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How to Have Flair at Any Age

It only takes one simple fashion statement. A bold new pair of glasses helped me see the light

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Photo by Rex Johnston

My friend Jennifer, who lives in Los Angeles, came to visit me in Minneapolis last month. She's my age and has always had an innate sense of style, even when she was broke. Her style also includes saying exactly what she thinks.

I met her at the airport. She was dressed all in black and sporting flashy red bifocals. When we got to my house, where the light was bright, she said to me, "You know, you need to get new glasses. The ones you're wearing make you look dowdy." I couldn't believe it. She just dropped the "d" word. You don't do that to people after a certain age.

But Jennifer wasn't being mean.

She was only asking me to dare. We all need friends like that, especially as we get older.

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"I'll be right back," I told her, heading to my office. From my desk drawer I took a pair of Thom Browne blended trifocals that I had bought a few months earlier at a very hip optics store. They have heavy black frames. There are two bridges that connect the lenses, which are round and oversize. They resemble a pair of antique ski goggles or old typewriter keys.

I loved their bold design from the moment a young optician named Kelly showed them to me. But I kept saying to myself, "I dunno." I'd always worn conservative frames with rectangular lenses. This was a whole new look, one that made a statement, though I wasn't sure what it was. But Kelly did: "You've earned the right at your age to be noticed," she said. "So go for it."

That's just what I did, cost be damned. But when I first wore the glasses publicly, I felt self-conscious, as if everyone was staring at me. If getting noticed was my object — and who doesn't want to be noticed? — then I'd succeeded. But I didn't want to be looked at because I'd made a fashion faux pas. I didn't want to be grouped alongside boomer women in miniskirts or those boomer men running around in muscle tank tops.

My insecurity was infectious. The more I questioned my choice of glasses, the more I noticed other people did, too. "I think they make me look like a mad professor," I said to my friend Chuck.

"Maybe you're right," he replied. "I guess I like the old ones better."

It was then that I put them in the drawer.

Jennifer was sitting on my living room couch when I reappeared in my designer specs. Her face lit up. “Where’d you get those?” she asked. “They’re fabulous! They make you look so cool. Lose the old ones.”

I promised her I would.

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Shortly after Jennifer left town, I attended a lecture with an art director friend who’s in his 70s. Will showed up in his usual black slacks and black button-down shirt. Only this time he was wearing a multicolored, handmade silk scarf from Scandinavia. “It belongs to my wife,” he said to me. “But it’s so beautiful that I told her I had to borrow it.”

In the lobby at intermission, everyone was complimenting him on his fashion choice. He wouldn’t have gotten such praise if he hadn’t worn the scarf with assurance. If he had asked for other people’s approval, like I did with my new glasses, he’d probably have gotten mixed reviews.

The other day I was talking to my friend Barbara, who’s a fashion photographer in New York. “As we get older, we have fewer tools to work with when it comes to looking good,” she commented. Barbara’s right. My boomer body isn’t made for the low-riding, slim-cut jeans they sell at the Gap and Abercrombie & Fitch. My gray hair and faded skin tones clash with brightly colored shirts and sweaters.

But even if I can’t be trendy anymore, I can still have flair.

The good news is it only takes one simple thing to accomplish that goal. It can be a great haircut, a fun wristwatch, a sexy pair of shoes, a flashy bracelet or a flowing scarf. For some — though not me — it can be a tattoo. I used to scoff at guys my age who decided to wear an earring, as if they’re pirates. But no more. My neighbor’s daughter, who’s my age, has added hot pink streaks to her white-gray hair. I say go for it.

For me, though, that one simple thing is a new pair of glasses.

I have been wearing them for a few weeks now. It’s taken me some time to get used to my new look: Change, even when it’s for the better, is never easy. But now I don’t think about them anymore. I just put them on in the morning and go about the day. Every so often someone I run into will say, “I love your glasses.”

“Thank you,” I reply. “So do I.”

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