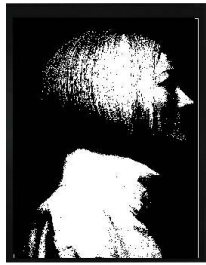


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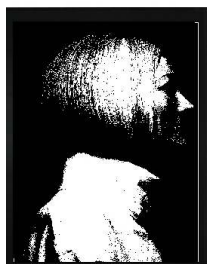
# GREY'S ANATOMY

At 49, columnist *Anne Creamer* decided to hold the hair dye and get back to her natural colour – and to write a book about the journey of self-discovery that followed.

**M**ost of the women I talked to for my book admitted that their number one anxiety about letting their hair go grey was not a fear about how quickly they were closing in on their actuarial death dates; rather, it was that they'd instantly be seen as sexless, grandmotherly old ladies. How we rank ourselves in the looks and sexuality departments tends to get pretty firmly entrenched around puberty, so that's where I began my own introspective look back.

As children, my sister and I were required by our mother to dress exactly alike, until well into adolescence. It was weird. I have a black-and-white photograph of my sister and me when we were about seven and 10 that was shot, strangely, with our backs turned to the camera, both wearing identical Easter outfits – blonde pigtails hanging straight down our backs, navy blue coats, white Madeline-style hats with ribbons between our braids, white gloves, white ankle socks and black shoes. It looks like some spooky Diane Arbus image. It's clear to me now that how my sister and I looked, almost more than how we acted, was essential to our mother's social identity in upper-middle-class-aspiring-to-upper-class Kansas City. As a child I internalised this notion that appearance was

OTTI MAREE



paramount – specifically, a certain labour-intensive Midwestern country-club presentation with perfect hair. My mother continued trying to exercise lifestyle control even after I was married by urging a wardrobe makeover on my husband, whose greys and blacks and navies and khakis she found too “drab”.

My mother was pretty and always pulled together, highly strung, and more than a little Nancy Reaganesque, even at home, even on weekends. I can count on one hand the number of times I ever saw her wash her own hair, and those occasions were as last resorts when we were on vacation and no one she knew would see her. Oddly, even while on vacation, I never noticed any grey roots. Like other mothers of the time who invested a great deal of energy in their hair maintenance, when my mother went “swimming” the two times I remember her in a pool, she would breaststroke, straining her neck to keep her coiffed hair out of the water. She had her hair done at least weekly, always following the styles of the time – the ‘60s bouffant look, transitioning to a more relaxed ‘80s pageboy. To protect those ‘60s hairdos, she’d sleep at night in a brushed-cotton cap very like the booties that hospitals make you wear. As a member of that first generation of newly middle-aged women to whom Clairol was marketing hair colour, my mother swallowed the idea hook, line and sinker – she always had the same Elizabeth Taylor shade through her forties and fifties and sixties. Her mother dyed her hair a blondish brown shade until her death at 94. It never occurred to me at the time to ask my mother and grandmother why they didn’t have grey hair – or even to consciously think about it.

So for me, growing up, dyed hair equalled femininity, and social acceptance hinged on looking the same as the people around us. Kind of a double whammy when it came time, 30 years later, to think about what it would mean to allow myself to reveal my natural grey hair. Abandoning artificial colour was not only flouting New York City social norms but violating the very powerful female archetypes of my upbringing. Who’d have thought – liberal contemporary New York and conservative Kansas City from an earlier era, totally in sync!

While I’ve inherited a good deal of my mother’s tightly wound nature, in contrast to her I’ve been a freewheeling mother as far as appearances go. From the moment my daughters could button their own shirts and tie their shoes, I’ve let them throw together whatever kind of outfit they wanted. Crazy patterns with stripes? Sure, why not? In the service of expediency I even allowed the kids, when they were little, to put on their school clothes at bedtime and sleep in them so that the morning routine would be easier. Who cares about a few wrinkles?

And I was equally relaxed when it came to hair. Kate, of course, applied her outrageous colours as an

adolescent, and as a little kid Lucy’s hair was always charmingly dishevelled. I actually took pride in the fact that both girls didn’t have perfect hair all the time – to me, their undergroomed hair showed the world that they were self-confident, independent spirits with more important things on their minds.

I clearly remember the rite-of-passage moment every mother of girls experiences – the moment I realised that my daughters were viewed as sexual beings. We were walking down a street in SoHo one summer day, both girls in their individually honed bohemian-chic outfits, and I in my jeans, Patagonia jacket and rubber-soled shoes. And I realised that all of the male passersby were checking out my naturally blonde 13- and 15-year-old daughters, not me. My

hair was still dyed brown, so it wasn’t that that put me lower on the horndog browsing hierarchy. It was a subtle, happen-in-a-glance kind of transition, but one that I’ve heard other mothers of girls talk about – after all, the males of our species are hardwired to covet reproductive youth.

For all of us, our relationships with our mothers, mothers-in-law, siblings, daughters, husbands, boyfriends and friends inform all the decisions we make about our look and style. My husband grew up in a family in which his mother never coloured her hair, and both of his sisters have grey hair. His comfort with grey hair was slightly double-edged for me: on the one hand, the person to whom it actually matters whether I am “sexy” is accustomed to the women he loves having grey hair; but it’s the women with whom he has a desexualised love who’ve had the grey hair. To compound the issue slightly, I am now considerably greyer than my husband – and I really don’t want to look like I’m older than he is.

**N**OT LONG AFTER I’D ANNOUNCED TO MY husband that I planned to stop colouring, he came home and delivered what he intended as an upbeat insight into his own feelings about grey hair on women. He’d seen a 35-ish woman on the subway with grey-white streaks in her dark hair and said he found her “very hot” because of the grey. And that reminded him, he told me, of his assistant at a job a dozen years before, a woman who developed white streaks in her dark hair at the age of 30. “And I actually found that extremely hot, too. Although she was sexy in general. Still is.”

Great, honey! Thanks so much for sharing! Could you maybe have told me that before I’d spent a zillion dollars colouring my hair?

But, in fact, it was interesting. And comforting. And kind of stopped me in my tracks. Maybe the truth is that men actually like grey hair (or at least don’t mind it) and it is women who are their own worst enemies when it comes to liking and accepting grey as a suitable colour. Without the image of a



specific person in mind when asked in the abstract, "Do you find a woman with grey hair attractive?", it's easy to say no. A big part of this is the fact that, until we had the very sexy Helen Mirren as a role model during last year's Oscar season, the typical mental image most men or women would have conjured of a woman with grey hair would have been their grandmothers. And sex and grandmothers just don't mix. Of course, if you ask if men with grey hair are sexy, George Clooney and Richard Gere come to mind.

I wondered if men might have a different take if they were presented with living, breathing, attractive female acquaintances who had grey hair, such as my husband's former assistant, rather than being asked in the abstract whether they liked grey hair. I decided

to conduct a very informal poll of different-aged men I knew.

Scott, 33, a slightly out of shape and highly strung manager of recording artists, was at the heartening end of the spectrum. "When I see grey hair on a woman younger than, say, her mid-fifties, it connotes wisdom in some odd way. Or a boldness to look a certain way that is attractive to me. And black hair with a touch of grey can also be really attractive."

A few weeks after talking with Scott I bumped into John, a highly flirtatious 51-year-old TV executive, for the first time in almost a decade. The last time John had seen me I'd had my ebony hair, so I was anxious about his response to my newly grey hair. He definitely noticed, but didn't say anything about it. Which made me very self-conscious. When he asked me what I was up to and I nervously said, "I'm working on a book about going grey," he relieved me

by professing real interest in the subject and suggesting we talk about it over lunch.

Given his general guy-on-the-make vibe, and also being still insecure about my new look, I was surprised to discover that John was into women with grey hair. "I've always loved a woman's grey hair, especially on a woman who's gone completely grey and dressed in a package where you wouldn't expect it. You know, we expect it from the last generation's 'grandmas', but with a modern woman with a casual look, jeans and a tee, a business suit, or an evening gown, it's great. For instance, you look great right now." Phew. Even with grey hair, I still rated his usual flirtation treatment. I was wearing a white cotton shirt, jeans, and an old black patent leather Agnès B raincoat. "To

me," he went on, "it's a real jolt to see a woman under 40, or in this day and age under 50, who's confident enough to wear her hair grey or silver. It must be a drag when one is going grey and it's just a mess of all sorts of colour. But once it's there, go for it. It's hot."

When I asked if he thought other men shared his

point of view, he thought ... not so much. "Until maybe 10 years ago, I figured that I had a pretty common, average outlook on almost everything regarding my views of women. So when I started hearing friends of mine say they wouldn't date a woman who didn't have a certain figure, a certain age, or a certain hair colour, I realised I kind of stood alone."

I wondered if maybe it was only the guys who worked in creative fields such as TV or the music industry who were open-minded enough to find grey-haired women attractive. So I met my old friend Henry, a 51-year-old bachelor investment banker in

Manhattan and serial dater of extremely attractive women (most of them 10 or 20 years younger than he), for a drink. Henry had hardly any experience with grey-haired women, he said, not because he found them unattractive, but because single women in their forties had ex-husbands and children and those were "complications" that put him off.

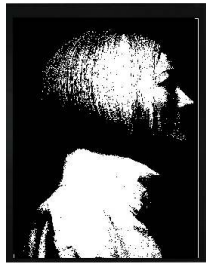
Henry reckoned many women have incorrect ideas about what men find alluring. "They dress for each other more than for men. They think we're responding to things we're not responding to." And he insisted that men aren't as obsessed with sheer youth and prettiness as women assume. "Remember," he said, "every time you see some beautiful woman walking down the street, some guy is tired of f-king her. If men are so superficial, how could a guy ever get tired of f-king a beautiful model? If it were just about beauty, that wouldn't happen. The way men read youth is about attitude and energy and vitality - the way a woman carries herself. Men respond to that kind of physicality."

So far the men I'd talked with had lived in New York, so I called my good friend Jeff, a divorced, 54-year-old TV writer based in Los Angeles, to see if men were as colour-blind over there. Jeff, of course, has no grey-haired colleagues and colours his own hair. He was definitively and defiantly un-PC. "Grey-haired women," he said, "run the risk of looking like they have given up."

Thank God I don't live in LA.

But after talking at length to a half-dozen men, I realised that, excepting showbusiness LA, hair colour just isn't what guys ultimately care about. It's clear to me that we're stuck in a negative, mutually reinforcing trap: because women have completely internalised a false assumption that men respond only to a narrow range of beauty, women limit the range of possibility for men. ●

*This is an edited extract from *Going Gray: What I Learnt About Beauty, Sex, Motherhood, Authenticity And Everything Else That Really Matters* by Anne Kreamer, published on February 1 (Little, Brown, \$35).*



The way men read youth is about attitude  
– the way a woman carries herself.”

## GOING GREY FAMOUSLY



**ANNE KREAMER**  
Author



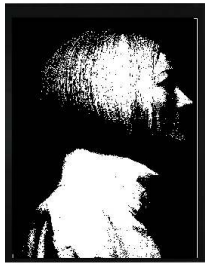
**EMMYLOU HARRIS**  
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