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She's Not Old; She's My Mother

I got mad this week. Real mad. It's about fingernails and "girl" stuff. It's also about discrimination and respect and what it means to be human. More specifically, what does it mean to be a human when you're old?

My mother is old. 74 years is old, no doubt about it. She is also intelligent, well-read and interesting, with a lifetime's worth of wisdom and compassion. She has never missed a general election and is very knowledgeable about local issues. She walks two miles every day and wears a size 6. She is slightly deaf and very shy. That's my mom.

Two small things that Mom really enjoys are shopping and getting her nails done every week. Both are a chance to get out of the house and talk to different people, and after sacrificing, with my dad, to raise 6 kids, I figure she's entitled. Here's the rub: I've noticed sales clerks trying to hurry her through the checkout as she counts her change, and department store clerks seem to look right through her (unless she has her charge card out). Last week it was the girl who does her nails.

Mom calls Annie a girl. I guess to a person of 75, a 25-year-old looks like a girl. Anyway, she told Annie that she noticed black spots under her acrylic nails, and should she worry? Annie was talking to the other manicurist (as usual), so it took my shy mother a little time to get her to look. "No, it's no big deal; don't worry," she said, and went back to her more important conversation. Mom did worry, but let it go, because she hates to "make a fuss."

Another thing about Mom is that she is from that "quiet" generation that (rightly or wrongly) relied on manners to keep society functioning. She's incapable of creating a "scene" or drawing attention to herself. She asked at the beauty supply shop in the mall what they thought. They said it was a fungus and to get those nails off fast. They also said she should report the salon to the state licensing board. Mom said she couldn't do this, but thank you.

She called me the next week and told me all of this, and I got mad. She'd made an appointment at another salon, and had the nails removed. For now, she's back to her own ugly nails, ugly and damaged from years of dishes and laundry and floors and yard work. She was ashamed of them for years and has really enjoyed the acrylics; she felt so feminine. Doing without long nails is not the end of the world, but I'm mad.

You see, after telling me this story and rejecting my advice to report them, Mom sighed. Just a little sigh, and she broke my heart. She said, "Sometimes it's like I'm invisible. She [Annie] acted like the fungus was no big deal because I'm old and who looks at old ladies' hands? I don't need a lot of attention, but I don't want to be invisible!" She apologized then, for complaining about such a petty thing, and asked about the family. So we talked about my school and kids and dad's health, because Mom prefers to put unpleasant things behind her. She won't dwell on it, but she feels diminished, she said. Unimportant.

When does a person become unimportant? I hope I don't diminish people. No one should be invisible. I'm still pretty mad.

Vicki Kramer