When a man of 25 is told that aging is inexorable, inevitable, universal, he will nod somewhat impatiently at being told something so obvious. In fact, he has little idea of the meaning of the words. It has nothing to do with him. Why should it? He has had no tangible evidence yet that his body, as the poet Rilke said, enfolds old age and death as the fruit enfolds a stone.

The earliest deposits of fat in the aorta, the trunk artery carrying blood away from the heart, occur in the eighth year of life, but who can peer into his own aorta at this first sign of approaching debility? The young man has seen old people but he secretly believes himself to be the exception on whom the curse will never fall. “Never will the skin of my neck hang loose. My grip will never weaken. I will stand tall and walk with long strides as long as I live.” The young girl scarcely pays attention to her clothes; she scorns makeup. Her confidence in her body is boundless; smooth skin and a flat stomach will compensate, she knows, for any lapses in fashion or grooming. She stays up all night, as careless of her energy as of her looks, believing both will last forever.

In our early 20s, the lung capacity, the rapidity of motor responses and physical endurance are at their peak. This is the athlete’s finest hour. Cindy Nicholas of Toronto was 19 when she first swam the English Channel in both directions. The tennis star Bjorn Borg was 23 when he triumphed . . . at Wimbledon for the fourth time.

It is not only athletic prowess that is at its height between 20 and 30. James Boswell, writing in his journal in 1763 after he had finally won the favors of the actress Louisa, has left us this happy description of the sexual prowess of a 23-year-old: “I was in full flow of health and my bounding blood beat quick in high alarms. Five times was I fairly lost in a supreme rapture. Louisa was madly fond of me; she declared I was a prodigy, and asked me if this was extraordinary in human nature. I said twice as much might be, but this was not, although in my own mind I was somewhat proud of my performance.”
In our early 30s we are dumbfounded to discover the first grey hair at the temples. We pull out the strange filament and look at it closely, trying to grasp its meaning. It means simply that the pigment has disappeared from the hair shaft, never to return. It means also—but this thought we push away—that in 20 years or so we’ll relinquish our identity as a blonde or a redhead. By 57, one out of four people is completely grey. Of all the changes wrought by time this is the most harmless, except to our vanity.

In this decade one also begins to notice the loss of upper register hearing, that is, the responsiveness to high frequency tones, but not all the changes are for the worse, not yet. Women don’t reach their sexual prime until about 38, because their sexual response is learned rather than innate. The hand grip of both sexes increases in strength until 35, and intellectual powers are never stronger than at that age. There is a sense in the 30s of hitting your stride, of coming into your own. When Sigmund Freud was 38 an older colleague, Josef Breuer, wrote: “Freud’s intellect is soaring at its highest. I gaze after him as a hen at a hawk.”

Gail Sheehy in her book *Passages* calls the interval between 35 and 45 the Deadline Decade. It is the time we begin to sense danger. The body continually flashes us signals that time is running out. We must perform our quaint deeds, keep our promises, get on with our allotted tasks.

Signal: The woman attempts to become pregnant at 40 and finds she cannot. Though she menstruates each month, menstruation being merely the shedding of the inner lining of the womb, she may not be ovulating regularly.

Signal: Both men and women discover that, although they have not changed their eating habits over the years, they are much heavier than formerly. The man is paunchy around the waist; the woman no longer has those slim thighs and slender arms. A 120-pound woman needs 2,000 calories daily to maintain her weight when she is 25, 1,700 to maintain the same weight at 45, and only 1,500 calories at 65. A 170-pound man needs 3,100 calories daily at 25, 300 fewer a day at 45 and 450 calories fewer still at 65. This decreasing calorie need signals that the body consumes its fuel ever more slowly; the cellular fires are damped and our sense of energy diminishes.

In his mid-40s the man notices he can no longer run up the stairs three at a time. He is more easily winded and his joints are not as flexible as they once were. The strength of his hands has declined somewhat. The man feels humiliated: “I will not let this happen to me. I will turn back the tide and master my body.” He starts going to the gym, playing squash, lifting weights. He takes up jogging. Though he may
find it neither easy nor pleasant, terror drives him past pain. A regular exercise program can retard some of the symptoms of aging by improving the circulation and increasing the lung capacity, thereby raising our stamina and energy level, but no amount of exercise will make a 48-year-old 26 again. Take John Keeley of Mystic, Connecticut. . . . When he was 26, he won the Boston marathon with a time of 2:20. . . . At 48, [he was] as fiercely competitive as ever, yet it took him almost 30 minutes longer to run the same marathon.

In the middle of the fourth decade, the man whose eyesight has always been good will pick up a book and notice that he is holding it farther from his face than usual. The condition is presbyopia, a loss of the flexibility of the lens which makes adjustment from distant to near vision increasingly difficult. It’s harder now to zoom in for a closeup. It also takes longer for the eyes to recover from glare; between 16 and 90, recovery time from exposure to glare is doubled every 13 years.

In our 50s, we notice that food is less and less tasty; our taste buds are starting to lose their acuity. The aged Queen Victoria was wont to complain that strawberries were not as sweet as when she was a girl.

Little is known about the causes of aging. We do not know if we are born with a biochemical messenger programmed to keep the cells and tissues alive, a messenger that eventually gets lost, or if there is a “death hormone,” absent from birth but later secreted by the thymus or by the mysterious pineal gland, or if, perhaps, aging results from a fatal flaw in the body’s immunity system. The belief that the body is a machine whose parts wear out is erroneous, for the machine does not have the body’s capacity for self-repair.

“A man is as old as his arteries,” observed Sir William Osler. From the 50s on, there’s a progressive hardening and narrowing of the arteries due to the gradual lifelong accumulation of calcium and fats along the arterial walls. Arteriosclerosis eventually affects the majority of the population in the affluent countries of the West. Lucky the man or woman who, through a combination of good genes and good nutrition, can escape it, for it is the most evil change of all. As the flow of blood carrying oxygen and nutrients to the muscles, the brain, the kidneys and other organs diminishes, these organs begin to starve. Although all aging organs lose weight, there is less shrinkage of organs such as the liver and kidneys, the cells of which regenerate, than there is shrinkage of the brain and the muscles, the cells of which, once lost, are lost forever.
For the woman it is now an ordeal to be asked her age. There is a fine tracery of lines around her eyes, a furrow in her brow even when she smiles. The bloom is off her cheeks. Around the age of 50 she will buy her last box of sanitary pads. The body’s production of estrogen and progesterone which govern menstruation (and also help to protect her from heart attack and the effects of stress) will have ceased almost completely. She may suffer palpitations, suddenly break into a sweat; her moods may shift abruptly. She looks in the mirror and asks, “Am I still a woman?” Eventually she becomes reconciled to her new self and even acknowledges its advantages: no more fears about pregnancy. “In any case,” she laughs, “I still have not bad legs.”

The man, too, will undergo a change. One night in his early 50s he has some trouble achieving a complete erection, and his powers of recovery are not what they once were. Whereas at 20 he was ready to make love again less than half an hour after doing so, it may now take two hours or more; he was not previously aware that his level of testosterone, the male hormone, has been gradually declining since the age of 20. He may develop headaches, be unable to sleep, become anxious about his performance, anticipate failure and so bring on what is called secondary impotence—impotence of psychological rather than physical origin. According to Masters and Johnson, 25 percent of all men are impotent by 65 and 50 percent by 75, yet this cannot be called an inevitable feature of aging. A loving, undemanding partner and a sense of confidence can do wonders. “The susceptibility of the human male to the power of suggestion with regard to his sexual prowess,” observe Masters and Johnson, “is almost unbelievable.”

After the menopause, the woman ages more rapidly. Her bones start to lose calcium, becoming brittle and porous. The walls of the vagina become thinner and drier; sexual intercourse now may be painful unless her partner is slow and gentle. The sweat glands begin to atrophy and the sebaceous glands that lubricate the skin decline; the complexion becomes thinner and drier and wrinkles appear around the mouth. The skin, which in youth varies from about one-fiftieth of an inch on the eyelids to about a third of an inch on the palms and the soles of the feet, loses 50 percent of its thickness between the ages of 20 and 80. The woman no longer buys sleeveless dresses and avoids shorts. The girl who once disdained cosmetics is now a woman whose dressing table is covered with lotions, night creams and makeup.
Perhaps no one has written about the sensation of nearing 60 with more brutal honesty than the French novelist Simone de Beauvoir: “While I was able to look at my face without displeasure, I gave it no thought. I loathe my appearance now: the eyebrows slipping down toward the eyes, the bags underneath, the excessive fullness of the cheeks and the air of sadness around the mouth that wrinkles always bring. . . . Death is no longer a brutal event in the far distance; it haunts my sleep.”

In his early 60s the man’s calves are shrunken, his muscles stringy looking. The legs of the woman, too, are no longer shapely. Both start to lose their sense of smell and both lose most of the hair in the pubic area and the underarms. Hair, however, may make its appearance in new places, such as the woman’s chin. Liver spots appear on the hands, the arms, the face; they are made of coagulated melanin, the coloring matter of the skin. The acid secretions of the stomach decrease, making digestion slow and more difficult.

Halfway through the 60s comes compulsory retirement for most men and working women, forcing upon the superannuated worker the realization that society now views him as useless and unproductive. The man who formerly gave orders to a staff of 20 now finds himself underfoot as his wife attempts to clean the house or get the shopping done. The woman fares a little better since there is a continuity in her pattern of performing a myriad of essential household tasks. Now they must both set new goals or see themselves wither mentally. The unsinkable American journalist I.F. Stone, when he retired in 1971 from editing *I.F. Stone’s Weekly*, began to teach himself Greek and is now reading Plato in the original. When Somerset Maugham read that the Roman senator Cato the Elder learned Greek when he was 80, he remarked: “Old age is ready to undertake tasks that youth shirked because they would take too long.”

However active we are, the fact of old age can no longer be evaded from about 65 onward. Not everyone is as strong minded about this as de Beauvoir. When she made public in her memoirs her horror at her own deterioration, her readers were scandalized. She received hundreds of letters telling her that there is no such thing as old age, that some are just younger than others. Repeatedly she heard the hollow reassurance, “You’re as young as you feel.” But she considers this a lie. Our subjective reality, our inner sense of self, is not the only reality. There is also an objective reality, how we are seen by society. We receive our revelation of old age from others. The woman whose figure is still trim may sense that a man is
following her in the street; drawing abreast, the man catches sight of her face—and hurries on. The man of 68 may be told by a younger woman to whom he is attracted: “You remind me of my father.”

Madame de Sévigné, the 17th-century French writer, struggled to rid herself of the illusion of perpetual youth. At 63 she wrote: “I have been dragged to this inevitable point where old age must be undergone: I see it there before me; I have reached it; and I should at least like so to arrange matters that I do not move on, that I do not travel further along this path of the infirmities, pains, losses of memory and the disfigurement. But I hear a voice saying: ‘You must go along, whatever you may say; or indeed if you will not then you must die, which is an extremity from which nature recoils.’”

Now the man and the woman have their 70th birthday party. It is a sad affair because so many of their friends are missing, felled by strokes, heart attacks or cancers. Now the hands of the clock begin to race. The skeleton continues to degenerate from loss of calcium. The spine becomes compressed and there is a slight stoop nothing can prevent. Inches are lost from one’s height. The joints may become thickened and creaking; in the morning the woman can’t seem to get moving until she’s had a hot bath. She has osteoarthritis. This, like the other age-related diseases, arteriosclerosis and diabetes, can and should be treated, but it can never be cured. The nails, particularly the toenails, become thick and lifeless because the circulation in the lower limbs is now poor. The man has difficulty learning new things because of the progressive loss of neurons from the brain. The woman goes to the store and forgets what she has come to buy. The two old people are often constipated because the involuntary muscles are weaker now. To make it worse, their children are always saying, “Sit down, rest, take it easy.” Their digestive tract would be toned up if they went for a long walk or even a swim, although they feel a little foolish in bathing suits.

In his late 70s, the man develops glaucoma, pressure in the eyeball caused by the failure of aqueous humour to drain away; this can now be treated with a steroid related to cortisone. The lenses in the eyes of the woman may thicken and become fibrous, blurring her vision. She has cataracts, but artificial lenses can now be implanted using cryosurgery. There is no reason to lose one’s sight just as there’s no reason to lose one’s teeth; regular, lifelong dental care can prevent tooth loss. What can’t be prevented is the yellowing of teeth, brought about by the shrinking of the living chamber within the tooth which supplies the outer enamel with moisture.
Between 75 and 85 the body loses most of its subcutaneous fat. On her 80th birthday the woman’s granddaughter embraces her and marvels: “How thin and frail and shrunken she is! Could this narrow, bony chest be the same warm, firm bosom to which she clapped me as a child?” Her children urge her to eat but she has no enjoyment of food now. Her mouth secretes little saliva, so she has difficulty tasting and swallowing. The loss of fat and shrinking muscles in the 80s diminish the body’s capacity for homeostasis, that is, righting any physiological imbalance. The old man, if he is cold, can barely shiver (shivering serves to restore body heat). If he lives long enough, the man will have an enlarged prostate which causes the urinary stream to slow to a trickle. The man and the woman probably both wear hearing aids now; without a hearing aid, they hear vowels clearly but not consonants; if someone says “fat,” they think they’ve heard the word “that.”

At 80, the speed of nerve impulses is 10 percent less than it was at 25, the kidney filtration rate is down by 30 percent, the pumping efficiency of the heart is only 60 percent of what it was, and the maximum breathing capacity, 40 percent.

The old couple is fortunate in still being able to express physically the love they’ve built up over a lifetime. The old man may be capable of an erection once or twice a week (Charlie Chaplin fathered the last of his children when he was 81), but he rarely has the urge to climax. When he does, he sometimes has the sensation of seepage rather than a triumphant explosion. Old people who say they are relieved that they are now free of the torments of sexual desire are usually the ones who found sex a troublesome function all their lives; those who found joy and renewal in the act will cling to their libido. Many older writers and artists have expressed the conviction that continued sexuality is linked to continued creativity: “There was a time when I was cruelly tormented, indeed obsessed by desire,” wrote the novelist André Gide at the age of 73, “and I prayed, ‘Oh let the moment come when my subjugated flesh will allow me to give myself entirely to. . . .’ But to what? To art? To pure thought? To God? How ignorant I was! How mad! It was the same as believing that the flame would burn brighter in a lamp with no oil left. Even today it is my carnal self that feeds the flame, and now I pray that I may retain carnal desire until I die.”

Aging, says an American gerontologist, “is not a simple slope which everyone slides down at the same speed; it is a flight of irregular stairs down which some journey more quickly than others.” Now we arrive at the bottom of the stairs. The old man and the old woman whose progress...
we have been tracing will die either of a cancer (usually of the lungs, bowel or intestines) or of a stroke, a heart attack or in consequence of a fall. The man slips in the bathroom and breaks his thigh bone. But worse than the fracture is the enforced bed rest in the hospital which will probably bring on bed sores, infections, further weakening of the muscles and finally, what Osler called “an old man’s best friend”: pneumonia. At 25 we have so much vitality that if a little is sapped by illness, there is still plenty left over. At 85 a little is all we have.

And then the light goes out.

The sheet is pulled over the face.

In the last book of Marcel Proust’s remarkable work Remembrance of Things Past, the narrator, returning after a long absence from Paris, attends a party of his friends throughout which he has the impression of being at a masked ball: “I did not understand why I could not immediately recognize the master of the house, and the guests, who seemed to have made themselves up, in a way that completely changed their appearance. The Prince had rigged himself up with a white beard and what looked like leaden soles which made his feet drag heavily. A name was mentioned to me and I was dumbfounded at the thought that it applied to the blonde waltzing girl I had once known and to the stout, white haired lady now walking just in front of me. We did not see our own appearance, but each like a facing mirror, saw the other’s.” The narrator is overcome by a simple but powerful truth: the old are not a different species. “It is out of young men who last long enough,” wrote Proust, “that life makes its old men.”

The wrinkled old man who lies with the sheet over his face was once the young man who vowed, “My grip will never weaken. I will walk with long strides and stand tall as long as I live.” The young man who believed himself to be the exception.

NOTES AND DEFINITIONS

Judy Stoffman, former book review editor of The Toronto Star, was born in Budapest, Hungary, and arrived in Vancouver as a refugee in 1957. She has degrees in English from the University of British Columbia and from Sussex University in England. She has also lived and studied in Aix-en-Provence, France. Stoffman’s articles and editorials have appeared in Canadian Living, The Globe and Mail, and Weekend magazine, where “The Way of All Flesh” was originally published.
inexorable: relentless, unstoppable. (para. 1)
debility: weakness. (para. 2)
prowess: courage, skill. (para. 4)
prodigy: person capable of extraordinary achievement. (para. 4)
relinquish: give up. (para. 5)
acuity: sharpness. (para. 12)
palpitations: irregular heartbeats. (para. 15)
susceptibility: sensitiveness. (para. 16)
atrophy: wither. (para. 17)
shirked: neglected. (para. 20)
aqueous humour: fluid in the interior chamber of the eyeball. (para. 24)
cryosurgery: surgical technique involving freezing of the tissues. (para. 24)
libido: sexual desire. (para. 27)
subjugated: conquered, subdued. (para. 27)
gerontologist: expert on aging. (para. 28)

STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUE

Stoffman structures this essay around the decades of life for the man and the woman (standing in for all men and all women), describing their aging process. This is a process essay: it provides information about how something happens. The author uses numerous direct quotations from a multitude of sources to illustrate aging from different points of view, as counterpoint to her man and woman.

Aging is treated both physically and psychologically. The physical effects of aging are described, but they are also paired with the psychological: how older women feel about their appearance; how older men feel about their sexual performance.

Paragraphs 29 and 30 are single sentences. Stoffman uses this technique to reinforce the content of the sentences. The last sentence is a fragment, and ties back to the beginning of the essay.
TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. The title of this essay is a biblical allusion (“I am going the way of all the earth. . . .” 1 Kings 2:2). Why do you think Stoffman chose this title?
2. What is “the worm” referred to in the subtitle?
3. Summarize the changes, both internal and external, that occur during one’s 50s (paragraphs 12 through 17).
4. On his 80th birthday, Morley Callaghan, the celebrated Canadian novelist, declared that “everyone wants to live to be 80, but no one wants to be 80.” Do you think Stoffman would agree or disagree with Callaghan?
5. Write a directional process essay explaining how to enjoy the experience of aging.
6. Write an informational process on how to keep yourself as young (and/or as young-looking) as possible as you age.
7. As a result of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in Canada, many vigorous 65-year-olds are challenging the principle of compulsory retirement. Do you agree or disagree that workers should be required to retire at 65? Why?