CHAPTER 1

Sixty? I’d Like to Speak to Whoever Approved This.

The first person to mention your sixtieth birthday is a woman you have never met.

She works for a company that would like to sell you something.

The envelope says, *An exciting new chapter awaits.*

Inside is information about a community where nobody appears to own a laundry basket.

Everyone is outdoors. Everyone is smiling. A woman in white pants is holding a glass beside a swimming pool.

You look at the photograph.

The pool looks tempting.

You remain suspicious about the pants.

Then you check the name on the envelope.

Yours.

Apparently, several organizations have been preparing for your birthday without involving you.

This seems premature. You have barely finished getting used to fifty.

You remember turning fifty. There were photographs. Someone made a speech. You bought an outfit that is still

in the closet because you intend to wear it again as soon as the right occasion develops.

You take the dress out of the closet for a closer look.

Surely it should receive a second outing before another decade is approved.

You hang it back up.

There will be time to investigate that later.

For now, someone wants to know what you would like to do for your birthday.

You say, “Something simple.”

This is your first mistake.

Simple is a flexible word in the hands of people planning a celebration for somebody else.

To you, it means a few people, good food, and being home before the kitchen becomes tomorrow’s problem.

To your family, it appears to mean an event without rented lighting.

They begin a conversation.

You are included at first.

Then the messages become private.

You recognize the signs. People stop speaking when you enter the room. Someone asks whether you happen to be free Saturday at two and whether you still like the restaurant near the park.

You do now, apparently.

A friend calls.

“How are you feeling about the big birthday?”

You are standing beside the washing machine holding a sock that has somehow acquired an entire tissue.

“Mostly annoyed,” you say.

She becomes concerned.

You explain about the sock.

“Oh. I meant sixty.”

You had gathered that.

People ask about sixty with a seriousness rarely applied to other numbers.

Nobody leaned across a table and asked whether you were emotionally prepared for fifty-seven.

Fifty-eight passed with very little supervision.

Now you are expected to have thoughts.

You do have thoughts.

One is that you would like people to stop looking at you while waiting for them.

Some days, the number surprises you.

You see sixty written down and experience a brief administrative objection.

That cannot be correct.

Then you do the math.

The math remains disappointingly firm.

You remember adults being sixty when you were young. They seemed to have been adults for an extraordinary length of time.

They knew which drawer contained important documents.

They owned serving dishes with specific purposes.

They could say, “We’ve had that since before you were born,” about an object that appeared perfectly usable.

You look around your own home.

There is a bowl you bought before your youngest coworker existed.

The situation is becoming difficult to dispute.

Still, you do not feel like the person you once imagined sixty would be.

You still laugh at things you probably shouldn’t.

You still become interested in a completely unnecessary purchase.

You can still hear a song in a store and briefly forget what you came to buy.

Occasionally, you remember what you came to buy and decide the song deserves another minute anyway.

The birthday approaches.

Cards arrive.

One calls you fabulous.

Another suggests you are entering your wild years.

You appreciate the confidence, although you recently declined an invitation because it involved parking downtown.

A younger relative sends a message.

You’re going to be the coolest sixty-year-old ever!

You type a thank-you.

Then you wonder how many sixty-year-olds they interviewed before making the announcement.

On Saturday, the family asks you to be ready at one-thirty.

“For what?”

“Just be ready.”

You have reached an age at which people discuss your future in inspirational language while withholding basic transportation information.

You put on something you like.

The outfit from your fiftieth remains in the closet. You tried it on yesterday.

It has developed opinions.

At the restaurant, a small group is waiting.

This is lovely.

Then someone steps aside.

Behind them stands a display of photographs.

You stop.

There is your childhood haircut.

There is your first apartment.

There is a photograph from a vacation during which the humidity made several important decisions about your hair.

You turn toward your family.

“Who gave you these?”

Nobody accepts individual responsibility.

A niece points to a photograph.