

# **Pears, Grapes, and Dates**

## **A Good Life After Mid-Life**

### Chapter 1

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## JOHN

*There is nothing which for my part I like better... than conversing with aged men; for I regard them as travelers who have gone a journey which I too may have to go, and of whom I ought to inquire whether the way is smooth and easy or rugged and difficult.*

—Socrates in Plato, *The Republic*

John always struck me as one of the sanest human beings I have ever met. He's intelligent, clever (not the same thing), and pleasant to be with. He's gentle, thoughtful, and incisive. And while "sane" is the word that spring to mind most readily, I suppose what I really mean is that seems to me that he's wise—not a word I'm very comfortable using. But John is wise—and old, not ancient, somewhere in his late seventies.

I, on the other hand, may or may not be old yet. And I'm quite certain I'm not wise yet—assuming that I'll ever be wise. I'm a middle-aged baby boomer from right about mid-boom and getting old had been on my mind at the time.

For one thing, I just celebrated another birthday. My comment about being able to feel the heat from the candles on my cake drew the predictable chuckle from the crowd of friends at my party (nearly all of them older than me), but in the back of my mind it bothered me. My birthday came along at a time when I was much too busy at work and immediately after a long

weekend trip to Florida to visit my wife's parents at their retirement village. I mentioned to my father-in-law that I was turning fifty on Ash Wednesday. "Ah," he said, "then I guess you'll be giving up your youth for Lent." The whole month surrounding the birthday I was mildly depressed and so I decided it was time for a trip across the neighborhood to see John.

I first met John on a walk around the neighborhood twelve years ago. I was furious at something my wife, Sara, had said and I stomped out of the house in a rage taking the dog with me. Walking quickly, my head down, mumbling under my breath, and rapidly deciding to file for divorce, I crashed into John as he walked his dog. The collision knocked him down on the path and caused both dogs to bark and growl in anger.

He wasn't hurt badly by the fall—or rather, the landing—but it tore a hole in his khakis. So after we got the dogs to calm down, I walked with him back to his house apologizing profusely. Once we got to his door, seeing the consternation on my face, John asked me what I was worried about. I blurted out that I wasn't worried about anything because I'd decided to get a divorce and all my problems would soon be solved. John began laughing, more, I think, from embarrassment than anything else. "Well," he said, "if that's so then life for you is much less complicated than mine has ever been. Why don't you come in and sit down for a moment. The dogs can rest and we can talk about that if you'd like."

I was so in need of someone to talk with that I jumped at this kind stranger's offer. So we sat down at his kitchen table with glasses of iced tea and muffins he had baked that morning. Two hours later I walked home to apologize to Sara and to begin cleaning up the mess.

Since then I've gotten used to going to see John when life seems overwhelming: at job changes, when my eldest went off to

college, after my dad died. He listens carefully, asks questions, and adds things he's learned.

I hadn't been to see him for several months and I brought along a good bottle of red wine as a sort of friendship offering lest I seem like a foul-weather friend. I secretly wished he'd open it and we could sit down and share it over a long talk.

"Well," John said greeting me, "look at what the cat dragged in. Good to see you, Jeff. Good to see you. Come right in. For me?" he said taking the offered bottle. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

The house smelled of latex paint and John's t-shirt and jeans were splattered with bright yellow spots. "I've been doing a little painting in my kitchen. Don't tell my daughter. She tried to take away my ladder years ago. I've just cleaned up so this is an ideal time for you to stop by. Sit down and tell me how you've been."

"I've been okay," I said.

"Okay? Is that the best you can do?"

I filled him in on the details of the last weeks: work, birthday, and visit to my inlaws.

"What birthday is this for you?"

"Fifty."

"The big five-O upon you already."

"Like a lion on the neck of a zebra," I said dejectedly.

"Oh, dear," he answered, "that's a bit grisly. But why so sad? Fifty is a great decade. My fifties were probably my favorite time of my life. Although my sixties were lovely and my seventies are working out to be extremely pleasant." He paused. "Why are you so upset about getting old?"

"When I was in Florida, I met the Patio Guy."

"The Patio Guy?"

"When we were with Sara's parents, we stayed in an apartment in their retirement village. The patios of four of the apartments

ran along the parking lot and I don't think there was more than four feet of grass separating those patios from the front bumpers of the parked cars. On one of the patios sat the Patio Guy." I sighed.

"He was sitting there when we left in the morning and when we returned in the afternoon." I continued, "He was there at noon one day when I had to run back to our apartment for something. All day long, there he sat on one of those \$3.99 white plastic armchairs they sell at supermarkets. He was about two feet from the edge of the patio and equidistant from the sides. He sat and looked. He wasn't staring blankly out into space; he was just... looking."

"Well, maybe," said John, "he's recovering from a stroke. Stroke victims sometimes do that, you know."

"I guess that could be it, but I don't think so. We said, hello, one day and chatted briefly." I paused. "Who knows? Maybe he had just finished a tough assignment with the FBI, or put the final touches on his latest novel, or defended his dissertation finally fulfilling a life-long goal of earning a Ph.D. in particle physics."

"Oh, I like that last one best," John jumped in. "Or maybe he needed the kind of rest that you've told me that you enjoy on vacation smoking a cigar, sipping a beer, and sitting on a rock watching the tide come in along the Maine coast."

"Maybe."

"Or maybe he was just watching the world go by."

"If that's what he was doing," I said, "he picked the wrong place. Aside from three or four cars pulling into or out of the parking lot over the course of the day, the world doesn't go by his patio. And still he sat with nothing to see, nothing to do, not much to say."

I went on. "I know that the Patio Guy may be the most

emotionally and spiritually healthy person I have ever met and I just don't realize it. Besides, we all need silence and solitude..." I trailed off.

"It's not that particular person that's got you upset," said John. "It's what you see in him. The Patio Guy—not the man himself—has become an image for you. Are you worried that you'll become the Patio Guy?"

"I don't want to get sedentary as I get older and I don't want to live like that ever. My boss..."

"Who's in his seventies and has jet fuel in his veins," added John.

"...who's in his seventies and has jet fuel running through his veins' tells me about the men he sees moving to his upscale community also in Florida. These guys have been top executives for Global 2000 companies, senior partners at law firms, and successful physicians. After long careers in demanding jobs they've finally retired and moved to Florida. The future lies before them like some magnificent green valley full of possibilities. They've worked hard for years. Now they can let down and finally enjoy life. They can't wait to play golf or fish all day, every day."

"That sounds like a fine plan to most busy men I know."

"It always sounded like a good plan to me, but then he tells me the rest of their stories. Most of them play golf or fish every day for a while, but within eighteen months they're watching soap operas every afternoon. One of his neighbors and his wife can sometimes be seen grilling a steak for dinner at four in the afternoon."

"That's the ideal time," added John, "since the soaps are over and they'll finish dinner before the local news came on at five," he added facetiously.

"It gets worse. The two of them sit in lawn chairs near the gas

grill, cocktails in hands watching the steak cook. *Watching the steak cook!* Could that be me someday?"

"It could be."

"But I don't want that to be me someday."

"And you're worried about it."

"Duh," I said in the sarcastic tone I'm used to hearing from my teenagers and then quickly apologized.

"No apology necessary. You're worried about a fruitless old age, about being like that bluegrass song:

*'Old and in the way,' that's what I heard them say*

*They used to heed the words he said, but that was yesterday.*

*Gold will turn to gray, and youth will fade away*

*They'll never care about you 'cause you're old and in the way.*

I used to worry about that too. All the time."

"But you're nothing like the Patio Guy."

"Well," he said, "I hope I'm nothing like the Patio Guy. Though I've had dinner at four in the afternoon on occasion and I've watched more than one steak sizzle on the grill."

There was a long pause.

"But, no," said John breaking the silence. "No, I'm not like that. I'm not like that on purpose. You see, I saw it coming too. I was an executive—you know that—and a pretty good one if I can blow my own horn. And when the time came, Maggie and I had already made a trip down to Florida to look at real estate for our retirement. We went to Arizona too for the same reason. We met wonderful people, saw old friends, and toured some lovely communities filled with beautiful homes.

"Now there's nothing wrong with retiring to Florida or Arizona. And there's nothing wrong with living in a retirement community. I have good friends in retirement communities around the country. But while it was all bright, shiny, and new, I could tell it wasn't for me. I saw Patio Guys too. And while I met

plenty of active, happy, involved people, the Patio Guys scared me. ‘Good heavens,’ I thought, ‘can’t these people think of anything else to talk about other than their latest doctor’s visit and what’s on sale at the supermarket?’ It wasn’t the place for me.”

“Exactly. What did you do?” I asked.

“Well, I continued to be the best executive I knew how to be and Maggie and I renovated and redecorated our house—this house. And I’ve lived here ever since even though after the kids left and Maggie died, there was no reason to have a place this big. When the time came to retire, I retired and stayed here to pursue life until it ends—and to be fruitful—to be involved in a positive way in the lives of others.”

“You and Maggie renovated the place?” I asked.

“Yep.”

I looked intently at him.

“You’re thinking,” he smiled, “that I renovated this house and in the process renovated my soul, aren’t you?”

The thought had crossed my mind on many occasions especially since John continues his renovations with things like new paint. I hoped it wasn’t true since I can barely hammer a nail and I have no intension of ever learning. The “home improvement projects” my wife is so fond of are torture for me.

“It wasn’t the house.” I was relieved. “No, it was the landscaping.”

I tensed again. This was even worse.

He laughed. “I thought that would get a rise out of you. Not doing landscaping, but thinking about plants—the way they grow and ripen, age and bear fruit. You and I aren’t the only living things on God’s Earth that are aging. Snapdragons, spruce trees, and sweet corn age too.” He laughed again looking a little shy. “You’re not going to believe this, but I learned to get old by

looking at plants.”

“Plants?” I didn’t believe him.

“Yep, plants. Not all plants. You see, I came across an old book my uncle had given me years ago. It was about horticulture, kind of an encyclopedia of plants and once I began reading it, I couldn’t get enough. That sounds strange, but I learned long ago to give into those urges to know more about some odd subject. When that kind of urge comes over you and you want to study stars or birds or ancient history or plants, give in and do it because there’s something in it. It’s a sign of some sort, direction from above if you will. So, anyway, I read the whole thing and three plants stuck out as worth remembering. All these years later, I can’t tell you much of what I read in that book, but I can tell you something about pears and grapes and dates. I’ve thought about them quite a bit.”

I was beginning to suspect that my questions about getting older had come a bit too late. He had already slipped a cog. “Pears and grapes and dates?”

“That’s right and, no, it’s not dementia. You can calm down about getting older if you remember pears, grapes, and dates. You may even enjoy the process and you’ll be fruitful.”

“And what is it about pears, grapes, and dates that I should remember?”

“I’m glad you asked,” he said. “I’m glad you asked. Let me open this lovely bottle of Pinot Noir and fetch two glasses. Then I’ll begin.”

**Read the rest. *Pears, Grapes, and Dates: A Good Life After Mid-Life* is available from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).**