

HOW TO AGE DISGRACE- FULLY

CLARE POOLEY



PENGUIN BOOKS

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
Penguin Random House, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW
www.penguin.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by Bantam
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Penguin paperback edition published 2025

Copyright © Quilson Ltd 2024

Clare Pooley has asserted her right under the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact,
any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Quote on p. 115 from *The Blues Brothers*,
written by Dan Aykroyd and John Landis.

Extract on p. 142 from *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*,
written by Eric Carle.

Quote on p. 254 from *Toy Story*, written by Joss Whedon,
Andrew Stanton, Joel Cohen and Alec Sokolow.

Lyrics on p. 285 from 'Female Of The Species' by Space,
written by Tommy Scott.

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with
reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologize
for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the
appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

ISBN

9781804992319

Typeset in 10.5/14.8pt Sabon LT Std by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose
of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance
with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House
expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made
from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



Also by Clare Pooley

The Authenticity Project
The People on Platform 5

Praise for *How to Age Disgracefully*
and Clare Pooley

‘Uplifting, heartwarming and joyful . . . so
funny, so moving, and so glad I read it’

Ruth Jones, *Sunday Times* bestselling
author of *Love Untold*

‘A feelgood comedy . . . a breezily entertaining read’
The Times

‘A celebration of life at every stage. I laughed,
cried and cheered at this wonderful novel’
Jennie Godfrey, *Sunday Times* bestselling author
of *The List Of Suspicious Things*

‘Warm, witty perfection’
Good Housekeeping

‘Joyful, life-affirming and full of heart . . .
an absolute riot of a read’
Freya Sampson, bestselling author
of *The Last Chance Library*

‘A warm and uplifting story . . . I loved it’
Sarah Turner, *Sunday Times* bestselling author
of *Stepping Up*

‘A totally wonderful, spirit-lifting read’
Helly Acton, author of *The Shelf*

For my mother, Janet (80),
and my daughter, Matilda (15).
Proof that incredible, inspirational
women come in all ages.

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

DYLAN THOMAS

Prologue

Police Constable Penny Rogers had been right on the bumper of the minibus, siren wailing and lights flashing, for several miles before it finally pulled on to the hard shoulder of the motorway. Were they completely deaf and blind? As she approached the vehicle and saw the mismatched group of people staring down at her through the grimy windows, she realized that perhaps they actually were. At least half the passengers looked to be well over the age of seventy, and a few – bizarrely – under the age of five.

The minibus's hydraulic door opened with a reluctant clunk and a shudder, revealing a red-faced and slightly sweaty middle-aged woman in the driver's seat.

'Why did it take you so long to pull over?' asked Penny as she climbed on board, not bothering to disguise her irritation.

'So sorry, officer. I was looking for a service station for another urgent toilet break. You have *no idea* how many of those we need with this lot.' The woman jerked her head towards her passengers, who were all staring at Penny with an unnerving, silent intensity.

To add to the surreal nature of the scene, three of the children were dressed as police officers. Were they taking the piss?

‘It’s a miracle we get anywhere, to be honest,’ continued the driver. ‘So initially when you started flashing all those lights and the traffic began moving out of our way, I thought maybe you were giving us a helpful escort. But then I realized that you couldn’t have known about the state of Kylie’s nappy, or Ruby’s weak bladder, and you were being rather insistent, so I thought it best to stop.’

‘I don’t think you’re allowed to disclose sensitive and personal medical information like that without permission, Lydia. Or a warrant. Does she have a warrant?’ said a small but fierce-looking lady who Penny presumed must be Ruby.

‘I wasn’t speeding, was I?’ continued the driver.

‘No. In fact, if anything, you were driving dangerously slowly. But we’ve been asked to apprehend this vehicle. I believe someone in this minibus is wanted by the Met for questioning,’ said Penny.

The colour drained from the driver’s face, and she rubbed her hands along her thighs, creating faint sweat marks on her pale-blue jeans, before gripping her knees tightly and gulping.

‘Oh gosh,’ she said. ‘Is he pressing charges? I’d thought he might. I just snapped, you see. After twenty years of dismissive comments, criticisms or – even worse – being completely overlooked and ignored, I’d just had enough. Although I admit it was partly my own fault.’

‘It was not your fault, Lydia,’ chanted several of the passengers in unison, employing the weary tones of an oft-repeated mantra.

HOW TO AGE DISGRACEFULLY

The driver ignored them, pulling a tissue from her sleeve and using it to mop away the beads of moisture which were breaking out on her forehead.

‘That photo montage was the final straw – the one that broke the camel’s back, I guess you could say,’ she said in a croak. ‘Are you going to arrest me? What on earth are the girls going to think? Their own mother, a common criminal . . .’

Penny looked down at the photocopied picture she was holding, then back at the driver, who was now weeping all over the faux-leather steering wheel, playing havoc with her eye make-up. She wondered what this most improbable felon could possibly have done, but she didn’t have the time, or the energy, to find out. She walked a few paces down the aisle, scanning the faces of the bus occupants on either side.

‘Lydia, my dear,’ said an extremely old man halfway down the row of passenger seats to the blubbing bus driver. ‘I don’t think they’re looking for you. It’s me they’re after. You know, it’s almost a relief after all these years. It had become an addiction, I think. But the stakes had to get higher and higher to create the same rush. I should have stuck to bingo, like an ordinary pensioner. I think the only way I was ever going to be able to stop was to get taken down. And now, it seems, that time has come. Bang to rights.’

The man started to get to his feet, holding his hands out in front of him, waiting for Penny to cuff him. In the seat next to him, an angelic-looking blond boy was fast asleep, his badly fitting policeman’s helmet falling down over his face. His arms were wrapped around an ancient,

unrecognizable breed of dog. As if he could sense the drama unfolding around him, the boy opened his eyes and stared at Penny in horror.

‘HIDE EVERYTHING! IT’S A FUCKING RAID!’ he shouted, waking the dog whose bark, it transpired, was much bigger than one would expect. Penny took a few paces back in shock. The whole bus erupted into applause.

‘Shut UP, Maggie Thatcher!’ said an old lady at the back, who obviously had dementia and no idea who the current prime minister was, or that she wasn’t on this minibus.

‘Bravo, Lucky! We knew you could do it!’ said the man whose anticipated arrest had been interrupted. Then, spotting the expression on Penny’s face, he added, ‘Sorry. It’s just those are the first words we’ve ever heard him say, and he’s nearly five. Not an ideal choice of vocabulary, obviously. Better if he’d started with a “hello”, or a “thank you”, but hey-ho. You work with what you’re given.’

‘What did he mean – *hide everything*?’ said Penny, rubbing her forehead where she could feel a tension headache brewing, exacerbated by the tequila slammers she’d drunk at last night’s pub quiz. Next time she’d leave the Met to do their own legwork.

‘Who knows, dear girl. Lucky’s past is a bit of a black box. He’s the most inappropriately named child you can imagine,’ said the old man. ‘Anyhow, he wasn’t referring to me. None of my ill-gotten gains are aboard the vehicle. Well, not many, at least.’

‘Look,’ said Penny, with a sigh. ‘I have no idea what you’ve been up to, and I’m quite honestly not sure that I

HOW TO AGE DISGRACEFULLY

want to know, but it's not you I'm after. Or her,' she said, nodding at the still-weeping bus driver.

'Did Social Services send you?' said a voice from the back of the bus, a teenaged boy with a gorgeous baby – who, given the resemblance, must have been his little sister – on his lap. 'I honestly had no choice, and I swear I'll never, ever do it again.'

'If you're here on behalf of the council, then tell them it's not criminal damage, it's art. They're just a bunch of philistines who can't tell the difference,' said the woman Penny thought was Ruby. She was almost entirely covered by a voluminous mound of multicoloured knitting.

Penny's temples throbbed harder. She could feel the headache building, pressing against her skull.

'Well, I'm not going in for questioning again,' said another old lady with electric-blue hair that made her head look uncannily like a police siren. 'How many times do I have to tell you lot, they all died of natural causes? I'm just extraordinarily unlucky with husbands.'

'Not as unlucky as them,' muttered the old man.

'WILL YOU ALL PLEASE STOP CONFESSING!' Penny shouted. She held up the photocopied picture in her hand and waved it at them all. 'THIS is who I'm looking for.'

Everyone went silent. Almost as one, they turned and stared at the seat immediately behind the driver. The empty seat. Then, they all swivelled to look towards the open bus door, and the motorway beside them.

Penny turned, too. The traffic had slowed to a near crawl, as it always did when drivers spotted a patrol car. Did they

CLARE POOLEY

think she wasn't aware that they never usually drove so cautiously?

A car horn blared, long and angry, and it was obvious why.

Who would have imagined that anyone so old could leap over the central reservation quite so athletically?

Three Months Earlier



Daphne

‘So, how are we going to spend my seventieth birthday?’ said Daphne to Jack. Which was, obviously, ridiculous, since Jack hadn’t been in a position to respond for the past fifteen years.

Daphne not only spoke to Jack regularly, she also talked to her house plants and to the people in the photographs dotted around her apartment, and she often shouted at actors and presenters on the TV. She didn’t, however, talk to the neighbours. Ever. Unless an urgent administrative issue cropped up, like the recent redecoration of the building’s ‘common parts’.

‘Common parts?’ she’d said to Jack in outrage, waving the letter from the building’s management company at the ceiling. ‘What kind of a descriptor is that? Sounds like something you’d find in a second-rate brothel.’

But, while Daphne avoided engaging with any of the other residents – or anyone at all, actually – she did know a great deal about them. She could argue that she enjoyed the

feeling of connection with the community that this gave her, but the reality was that she liked the sensation of power that an imbalance of information imbued. When you know more about someone than they know about you, it puts you in control. And it makes you safe.

Daphne's source of information was a website she'd come across, about a year ago, called OurNeighbours.com. An extraordinary number of local residents appeared to have signed up to the sub-group that covered their end of Hammersmith, and she'd discovered that, if she joined them, she was able to lurk furtively, eavesdropping on everyone's strongly held opinions, without ever having to declare herself.

Every morning, while she ate her toast and marmalade, Daphne would scroll through the latest posts, watching video surveillance footage of Amazon parcels being stolen from people's doorsteps, reading heated debates about traffic-calming systems and residents' parking, or looking at the *awful*, tasteless, often broken items people put up for sale, expecting some fool to pay good money for them.

Yesterday morning there'd been an argument about urban foxes. Were they friends, who should be left food in our gardens, or mange-ridden vermin who spread disease and caused damage? As always, the debate had rapidly descended from reasonable and measured into a slanging match resulting in one resident threatening a call to the police and the RSPCA, and another offering to cover his neighbour's garden with fox poo to see how she liked it. Finally, after several posters being misnamed 'Karen' for some reason, an admin had removed the whole thread from

HOW TO AGE DISGRACEFULLY

the site, and everyone had gone back to talking about rubbish collection.

Daphne loaded up the website, trying not to get toast crumbs on her keyboard. What was waiting for her on her birthday morning?

The talk today was surprisingly, and annoyingly, genial. A cleaner looking for work, a woman seeking advice on retrieving a wedding ring from a kitchen sink U-bend, and someone selling a dining-room table and chairs to a community of people who were highly unlikely to own a dining room. Since Daphne's second-favourite website was Rightmove.co.uk, she knew that every local dining room had long since been converted into a home office, a gym or a 'media centre'. What, she wondered, did one *do* in a media centre? Mediate? Meditate? Who knew?

Daphne kept scrolling through the recent posts, but was finding it impossible to concentrate. *Seventy*, she kept thinking. *Seventy*. Could she really be that old? She certainly didn't feel it, and couldn't yet believe it. How on earth had she got here? Where had all that time gone?

This wasn't where Daphne had expected to be at this stage of her life. She'd rather imagined that she'd spend her older age surrounded by loving friends and family. Well, perhaps not *loving* friends and family, but at least a group of familiar people connected by history, genetics or shared finances and real estate. Yet, here she was, utterly alone, stalking her neighbours and talking to her plants. Except for the yucca, which she'd never entirely trusted.

Her apartment, admittedly, was gorgeous, with views of the majestic, winding Thames, with Hammersmith Bridge

to her right, Putney Bridge to her left, and the imposing, salmon-pink, terracotta-clad Harrods Furniture Depository on the opposite bank. But while it had initially felt like a place of safety – a cocoon – it had gradually become a prison, however luxurious. Since she'd moved in, fifteen years ago, she'd only ventured out once or twice a week to buy groceries, and recently she'd had the feeling that the walls were closing in on her, that eventually she'd be mashed, together with all her furniture, into a tiny cube.

Maybe it was time, whatever the consequences might be, to *re-engage* with the world, to make some friends? Or at least some acquaintances. And what better day to start than her birthday?

The problem was, Daphne didn't actually *like* other people very much, and she had no idea how one went about making friends as an adult, in any case. You couldn't exactly ask someone to play hopscotch with you, or give them one of your Sherbet Lemons. They'd probably report you to the authorities, or badmouth you on OurNeighbours.com.

Daphne needed *a plan*, which shouldn't be a problem since she was, after all, one of the best strategists she knew. She and Jack had spent hours standing in front of elaborately mapped-out flowcharts, uncapped pens in hand, interrogating them from all angles, adding in options, contingencies, backstops, firewalls. Stress testing, then redrawing until the names, places, times, codewords, arrows and symbols would infiltrate her dreams, whirling around and coalescing in alternative patterns, which sometimes provided a breakthrough.

It was probably when she'd loved Jack the most, those

HOW TO AGE DISGRACEFULLY

long evenings when she would toss him an idea and he'd catch it, reshape it slightly and throw it back, the to-and-fro volley continuing until they'd created something spectacular together.

Could she do it without him?

Of course she could! She'd always been the real brains behind the operation. Not that Jack, or anyone else, would have acknowledged that. And, in any case, this was hardly a complex project, was it? Make some friends. A five-year-old could do it!

Daphne pulled a coat and handbag from the pegs by her front door. She would buy herself a whiteboard and some coloured pens. Then she would construct a plan.



Art

Art Andrews always put a call in to his agent on the first Monday of the month, but for the last few months his agent had been strangely unavailable. According to his ferociously protective assistant, he'd been in an important meeting, or visiting a set, or playing golf, and, despite her assurances, he'd not called Art back. Even his NHS GP was not this difficult to get hold of.

Art was beginning to suspect that he was being deliberately avoided. He believed the modern expression was 'ghosted'. He'd been one of Jaspar's first clients, about forty years ago, but he'd spent more of his career 'resting' than acting, so he'd never been anywhere near the top of his agent's priority list. Now it seemed he wasn't on the list at all.

For a while Art had found himself a niche, playing grumpy old men in wheelchairs and heart attack or stroke victims in hospital-based TV dramas. He had also become fairly renowned for his extremely convincing late-stage

HOW TO AGE DISGRACEFULLY

Alzheimer's. How many actors could drool realistically on demand?

If Art were offered a part, it was very rare that he was alive by the end of his episode. On more than one occasion he'd been smothered with a pillow by a close family member. Sometimes, he wasn't even alive at the beginning of an episode. He had spent numerous hours playing a dead body, over which siblings argued about their inheritance while he tried desperately not to sneeze. In his last job, he'd been one of the White Walkers in a *Game of Thrones* spin-off, and just had to shuffle forward as part of an undead pack, until he was incinerated by a dragon in post-production.

But recently, even these less-than-glamorous opportunities appeared to have dried up.

Art picked up the phone. He was not going to let his career die without a fight. He dialled his agent.

'Shelbourne Talent Agency,' trilled Jaspar's assistant.

'Hello,' said Art. 'This is Mr Shelbourne's consultant speaking. I'm calling with the results of his recent medical tests. Is he available?'

'He didn't mention any medical tests,' the assistant said, sounding hesitant, verging on vaguely suspicious. 'Can I take your number and get him to call you back?'

'I'm afraid it's rather urgent and very . . . sensitive,' said Art. 'And I have a patient ready prepped in theatre for an extremely tricky phalloplasty.' Thankfully, Art had appeared in several episodes of *Casualty* and *Holby City* over the years, during which he'd been examined by many arrogant, overbearing medical consultants, so the part was coming naturally. He should add it to his CV.

‘Uh, OK, I’ll put you through, Dr . . .’

‘Clooney,’ said Art, which was the first name that came to mind.

There was a pause on the line, then Jaspar said, ‘Dr Clooney?’

‘Hi, Jaspar. It’s Art,’ he replied.

‘Oh, for goodness’ sake,’ said his agent. ‘Why the subterfuge? And couldn’t you have done better than *Clooney*?’

‘Sorry, dear boy,’ said Art. ‘It’s just you’ve been rather tricky to get hold of recently.’

Jaspar sighed, which wasn’t a promising sign. ‘I’m afraid the work hasn’t been exactly *pouring in* for you recently, old chap. But you are’ – there was a pause, and Art could picture Jaspar checking Art’s somewhat dusty CV – ‘seventy-five years old. You should put your feet up! Learn to play golf! Spend more time with your grandchildren!’

Art had never actually met his grandchildren, but this was hardly the time to revisit that old wound.

‘But I don’t want to retire, Jaspar,’ he said. ‘I’ve got so much life left in me.’ *And almost nothing left in the bank account*, he could have added. ‘And seventy-five isn’t exactly *old*, is it? The president of the United States is older than me. The Queen, God rest her soul, carried on working right up until she died at ninety-six. The Rolling Stones are my age, and they’re still performing to packed-out stadiums.’

‘I bet their insurance premium is massive,’ said Jaspar, which was hardly the point.

‘Do you not have anything I could do?’ said Art, trying not to sound as if he were begging. Which he was.

HOW TO AGE DISGRACEFULLY

‘Hold on,’ said Jaspar, with another long sigh, but at least it was punctuated by the sound of rustling paper.

‘Nope. The only thing I can see that could work is a request for entrants for a TV talent show. It’s called *Me and My Dog*. They wondered if any of our talent have equally talented dogs and might be able to put an act together. I don’t suppose you . . . ?’

‘No,’ said Art. ‘I’m afraid not.’

‘Shame. There’s a hundred thousand pounds’ prize money to play for. And there’s the visibility, obviously. Well, that’s all for the moment, I’m afraid,’ said Jaspar, in what Art recognized as his *I’m wrapping this up now* voice. ‘But I’ll be sure to call you the minute I find anything appropriate.’

This, Art knew, was highly unlikely.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘Thanks, Jaspar. Speak soon.’

Art hung up and went to the cupboard for his emergency bottle of whisky, before remembering that he’d drunk it in a fit of despair during another long dark night of the soul spent stalking Kerry on Facebook. He put on his coat and headed for the off-licence.

As Art turned the corner on to King Street, he spotted a rather sweet-looking old lady, with white hair in a messy bun and the petite physique of a retired ballet dancer, carrying a ridiculously large whiteboard. She kept shifting it from one arm to the other, only narrowly avoiding assaulting passing pedestrians.

Art believed in helping people more disadvantaged than himself. It was the right thing to do, and it made him feel like a *good person*. The problem was, recently he’d been unable to find anyone more disadvantaged than he was. But

here, right in front of him, was a lady who was almost as old as him, and significantly smaller.

‘Can I offer you a hand with that?’ he said, in his most chivalrous tone.

‘Do I look like I’m unable to manage by myself?’ she replied, not at all sweetly.

‘Actually, yes,’ he said.

‘Do you think I’m incapable because I’m old? Or because I’m a woman?’ she said, fixing him with a steely glare.

Art considered giving up and leaving this grumpy old bag to her own devices, but now he’d resolved to earn himself some karmic merit points, he wanted to see the whole thing through.

‘I don’t think you’re incapable at all,’ he said. ‘I just think you’re much smaller than that whiteboard. I’ll help you carry it home, if you like?’

‘And let you know where I live?’ she said, scowling at him as if he were some kind of criminal. Which he wasn’t. At least, not entirely. ‘What kind of fool do you think I am? Anyhow, if I did want help, I wouldn’t ask someone so . . .’ She paused, looking him up and down, before choosing the word ‘unfashionable’.

Unfashionable?!?

‘Look, I’m just trying to help,’ said Art. ‘It’s obviously far too large for you to transport by yourself.’ He picked up the end of the board that was now resting on the pavement.

‘GET YOUR HANDS OFF MY PROPERTY!’ yelled the woman, causing every pedestrian within a ten-metre radius to stop and glare at him.

‘Fight! Fight! Fight!’ shouted two youths on bicycles,

HOW TO AGE DISGRACEFULLY

before collapsing over their handlebars in fits of giggles, then cycling off.

‘Now, move out of the way, before I call the police,’ said the woman.

‘Certainly, my lady,’ said Art, affecting the deep bow he’d perfected when cast as a random, non-speaking courtier in an episode of *Blackadder*, and shuffling backwards off the pavement, where he was sworn at, and nearly mown down, by a man on a moped with a Deliveroo bag strapped to his back like an improbably fast-moving tortoise.

He watched the woman walk off down the road, sending pedestrians ricocheting out of her path, stopping every three or four metres to put down the whiteboard, then pick it up again in a slightly different position.

If Art had been just a smidgeon less charitable, he’d have been willing her to drop it on her foot.