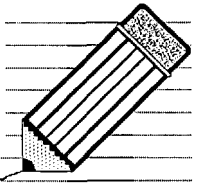


# Letter to a Friend

By Christa Karina Karras



Dear Erika:

Thanks for your warm letter and the hand-painted birthday card. Betty, too, turned fifty-seven this month and showed me some of those godawful commercial cards she had received. One of them featured a leggy woman in seductive pose with a paperbag over her head. Caption: "The Legs are the last to go!"

That card couldn't have come at a worst time for her. Maybe her friend (?) didn't know that Joe had moved in with his gorgeous thirty-year-old secretary? He and Betty are divorcing after thirty-two years of marriage. And Joe has wasted no time letting Betty know that "Linda" has cured him of his impotence. Proof positive, he gloated, according to Betty, that his "problem" had all been Betty's fault — what with her loose flesh, wrinkles, and stretch marks!

Pete, who's been involved in a men's sensitivity group, is comforting his mother to the best of his ability. He told her that "Dad's problem has always been in his crotch — where he keeps his ego!" Astute observation. But the damage is done. Betty is down on herself; being in menopause doesn't help. She went on Premarin and Ativan.

I am happy to hear that your hot flushes are letting up. Mine are too. After five years of struggling with this on our own, we ought to be rewarded with that post-menopausal zest Margaret Mead promised us. When we get it, let's do something special with it!

Of all the possible transitions in our lives, menopause has elicited the worst press, I think, and has presented us with the least useful model for psychological integration. Just who benefits from this depressing, distorted picture of menopause as a "deficiency disease"? The pharmaceutical companies, gynaecologists, psychiatrists? Certainly not you and I.

In the world according to patriarchy,

our reproductive lives have always been public property, including the contents of our wombs. Now the experts are at it again, appropriating the end of our fertility cycle. This public model of menopause has been too craftily constructed for wholesale consumption to be passed off as unintentional. "Diseased" and "deficient" as we now are, we've been set up for professional intervention. Chances are when you are in the midst of a difficult menopause and often feel rotten, you are going to accept this medical/commercial model sooner or later.

My hunch is that those who have a socio-economic, cultural, or psychological interest in the "disease" model will press on with the media hype until the last menopausal woman lines up for hormone replacement therapy (note the word 'therapy'!) or surgery.

Now that I am just about out of menopause with no help from these experts, I find it hard to believe I am aging so rapidly. But my mirror tells me so. And soon I'll have to make daily eye-contact with myself if I want someone to affirm

my existence. Did you know aging women become invisible? Marie, now sixty, said the other day she's *forcing* others into eye-contact! Even strangers. How long before she tires of that? I can't see myself straining like that. Can you?

By the way, Marie and Bob are retired now. Nice pension, nice house, nice everything. That's because they always did things right. He worked; she stayed home. He earned big; she budgeted well. When they were thirty, remember, they were already planning for their old age. And we laughed! All that preoccupation with security, we said. Well, now I think the laugh is on us.

You and I, instead of preparing for our old age, had our consciousness raised in the sixties and expanded in the seventies. From there we went straight into causes. Before that, we were immigrant women from a country in which the f-word stood neither for you-know-what nor for "feminism" but for "fascism." We clearly had other problems, such as language, integration, cultural adaptation. Security for us meant relief from the war zone and



post-war period, forgetting war-trauma and daring to plan for the next few years. Planning for our old age seemed a ridiculous proposition. Old age? It may never come. Too distant to contemplate. We should have listened to Marie when she advised us to "marry well." By "well" she meant "investments."

Perhaps we *should* have entered the mainstream and married well. Here you are struggling until the Old Age Security and Canada Pension become effective. I hope you will be able to keep the house. Jenny is in a position similar to yours. Before *her* husband died, they did just fine. He had a good income; they paid off

the mortgage; he helped their daughters financially. Now all she has is this low-paying job in the female work ghetto. She hardly earns enough to get by. Low salary, low Canada Pension Plan contributions, low Canada Pension! She fears the house may have to go.

It's still a truism that "a woman is always one man away from poverty," isn't it?

According to Marie, Karl and I did everything wrong. First we went against the mainstream more often than not, doing our thing and paying little attention to income. Then we switched traditional roles and made that insane experiment of *him*

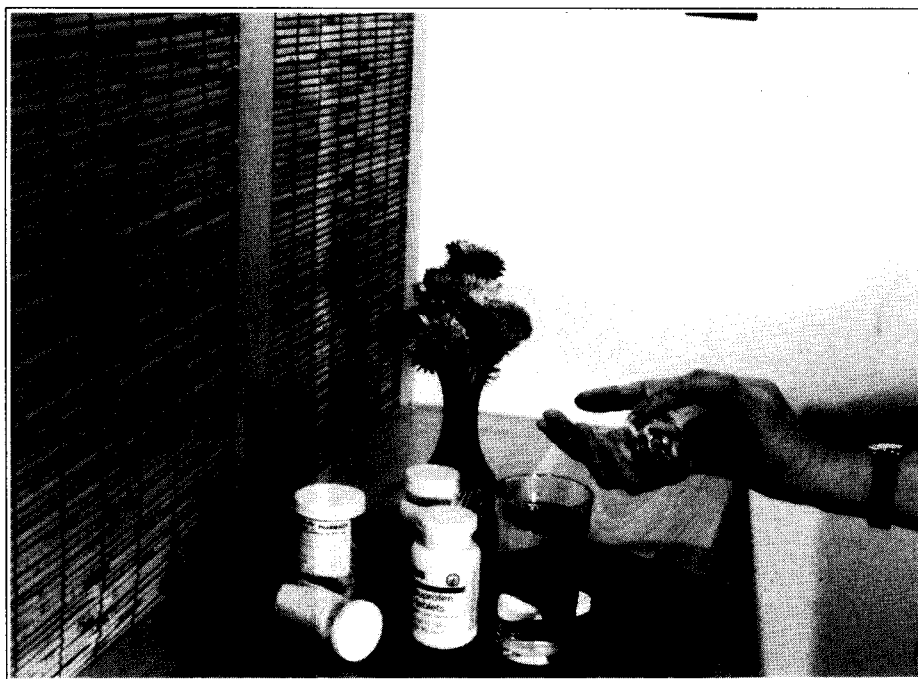
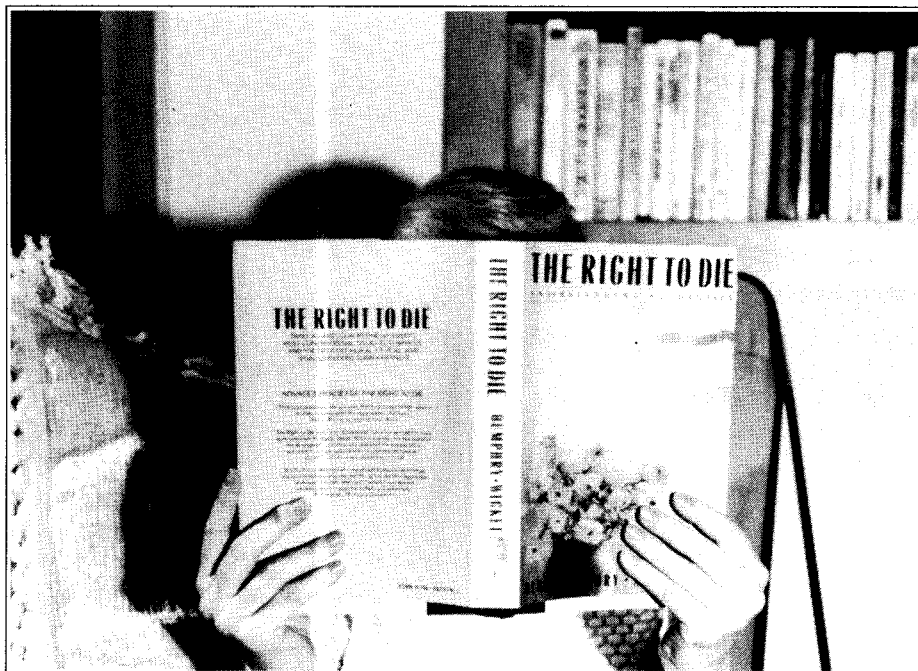
staying home, doing the cooking and all the other domestic chores, and me getting a job for a mere 66% of a man's dollar! Granted, this has put us somewhere near the poverty line, even well before old age.

Why a woman who supported her male partner financially should be so much worse off economically than a man who supports his female spouse puzzles me. Must have something to do with systematic discrimination against women in the workplace. For a while I thought I had heard rumours about pay equity.

Karl and I will be all right only if both of us shall live. It'll take two Old Age Security cheques and my Canada Pension, two-thirds of the maximum (after all, I am a woman!), for us to survive. We don't know about the house though. We've got eight years yet to worry about that.

I ran into Jane the other day. She's a little younger than we are. In her opinion, women getting old stinks. She is not looking forward to old age and hopes she'll get some painless disease that'll do her in before she has to live in poverty. If not, she's got this book from the Hemlock Society. She calls it her "recipe book." Her doctor thinks she is downright morbid and wants to put her on "uppers." Seems to me she is realistic! Anyway, she went to see a psychiatrist on her doctor's urging, and the shrink recommended that she do some volunteer work. She needs to feel useful and worthwhile, he explained. She fired him. Before she did, she told him that her entire life had been volunteer work, looking after a spoiled husband, spoiled children, sick parents, and now her mother-in-law. She is reading that cookbook again. She says it gives her more comfort than anyone in her family ever did.

Last year I met a woman with hope! She is childless, widowed, and lives in my rural neighbourhood. She has also been an older woman for ten years longer than you and I and says she is through with all that catastrophic thinking. She has found feminist solutions to our problems of aging. Erika, I wish you could meet her! The woman is an inspiration. A pragmatic idealist and democratic socialist. She only became radicalized at fifty, after thirty years of a traditional European-style marriage and what she calls "my liberation through death." Now she is interviewing other older women, widowed, single, or divorced, who are interested in house-sharing. She has room in



her house for three other women; privacy won't be a problem. Her plan of saving her own house and home by offering to share it has none of the goofy flavour of *The Golden Girls*, the TV series that trivializes while it glamorizes older women and our lives. I have renamed the show *As The Stomach Turns*. I don't know any such Golden Girls.

My neighbour's selection criteria for house-sharing are a shared commitment to improving the status of aging women ("we must become our *own* cause," she says), a willingness to do more than gardening, and to enter the socio-political process in effective ways. Her personal opinion is that women, collectively, must first rid ourselves of the oxymoronic Progressive Conservative Feds and vote massively for a government that takes older women's issues dead-seriously. Problems of shelter, of sickness and health, caregiving, drugs, disability, and pensions. Problems of poverty, loneliness and abuse. Problems of discrimination, be they injustices based on race, class, or sexual practices. So much to do!

As our female population ages, this woman predicts, our clout to influence the socio-political system increases. Female

Gray Power, as a collective force, has the potential to upset the established Old Boys' Networks dramatically. She envisions a day when older women will no longer be laughingly dismissed as "little old ladies in tennis shoes" or "feisty old broads," but will elicit respect—if only at first through a healthy fear of the consequences, should that day not be forthcoming.

Because women outlive their partners by several years (a friend of mine believes it's that god wants to let us have a few good years!), we will form a formidable, critical mass in society and "feminize" its values. A long-overdue process in a society that has feminized poverty! My energetic neighbour is convinced that a strong show of solidarity by well-off older women on behalf of poor older women, in both word and deed, would strengthen the collective voice of forgotten and neglected aging women and make the call for social justice highly audible, so audible as to no longer be ignored. Such a compassionate sisterhood of aging women could help eradicate the depressing socio-economic conditions so many aging women must endure. Not enough to live on; too much to die on! To sensitize the more fortunate aging women, fortunate enough not to

have to live in "reduced circumstances" (read poverty), this woman activist suggests they start by reading Leah Cohen's book *Small Expectations: Society's Betrayal of Older Women*.

The house-sharing concept this woman proposes may be an idea whose time has come. I know it can't solve all our concerns about aging, but it's good framework in which to begin. The more I think about it, the more I like it. Given my own world view, this model not only seems politically correct and socially progressive for aging women, it's also pragmatic and workable. I would seriously consider it, were I alone. Can women get along? I think so! From past experiences we already know that three or four of us could live together (as my neighbour said to me "if I can live with a *man* for thirty years, I can certainly live with three like-minded women!").

I believe such a social experiment to be beneficial psychologically, in addition to being practical. Perhaps it wouldn't ease Betty's pain entirely, but it would help. Would it help Jenny who may have to let go of her house? Definitely, because this would allow her to keep it through sharing and co-operation. Would it help Jane? I think so, because she might put that book about self-deliverance aside until or unless she were terminally ill. Would it do anything for Marie? No! For me? Yes! For as much as I crave personal space and privacy, I crave companionship and community. Beats looking into a mirror for eye-contact!

Would it help you?

Let me know what you think. Wish you were here for a brain-storming session! Hope you can visit soon.

Affectionately,

Karina

P.S. Karl sends his love.

*Chris Karras, 57, lives in rural Ontario with her husband of thirty-eight years. Originally from Germany, they emigrated to Canada in November 1956. The couple have two daughters and three grandchildren. After having taught yoga for a decade, Chris worked briefly with mentally handicapped adults. For the last thirteen years, she has been employed as a licensed registered insurance broker in an insurance agency. She reads, writes and is a committed letter-writer. She is also a member of Amnesty International.*

