.
- Asking the doctor for the morning-after pill - but it might be a laugh to show up at the surgery one busy morning and ask.
- Three-in-a-bed sessions.
- Snogging in public.
- Lighting farts (in public).
- Putting bollards on the tops of statues - although, interestingly, Grumpy Old Women would be the last people the police would suspect - neat.
- Wearing T-shirts that say 'Fancy a shag' or 'All I want is a blow job'.



But perhaps we shouldn't be putting such wicked thoughts into respectable middle-aged women's heads.

CHAPTER ONE

From hot pants to hot flushes

YOU STILL FEEL YOUNG. You still feel like you did when you were about 18. OK, so you know a lot more than you did: you know that the chocolate-vending machines in Tube stations never work; you know that two days after chucking something out, you find a use for it and wish you'd kept it. Those sorts of pearls of wisdom are among the benefits of age. However, trying to crack the business of being a grown-up is infinitely trickier.

Sometimes, even at my age, I still feel like I'm preparing for life proper to begin, still trying to get things balanced and orderly so that I can begin living Life with a capital L - being a domestic goddess and a successful woman about town rolled into one. Probably with a house by the sea and matching bed linen, where the sun shines every day. But then John Lennon got it right when he said, 'Life is what happens when you're planning other things'. Real life is about putting the washing away, managing the nine-to-five routine, and waking up in the middle of the night wondering whether you left the oven on.

I still feel like I did when my life was just beginning, like I did when I started at university, like I did when I was driving my first car, but I look in the mirror and see someone who is

very evidently grown up and way past that time. Grown right up and over the other side of the hill. I can't believe I'm now the age my parents were at their silver wedding anniversary, when I thought they looked about 95. That night I saw them kiss - the only time I saw them kiss - and thought to myself it was disgustingly inappropriate at *their age*. Now, two minutes later, here I am the same age myself.

So let's start with some of the physical attributes that go with the territory. Some of the things that we see in the mirror or in the holiday photos that cheese us off and get us very grumpy indeed.

MIDDLE-AGE SPREAD

My entire body is turning into my mother's, or Judy Finnegan's. I now look so old that if I was stupid enough to go into a nightclub, people would assume I was an undercover policewoman. WPC Menopausal. If I got on to the dance floor and strutted my stuff, people would run for cover, averting their eyes in horror, like in an Alfred Hitchcock film. Just like my mother, every bit of my body is either sagging, or bulging, or both. I'm sprouting some of those bobbly warty things on my nose and chin that look just like the ones they sell in fancy-dress shops for Halloween parties. Is there any bit of my body that doesn't need a spot of structural repair? Even my feet are getting all idiosyncratic: my toes are growing in odd directions, my toenails are so hard and horny that I've had to buy a pair of those nail scissors that could cut whole chickens in half, and open-toed sandals are a no-go area. Perhaps that's why God invented pop socks - perfect camouflage as well as natural contraceptives (being guaranteed passion-killers).

And my boobs . . . Oh - my - God! It's like someone is inflating them with the thing we take camping to blow up

the sleeping-bags. Slowly but surely they expand every month.



The only bras that fit now have pulleys, ropes and hooks, and are built by civil engineers. Bras for Grumpy Old Women today, suspension for the Forth Bridge tomorrow. My bras now look like the kind of thing Hattie Jacques would have hung up in *Carry on Camping* . . . If I did try to burn my bra these days, I might have to call the fire brigade.

And then there's knickers - sorry, I mean pants. High leg, low leg, pull in, pull out . . . what's a middle-aged girl to do for the best? Corrective underwear is what, as long as you are not going on a hot date. Some chance! And thongs, whose idea were they? Not a middle-aged woman's, that's for sure. Middle-aged women and thongs - not a good look. Think Sumo wrestler . . . So don't say you weren't warned.

Although I see they've now brought out the 'control thong', with an industrial-strength elasticated panel down the front, which pulls you in so dramatically that it makes you walk at a 45-degree angle and pushes the rest of you out at the back, giving you a neat rear-view shelf for keeping things on – which is handy.

I tried thongs for a bit, and I thought they were marvellous because you've got no line, no visible panty line, which is kind of cheesy. And so I went into thongs in a big way. And I can't wear them now because I wore them so much I gave myself galloping anal itch.

Dillie Keane

No, I don't think I would've worn thongs even when I was young and trying very hard. No, that's ridiculous. You might just as well go without knickers at all.

Annette Crosbie

So popular are thongs (for reasons that totally escape me) that scientists are apparently working on the maternity thong. Just pause and think of that for a moment – picture the ads on billboards – I suspect they'll cause accidents, or cardiac arrests.

All those lovely sex-kitten cute underwear shops with teeny-weeny bras and fancy strappy knickers and sexy-bitch ranges are no longer for me. I imagine if I went into one of those shops they'd say they didn't have anything in my size without even looking. Just as well I'm not thinking of having an affair, isn't it? It would have to be seriously dark. Not that I'd ever really have the nerve. I could never pluck up the courage to buy the condoms. Even though they are tantalisingly near the till at Asda. It would be just my luck for Brown Owl to take over on the checkout as I sneaked them under the cauli.