

Will you still employ me – when I'm 68?

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For The Straits Times

My mother was ageist.

She believed that the older she grew, the grander she became. Because of Mama, I live in a parallel universe. Typical of this world is my encounter with a stranger. Her hair was blonde with a hint of green. She had on hazel-coloured contact lenses, and wore a black T-shirt over black pants. She looked good, and I told her so. She beamed the customary challenge in reply:

“Do you know how old I am?”

“Ahhh, you cannot be older than me.”

“I am 60, you know.”

“I am 67, six seven!” Sweet victory.

The Internet is a window to another world. I typed “mother-daughter relationships”, and got “Keep Narcissistic Grandparents Away From Your Kids”, “Stop Toxic Parents And Grandparents: Bullies Be Gone”.

Such concepts do not exist in our Asian vocabulary, I believe; but just to be sure, I checked with an Indian friend, young at only 62. “Yup,” he concurred. He had told his betrothed, newly arrived from Kerala, as he had later told their children: “What grandma asks for, just do it.” The corollary, my friend explained, is that the grandson has only to hint at a yearning for fish curry when the old woman would cook a pot full. I think that behaviour counts as toxic in the other world.

In the chronotope called modernity – a discourse in time (now) and space (West but now also East) – old equates with debased. A magical portal from one world into the other is the statutory retirement age. One day you are constantly assailed with decision-making, the day after that birthday you can sit at your desk and never get asked a question.

According to Bloomberg, getting the sack feels worse than being divorced and more devastating than losing a spouse to death. It has something to do with losing meaning in life. I am already steeling myself against next June when I will be 68 and my employment contract comes up for renewal. The corporate human resource explanation is that this is regeneration, a natural rite like when a defeated soldier will fall upon his sword.

Needing to calm my nerves, I went to VivoCity to anaesthetise myself in a movie. Instead I got traumatised: A bank of shining new dispensing machines stood where human ticket-sellers had been. Redundant, replaceable, useless. It happens.

Recently, AlphaGo, the Google weiqi-playing software, beat 19-year-old Ke Jie, the world's top Go player. Ke said that in future, he would only play humans as it was pointless to challenge a “god”. Games such as weiqi and chess

used to celebrate the genius of the human mind.

With an elephant in the room, politicians should never tell people: “Don't think of an elephant.” This is advice from retired Berkeley professor of cognitive linguistics and neuroscience, George Lakoff. Tell people not to think of the elephant, Lakoff says, and right away they think of the elephant. People are biconceptual, explains Lakoff. People, like Latinos (and Asians, I might guess) who have a “strict father” worldview, trust, and do not like to feel betrayed.

Politicians should frame their messages the “nurturant parent” way. Convince people that they are not out, but are the “in-group”, and that the community takes care of its own. Lakoff concedes that message framing is not easy and demands “serious training”, which makes me wonder if this is about doublespeak, or has there to be follow through?

I am an actor, a vocation as with sports, that involves the body as much as the mind. I knew, without rancour, that at 47, I could not play Juliet in a standard Romeo And Juliet. “What job would value me more the older I got?” I thought to myself. The answer: Professor – which meant I had to read for an MA and then a PhD. Coincidentally, at that time, my husband's employer posted him to London, to whence I went as wife, mother and post-grad student. At almost 50, I won the United Kingdom Overseas Research Scholarship to read for my PhD. Hitherto I had believed grants were only for those 35 and younger. But miracles do happen.

There are age-blind, race-blind, gender-blind, programme-blind, university-blind awards. I returned to Singapore as Dr Chan, aged 52, and applied for two jobs at two universities. Both jobs did not require a PhD. One university wrote that I did not need to come for an interview, but Singapore Management University took me as senior manager. The next year, I became assistant director, the next, associate director. In my fourth year at SMU, a faculty position came up in the School of Social Sciences and I made the cross over to professor. Last year, aged 66, I went on a Fulbright scholarship to Columbia University, New York. I had only ever been a child, a wife in a home, a mother, a grandmother.

It would be the first time in my life that I would be away from family for more than 10 days. Frightened and already homesick, I kissed my worried husband goodbye at the airport and explained that “I had to grow up”.

I did, and now await the big transition next June with trepidation.

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