

Menopause Makes a Mockery of Me

844 words

Last February I sent a birthday card to my high school best friend on her 46th birthday. As I recall it had a picture of 4 firemen jumping out of a cake. On the inside it said, “They’re here to put out your hot flashes.”

This was so hilarious to me I couldn’t wait for her to call and say she’d gotten the card and loved it. When she did, we launched into the usual back-and-forth talk about what the year ahead held for us. “Hiking and belly dancing for me,” she said. “Insomnia and night sweats for me,” I would have said, had I been paying attention to my own body’s warning signs. It turns out that hot flashes are only hilarious when they’re someone else’s.

Now that I’ve done some reading about menopause, I know it can be a sad time of life for some women, particularly those who never had children. For me, menopause is like the old joke about going to a restaurant with bad food, and complaining that the serving sizes are too small: even though I never wanted children, it bothers me to know I’m no longer fertile.

But the worst part about menopause is that I’m becoming a little crazy. Maybe it’s the fact that I wake throughout the night, pretty much every night, on the twelves. Or maybe it’s because, as a lifelong cold person, I’m a little freaked out to find myself, like my mother before me, naked and fanning myself with the freezer door, shrieking, “It’s a SAUNA in here!” But really I think the problem is that, as you age, the things you hold dearest crystallize in your mind, crowding out more flexible, worldly thoughts. For my husband’s great-uncle, who loved cars, it was the story of fixing a certain Ford Mustang whose diagnosis had eluded the repair shop. According to my husband, this was the story his uncle told and retold for nearly twenty years, leaving every detail, including that “aha!” moment when he finally figured out the problem, intact.

Last week at an art show, I remembered my husband’s uncle. I was sitting in front of my painting booth waiting for business, when a young couple ambled past with a black cocker spaniel. I smacked my husband on the arm and pointed to the couple with the dog so like ours. He smiled appreciatively. I, on the other hand, ambushed them.

“We have a black cocker!” I said excitedly, crouching in front of the dog’s face. At first the young couple appeared happy to hear it. It was when I stood up and pulled out my phone to show them evidence that they began to exchange looks. Deeply embarrassed by my own actions, I was still somehow unable to stop the progression of doggie show-and-tell.

“This is Shark on the bed,” I said, cringing inside as they politely pretended to fawn over a picture I knew was too dark to make out. “He’s an American cocker. I found him on the street nine years ago.” I scrolled on to the next picture. “This is Bella. She may or may not be a cocker. She came from the Humane Society.” I scrolled to the next. “And this is Brie, Bella’s sister. She’s an English cocker. My dog Annie. . .” I began, and then I stopped, because even though it has been almost a year since we lost Annie, I am still unable to talk about her without sobbing, and I am not yet so crazy that I would sob in front of strangers.

The couple moved on, and I returned to my chair by my booth. A little spark of heat, like the lighting of a match, went off in my brain, and within seconds I was fully engulfed in the flame of a hot flash. I fanned my belly under my shirt, piled my hair on my head, and held a bottle of water to my chest. Ten minutes later, two women walked by with two cocker spaniels in tow. Forgetting everything I'd learned in the previous interaction, I rushed to greet them. "I have cocker spaniels!" I said, crouching down in front of their dogs. Just as I was pulling out my phone to show evidence, it rang, and the women fled.

That evening in bed, as I was recounting my behavior to my husband, he just shook his head. "It's bad business to do that at an art show," he said, and while I knew he was right, I also knew his life hadn't devolved into lying on packages of frozen chicken to keep his brain cells from turning to ash. An hour later, sirens pierced the night air, and somewhere in my menopausal brain, a dream of firemen bloomed in my head. "They're here to put out your hot flashes," my subconscious quipped. I woke, sweating and headachy, but had to smile. In my dream I'd pulled out my cell phone. "This is Shark," I was saying to the firemen. *Respond to this column at danalise@juno.com.*