



THE CASE AGAINST TELLING YOUR AGE

by Johanna Garfield

A few weeks ago, as I casually leafed through an old magazine, I chanced upon the following paragraph, alongside some color photographs of the actress Dyan Cannon: "Now in her early forties (she refuses to divulge her age), Cannon's screen trademark is an odd but appealing mix of sensuality and wacky spontaneity."

My attention was riveted at once. Not by the colorful description—though I admire anyone who can pull off a combination like that at any age. Nor was it the stunning photographs. Dyan Cannon *always* looks stunning. No, it was the casual aside—"she refuses to divulge her age"—that struck me.

Now there is a girl after my own heart: one who restores my flagging faith in American womanhood, in the discreet white lie—and, more importantly, in myself. Because I have discovered, in an unofficial canvass of my contemporaries, that there is a new and alarming trend among them—a trend not only to reveal their ages if asked, but actually to *volunteer* the information.

I was inspired to investigate this matter by a friend's shameless invitation to her 50th birthday party. No euphemisms here; a blatant "50" on the front of the invitation proclaimed her decades to the world. Convinced that she had either taken temporary leave of her senses or was possibly part of a small but revolutionary cadre, I undertook my inquiry.

When I began, I had no intention of asking my subjects how old they were; I simply wanted to know how they felt about telling people. Yet, unasked and unbidden, even before I could cover up my ears, they brazenly announced their ages to me. Many, apparent-

ly, even seek out opportunities to tell: to total strangers at cocktail parties, to younger colleagues in their offices, to clerks in supermarkets. They unblushingly admit that they saw *Gone With the Wind* the first time around and that they clearly remember Pearl Harbor.

Now, I have to wonder, where have all these free-speaking ladies been while Dyan and I were learning to keep our mouths shut? Unlike these latter-day female George Washingtons, I do *not* like telling my age.

Why? Well, it might have something to do with the day one of my former high-school students inadvertently discovered my years in the course of a routine interview for the school paper. "My God," she shrieked, for all the world as though I'd just left Shangri-La and withered in front of her very eyes, "you're as old as my mother!"

Or maybe it was the time when one of my son's friends told me that his mother, upon learning my age through that traitor, my own offspring, had decided not to invite my husband and me to their barbecue and disco party after all (we married late, and therefore are five or more years older than the parents of his friends). "They might feel out of place," she had told him sympathetically.

Or, on an economic and much more serious note, it very well might have been the time I blithely announced my age to the headmaster of a school where I taught and found myself, along with some other middle-aged women who had played true confessions that day, mysteriously out of a contract at the end of the year. (Ironically, we had all been at a faculty party, tossing each other verbal bouquets about how well we looked "for our

ages," when I was inspired to reveal mine.) We threatened a class-action suit, and it worked—but our jobs no longer seemed so desirable after the headmaster was forced to rehire us.

Now, I believe in truth telling (within reason), but a few experiences like those will make one wary, to say the least. And the point is that the headmaster never asked me my age. I'm sure he'd never have bothered to find it out if I and the others hadn't so cavalierly volunteered the information.

It occurs to me now that being so bold about announcing your years can sometimes be just as much a kind of showing off, a kind of insecurity in reverse ("Hey, get a load of me! Aren't I terrific?"), as trying to hide your age with face-lifts or teenage clothes. If, in fact, you're as young or as old as you feel—or even look—whose business is it, anyway? Many people, rightly or wrongly, do retain some primitive categorical notions about "over 40," "over 50," "over 60." Whether they should or should not do so isn't the point. The point is, they *do*. So why ask for trouble?

Dyan Cannon and I are currently in a minority. You can hardly turn on a TV talk show without some longtime screen star happily spilling her years. Sophia Loren told her age on the Dick Cavett show. Ingrid Bergman, in her book, readily admitted to hers. And speaking of age and celebrities, I hear Shirley Temple Black is another one who announces her age whenever she gets the chance.

But then, of course, I hardly remember her. That is, I've only seen her movies on TV. I mean, I wasn't even born when she was popular. Honest. ■