


M

FABULOUS OVER 40

More

®

A close-up photograph of a cougar's face, showing its fur and eyes, set against a bright pink background. The text is overlaid on the image.

**CANDACE
BUSHNELL'S
COUGAR
COMPLEX**



Attack of the Cougars

> Married to a younger man and sick of being stereotyped, CANDACE BUSHNELL shows her claws (and her smarts) in the great cougar debate

ABOUT A YEAR and a half ago, I was innocently trolling the Internet when I came across the headline “Cougar Attack!” The sexual usage of *cougar* was fairly recent back then, but already irritating. Still, I was curious. I expected to see mature women plasticized within an inch of their lives running after boy toys. Scrolling down, however, I saw that I was the cougar in question. My identifying behavior? Posing for photographers at the premiere

of the *Sex and the City* movie. Sure, after hours of hair and makeup, I looked pretty good (one of the requisites, I suppose, of cougarhood), but I know the only thing I wanted to attack at that moment was a cocktail. Besides, there was nary a young man in sight.

So why had I been labeled a cougar? It was perplexing. Yes, my husband is 10 years younger, but we’ve been married for seven years. And he’s 40, ferchrist’s sake. And how come every time women manage to break out of traditional roles, someone comes along and tries to ruin it with a derogatory label? If you’re a female CEO, you’re a ballbuster. And let’s not even go there with Hillary Clinton. In comparison with what she gets called, I suppose *cougar* is fairly harmless. What I dislike most about the term is that a complex group of women in a variety of different situations end up lumped together under one sensationalist and slightly vulgar rubric. It reminds me of the old days when women were routinely divided into two categories: madonnas and whores. Chalk it up to progress: Now we can be madonnas and cougars!

Problem is, I know some real-life cougars (meaning, simply, women over 35 who are with younger men), and they don’t at all resemble the pop culture stereotype. For instance, my younger sister, whom I’ll call Z, is 45 and married to a man 11 years younger. A former engineer, she has three children and runs her own business in rural Connecticut. She’s never used Botox; heck, she’s never even colored

her hair. But because her husband is more than a decade younger, I guess she's a cougar.

In fact, you could say my sister and I were cougars before the word *cougar* even existed. Several years ago, my father looked around the table during Thanksgiving dinner and, with a certain amount of pride, wondered aloud how he'd ended up with two thirty-something sons-in-law. And years before that, my mother declared to my single sisters and me that she didn't care if we ever got married and had children, as she had

I interviewed articulating women's worst fear about aging: namely, that it was all over for us at 35 (I was then 34). Man after man told me that (a) a woman over 35 is no longer sexy, because her prime childbearing years are over; (b) women that age have baggage (i.e., too many experiences); and (c) an unmarried, over-35 woman must have something really wrong with her, like maybe a mental illness. I was pretty horrified to find that men still believed stuff like this, but they do, as was borne out by a sexual encounter I had around that time with a

What I have yet to see is a real woman choose a younger man because he spent six hours a day at the gym trying to sculpt his abs.

no interest whatsoever in being a grandmother. So it could be that our propensity for the nontraditional arose from parents who didn't give a hoot about the traditional.

Ten years ago, when Z got married, the idea of women living with younger men struck me as a phenomenon with real promise—an emblem, I hoped, of a coming era when women could shake themselves free of traditional and limiting concepts of marriage and just be themselves. My “Sex and the City” column arose out of the reality of this new type of woman, a thirty-something “gal” with an interesting life and career who somehow hadn't managed to find an acceptable guy to marry her and complete that picture of “having it all.” (A phrase that, by the way, makes me want to barf, but whatever.) These single, independent women were forced to invent their own rules for living. And it took society a few years to catch up.

In 1994, when I started writing the column, I was shocked to hear the men

26-year-old. The next morning, he asked my age, and when I told him, he screamed, “Omigod, you're almost as old as my mother!”

“Dude, if you were that worried, you should have inquired about my age before you took off your pants,” I responded. “Plus, I can only be nearly as old as your mother if your mother had you when she was nine.” Geez.

But then, something happened. Suddenly, it was cool to be 40, and women that age were declared still sexy. And when a reporter asked me what happened to the women I had known and written about, I realized that most of them had husbands and some of them had children—but all were involved with younger men.

NONE OF THESE WOMEN had intended to become cougars. Unlike your traditional single guy, who never gives up the idea that his biological age is somewhere just north of 30, that it's OK to have his first child at 70, and that therefore a 25-year-old

is about the right age for him to date, I don't know any real-life women who strap on a pair of stilettos and hit the club scene with the intention of meeting a 25-year-old guy. For most women, it just happens. You fall in love, and the guy turns out to be 10 years younger. For the first couple of weeks, you worry that if you turn your head a certain way in the wrong light, he's going to see those wrinkles on your neck. And then you get over it. And somehow these relationships work.

I can't speak for all cougars, but the reason my marriage works is that it's not traditional. When I was younger, I dated men of various ages, some a little younger, some several years older. And I saw a pattern begin to emerge: Whenever I was with an older man, all those societal dictates about male and female roles would creep into my subconscious. I'd start acting like the little woman, and then my behavior would make me sick and I'd rebel by staying out at nightclubs until four in the morning. I knew what I wanted—an equal, balanced relationship in which both members could shine, a union in which I'd have a partner as opposed to a provider—but I couldn't find that until I let go of the idea of the guy who looked right on paper. Of course, equal partnership is something many women want, and they find it in all kinds of forms. My fellow cougars and I found our footing in relationships with younger men.

And by the way, our men don't usually resemble boy toys. What I have yet to see is a real woman choose a younger man because he spent six hours a day at the gym trying to sculpt his abs. Instead, I see guys who are supportive, loving, admiring and eager to do their half of the child rearing. Indeed, the very fact that a man is open to being with an older woman suggests that he doesn't give a hang what other people think of him. More likely, he's confident, open-minded and willing to make his own rules. All of which just happen to be qualities that, much more than a great six-pack, make for a great relationship. ☺