

# SEPTEMBER SONG:

**W**hen Ann Summers\* married Richard, 28 years her senior, she was too much in love to worry about his age. Her mother, however, whose vision was unclouded by rapture, pleaded with Ann to think about her future, her children's future. Picture

BY NIKKI MEREDITH

life a few years down the road, she implored: Richard, worn out by his first family, uninterested in his second; Richard, in his senescence, trying to pitch baseballs to a robust young son (or, worse, unable to pitch balls at all); Richard, dying early and leaving her a young widow. "It didn't work," Ann says. "I was 25 and the whole world and everyone in it seemed indestructible. And, for some reason, 54 didn't sound old to me."

Richard Summers is now 72, and the world doesn't seem quite so indestructible. Six years ago, when the youngest of his and her four children was five years old, Richard suffered a heart attack. Although he is now fine, the trauma seemed to exacerbate their oldest daughter's tumultuous adolescence, and it certainly heightened the whole family's awareness of Richard's mortality. But despite these and other problems unique to older fatherhood, Ann is still unequivocal about the path she selected. "It's all been worth it. There's nothing I would change."

If they needed reassurance about the future, these words might be comforting to the increasing number of women who have chosen to have children with older men. But most of them seem determined to focus on the present and not to think about tomorrow. "The issue is how we live today, that's what's important," says Karen Xavier, 31, a San Francisco social worker. She and her husband, Roger, who is 58, have a four-year-old daughter and are considering having another child. "I don't spend a lot of time calculating how old he'll be when my daughter is at various stages of her life, and even when I do, the numbers don't scare me. My husband is generously involved with me and our daughter, and I can't anticipate a time

when he won't be active."

Many women who have children with older men say they view life stages less rigidly and have a more positive view of aging than others they know. "Interesting people are not divided by age," says Myrna Lewis, an instructor at the Mt. Sinai Medical School in New York. She and her husband, Dr. Robert Butler, 60, have a seven-year-old daughter. "I think my husband is a much more interesting person now than he was when he was young. Of course personality and genes have a lot to do with how one ages. My husband also has twice as much energy as men half his age."

Wives of older men point out that their husbands bring wisdom and maturity to their younger families and often provide one of the more valuable commodities in our fast-track society—time. Though not all older fathers of young children are retired, those who are can ease the pressure of coordinating home and family for their wives who may be knee-deep in careers. "I'm still driven by my ambitions to make it in the world," says the wife of a 65-year-old schoolteacher. "I'm exhausted when I come home. I'm not good at putting kids to bed, but my husband loves that and has the energy at the end of the day to do it."

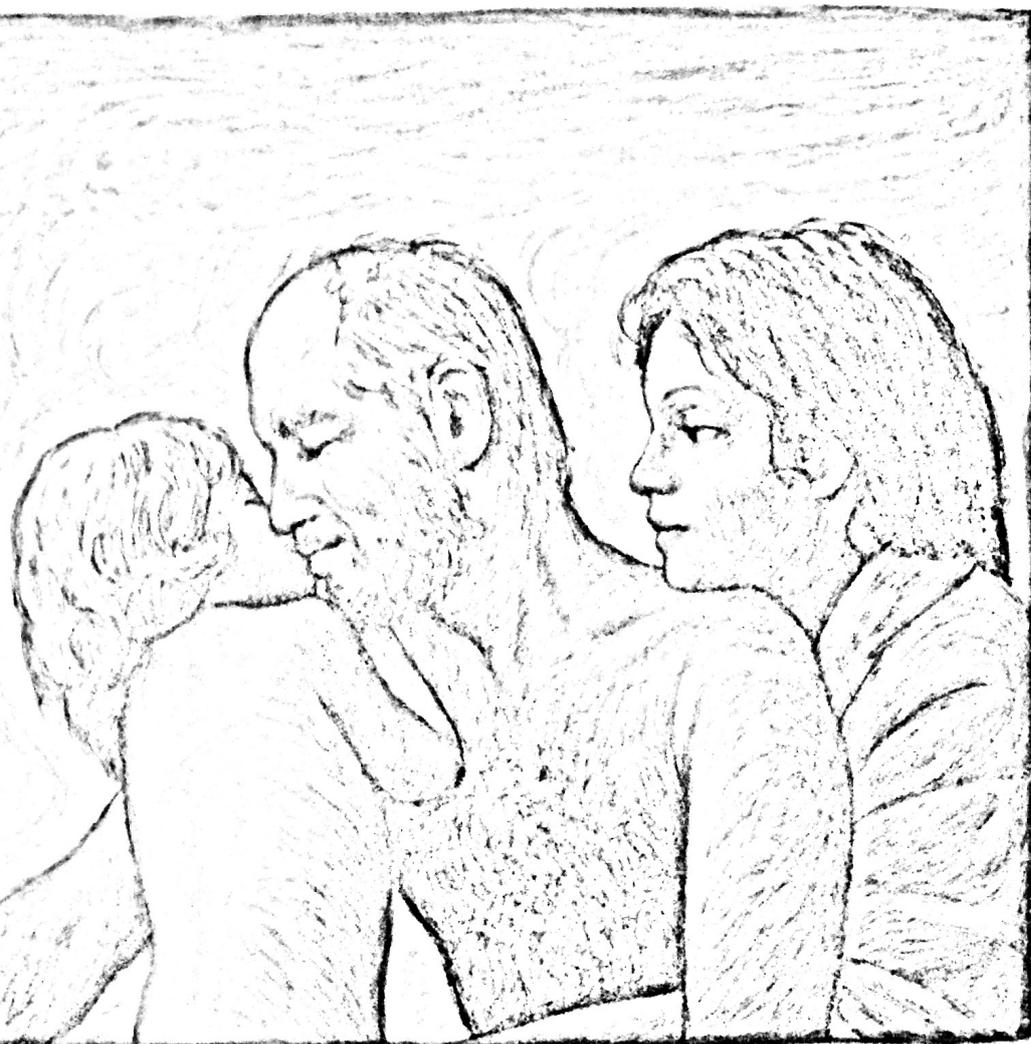
Lucy Rauw Ferguson, a professor at the California School of Professional Psychology in Berkeley, herself the wife of an older father, says extra time can be one of the important benefits for children in older-father families. "In my own work, I repeatedly hear children say they don't feel their parents have enough time for them. Because my husband is retired, this isn't true in our family."

Some mothers, especially those with much older husbands, acknowledge that their husbands are not as physically active with their children as are younger fathers, but treasure what they do provide instead. "I'm not going to claim that my 82-year-old husband is out playing football with the kids," says Nancy Adler, whose four-year-old son and six-year-old daughter are the children of former San Francisco Opera director Kurt Herbert Adler. "But he gives them other things. He reads to them and takes them to the opera and ballet."

The physical and emotional needs of older children, especially boys, are different from those of younger children, however, and some mothers are bothered by the absence of a physically active male role model for their sons. "I think about this when I see my 14-year-old son playing with my two younger brothers," says Ann Summers, whose husband has been a very

\*Ann Summers, Richard Summers, and David Grant are pseudonyms.

# WIVES TALK ABOUT OLDER FATHERS



SCOTT SEAMAN

devoted follower of his children's sports activities but not an active participant. "Some of it is just a question of that rough-and-tumble activity, but I think also that because my brothers were my son's age so much more recently, they can remember what it was like to be a teenager."

David Grant, an Illinois college professor whose father was 69 when he was born, feels that his father's age became much more significant to him in adolescence. "Sometimes we would get very angry with each other and he would threaten me," he says. "It seemed so ridiculous because by that time he was quite old and had shrunk and I was quite tall."

(One of the reasons David is so tall is that he has Marfan's syndrome, a congenital disorder of the connective tissue that is one of the genetic abnormalities that can be caused by sperm from older fathers. Although the incidence of this, along with achondroplasia—the most common form of dwarfism—and other birth defects associated with advanced paternal age, is rare, the numbers are "statistically significant," according to Victor A. McKusik, pro-

fessor of medical genetics at Johns Hopkins University Medical School. Unlike chromosome defects associated with older mothers, like Down's syndrome, these genetic disorders are not always detectable in utero.)

Grant also says that when he looks back, he thinks his father's attitude about life was as much of a problem as his frailty. "When I was at an age where I was exploring my independence, he was in his decline and very cautious about life."

Similar complaints were voiced by individuals interviewed by Monica Morris, a sociologist at the California State University in Los Angeles and the author of a book on children raised by older parents. Although not all of those she interviewed said they had had problems growing up with older fathers, there were similar patterns among those who did. Morris says daughters tended to cite communications problems and sons a lack of participation in sports. Both mentioned embarrassment at having their fathers mistaken for their grandfathers, and premature concern about their parents' mortality.

Writer Lucinda Franks believes there has been a change in attitude about age in recent decades and the shift is enabling older fathers to feel young. "There used to be a stigma against older fathers," she says. "Once, anyone over 45 was considered an old father. Now, 45 is considered young." Franks, 37, is married to Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau, 67. They have a three-year-old son. "May/September relationships are so common now," she says, "that second-time-around fathers are given society's sanction to be young-thinking, young-acting fathers."

Wives of older fathers also believe that they are better equipped to grapple with their children's particular emotional trials than were parents of previous generations.

In fact, the key to making the older-parent experience easier for kids may be the parents' ability to confront the special issues that affect their families. As children grow, their concerns about their older fathers are likely to intensify and both parents need to be attuned to this. Myrna Lewis says her seven-year-old daughter, Alexandra, has already asked questions about her father's longevity. In spite of his abundance of energy, he does have gray hair, and she equates gray hair with old age. "When she asks about it," Lewis says, "I tell her that most people live quite long and we both expect to live long enough for her to grow up and take care of herself."

Ann Summers believes that her own children have learned to deal with their family's differences. "They may sometimes wish their father were younger, but I think as they get older they also appreciate what he has to offer." She says her husband, who is a physician, recently spoke to her youngest daughter's middle school class about drug and alcohol abuse. "She was so proud of him. The fact that he was so much older than the fathers of her classmates didn't concern her."

When situations are uncomfortable for her children, they know how to handle it. "When a new friend comes over to our house and asks our kids if Richard is their grandfather, they say, 'No, that's Dad, the old duffer.' In fact, that's what we all call him. If he really was an old duffer we couldn't do that, but I suppose it's just our way of dealing lightly with an age disparity that doesn't matter very much to us." □

*Nikki Meredith wrote about block play in the premier issue of Parenting.*