# A Rage to Age

Turning 40 can be a wicked wrinkle in time. But having HIV has turned River Huston's midlife crisis into a piece of cake.

February 1, 2001 By River Huston

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I just turned 40. Such a fat, round number, the big 4-0, middle age. Gasp! Well, if this is the middle of my life, then simple math tells me I should live to be 80. But -- knock, knock -- HIV is here to remind me that I only have today. It has been reminding me of that for the past decade.

In our youth-obsessed culture, aging is a sin, especially for a woman. The over-40 are no longer sexy, attractive or valued. We also get dumber as we get older -- or so you would think if you took a look at some of the stuff that's peddled for preserving a youthful appearance. I was at a makeup counter the other day when I saw a product called Magic. "What does it do?" I asked the saleslady. "Is it a face cream? A foundation?" She smiled her powdery, made-up smile and sniffed, "No. You just put it on, and it creates an illusion of youth." I asked how, and she actually said it was magic. I thought she was kidding, but she wasn't -- and shouldn't, at $69 bucks a pop. I walked away empty-handed.

When I look in the mirror, I don't see 40 staring back at me. I'm not sure how I appear to people at all. Someone once looked at my headshot and exclaimed, "Vegetarian cookbook author!" I don't know about that, but I know I definitely don't worry about getting wrinkles and gray hair. I do wonder how long I'll get to be here. For at 40, I've finally come to really like living. It wasn't always so. At 6, I remember looking in the medicine cabinet for something to take me away; at 9, I drank turpentine. The rest of my life was a self-destruct mission that I pursued with drugs, alcohol and life-threatening situations. When I stopped all that, I was left only with the desire to hang myself. I really can't explain it -- I just always felt unhappy on this planet.

HIV was the proverbial big kick in the butt. Actually it has kicked my butt more than once, including three close encounters with death. It's ironic: When I was finally closing in on my wish for extinction, I suddenly got a clear taste of the sweetness of life and how I had missed its delicious nectar, opting instead for turpentine. With this realization, I began to notice things in my life that weren't straight out of a nightmare. The older I get, the more of these I discover.

For me, aging only brings experience, confidence and the faith that everything will work out and there is no reason to get your panties in a twist. This past year has been the happiest of my life. I've forgiven all the people I felt had done me wrong, and accepted most of my circumstances -- including a weekly IV that leaves me feeling like a 95-year-old in need of a walker. I make a decent

living, and I know where my clitoris is and how to use it. These are things I was clueless about when I was 20 or, for that matter, 30 (I knew about my clitoris but was too inhibited to show anyone else how to use it).

Luckily for the new me who wants to live, I come from hearty stock. My grandmother lived to be 96. She was built close to the ground with a bowl haircut she snipped herself, and she snored at least as loudly as I do. I promised my mother that I would never tell Granny that I have AIDS -- it would “upset her too much.” But she suspected it anyway. Why else would I, in my 30s, feel so comfortable talking about death and dying, while all the other relatives were busily assuring Granny she’d be just fine?

If AIDS has taught me one thing, it’s to look death in the face. No one gets out alive, and it’s good to be able to talk about it without all the denial and drama and tears. I called my granny every Sunday, and every Sunday she would say to me (very loudly because she was going deaf), “Dahlink, when am I going to die? I can’t take this anymore. Everything hurts!” I would say (also very loudly), “Soon, Granny. Soon,” and she would laugh. When she died, I grieved, but I also rejoiced for her freedom from her arthritis, weak heart and inconsistent bowel movements.

This is not how I feel when people with HIV die young. I recognize their freedom from the horrors of this grotesque disease, but it doesn’t feel joyful. After watching so many people not even come close to 40, I feel grateful for every day I get to take a walk, a breath. And every day I mourn and remember my fallen comrades in the AIDS wars. This sharpens my gratitude.

I noticed this again six months ago, when I had a suspected brain hemorrhage. Because I survived, this episode put a permanent smile on my face. So wrinkles, stretch marks, saggy muscles, varicose veins, memory loss, failing eyesight, oldster woes -- bring them on. When people complain about aging, I shrug. I just feel lucky I get to do it.

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