

B. 1933

Jane Juska

*She transcended a strict  
upbringing and embraced her eroticism  
in her 60s.*



BY MAGGIE JONES

**Y**ou are a 66-year-old mother and retired high-school English teacher, bred in a small, puritanical Ohio town. Though you've been divorced for 30 years and celibate for almost that long, your life is full in many ways, teaching a college education course, volunteering as a writing instructor at San Quentin State Prison, escorting women for abortions at Planned Parenthood.

None of it compensates for the lack of a man's touch. The conventional avenues for dating at your age — senior hikes, senior bird-watching, senior mixers (you even hang out in hardware stores) — have netted little. Online dating is not yet commonplace. So, one October day in 1999, you write 30 words that will appear as a personal ad in *The New York Review of Books*. "Before I turn 67 — next March — I would like to have a lot of sex with a man I like. If you want to talk first, Trollope works for me."

Within weeks, the letters begin to arrive from the *Review of Books*



Juska reclaimed desires pushed down too long.

to your Berkeley, Calif., cottage. In total, you will receive 63, in seven manila envelopes. One man sends a picture of himself naked, except for sunglasses balanced on his nose. He includes a poem detailing his disgust with older women. Another confesses he's married. A 72-year-old man with a Gramercy Park address tells you that he's very horny. The address is encouraging. The inelegance of "horny" is not. It lands him in the "no" pile, along with the married man and the naked man. The "yes" suitors come in a variety of ages, occupations and locations, but they have one thing in common: They can write a good sentence. For you — a lover of Trollope, Dickinson, Chekhov — fine writing arouses like the male body.

Among the yeses is a man you agree to meet in a Manhattan cafe. You'll refer to him as Sidney in your 2003 memoir, "Round-Heeled Woman: My Late-Life Adventures in Sex and Romance." (All your men have pseudonyms.) You will eventually have sex with Sidney in a conference room at his office. Before him, there's Jonah, who flies out to California for three nights in a hotel, during which you learn he's 82 (he said he was somewhat older than you in an email). He steals your Champagne flutes and your pajama bottoms. Next comes Robert from Manhattan. He is 72, tall, slim, a martini drinker. He takes

you to the opera, wants to know your fantasies, traces your body from head to toe with his finger and is one of the most skilled lovers you will ever know. You fall in love. But Robert, who struggles with impotence and has another girlfriend, is fickle in his passions.

So you keep moving forward. John, a New England recluse, has graceful legs and charm. He sucks on candy — he's beating a smoking habit — when he performs oral sex on you. And your phone-sex partner, Matt, speaks of sex positions and Roethke poems in a voice practiced in seduction.

What do you want from all this? Not marriage. You aren't eager to pick up dirty clothes or stop your sexual adventures. Also, your lovers tend to live in New York City, and you won't move away from your son, Andy, his wife and their new baby in California. (Andy, incidentally, will never read your book. Who wants to know such things about his mother?) What you do want is connection, which both good sex and good conversation create. You are also on a mission to shed the inhibitions of your youth, when your mother shunned all hints of your sexuality and warned of the dangers of men, and you favored XL sweatshirts to hide your breasts. Now a feminist who reads Shere Hite's writing on female sexuality, you reclaim the desires

pushed down for too long. You lust for men's asses, their long, muscled legs, that flat space between their buckle and their hipbone, their penises. Menopause has not dampened desire but only made you bolder. When you wonder aloud to your therapist why Manhattanites seem to stare at you, he notes, "People recognize the libido when they see it."

Which is not to say that it is easy to take your clothes off in front of new men or to make love with the lights on. But you do it, again and again, including with Graham, who arrives in the final packet of letters and, at 32, is more than three decades your junior. He has never dated someone older, never answered a personal ad. But he is coming off a bad breakup and is intrigued by your words. The conversations start by email, then phone, then in person, during which you share passions and opinions about John Singer Sargent, Émile Zola, Herman Melville, W. H. Auden, Jane Austen. Graham is not only one of the most intellectual men you have ever met, but he is also six feet tall, with green eyes and an unabashed eroticism. In his first letter, he proclaims that "sex is extremely important to me, and my proficiency is quite good." Later, at a picnic lunch in Battery Park, after pouring you wine, he explains that he doesn't drink because he has "no inhibitions, so nothing to release." That night, he lays you down on your hotel bed, kneels naked and tells you how sexy you are.

But age and the width of a country stand between you. Less than two years after you first meet, Graham will marry someone his own age, in his own city. Your heart will fracture. Still, the men keep arriving. After your book is published, they call you and come to your book readings. Some think you will be an easy lay, not understanding that intellect is part of your criteria. Others are just lonely. At the end of one reading, a man who looks like Clark Gable in his older years, with the cleanest fingernails you've ever seen, asks you for a drink. He tells you he is married but promises to give you as much of himself as you can handle. If you were 50, you would run the other way. But now, in your mid-70s, the sex, the travel and the companionship are welcome, even if your heart pays a price. He will not leave his wife.

In your final days, it is Graham who returns. In fact, he never really left. He is still married, but on his frequent business trips to California, you take long walks and talk about relationships, writing, books, love. He is your muse. You are his best friend. He reads all your work and gives you the idea for your novel, "Mrs. Bennet Has Her Say." Now, before he leaves, you have a request: Kiss me, you say, as we used to. He leans over your bedside and places his mouth fully on yours, one last time. ♦