

# Mind the age gap – what it's like to be a toyboy husband

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A quarter of all men are younger than their wives. **Andrew Don** is delighted to be one of them

Coldplay's Chris Martin and I have something in common – and it is not musical talent or bank balance. We are both married to women five years older than us.

We are not alone in our love of the more mature missus. Take Percy Gibson, for example, who, at 36, wedded Joan Collins last year, aged 68. Younger men have also found favour with Demi Moore, J K Rowling, Madonna, Sadie Frost, Cameron Diaz, Sharon Stone and Minnie Driver. And the trend is growing. Today, one in four grooms takes an older bride, according to the Office for National Statistics.

I was one such man when in 1993, at the age of 31, I married Liz, then 36. I had not consciously gone after an older woman – in fact I had pretty much resigned myself to being Cliff Richard's archetypal bachelor boy. I had promised myself that I would never settle for second best.

I was minding my own business eating a pizza in one of north London's finest one Saturday night when in she walked. I thought she was beautiful – my fantasy on two legs. She had olive skin that glowed as if Elizabeth Arden's Visible Difference had been impregnated at birth. She had Cleopatra eyes and bone structure that could have been carved by Michelangelo.

She came over to chat with my friend Alberto, who was one of her clients (she worked as a travel consultant). She showed no interest in me except (never one to miss a business opportunity) to give me her card. I was too shy to utter a word.

"I've just seen the woman I'm going to marry," I told Alberto when she left.

"She's too old for you – you've no chance," he said. "Eat your garlic bread." Liz's business card burned a hole in my

pocket for a week. When I finally summoned up the courage to call, she struggled to remember who I was. When I reminded her she asked my age – she knew Alberto was considerably younger than her. When I told her she couldn't get me off the phone quick enough.

I launched a "woo Liz" campaign. I sent her cassata ice-cream, serenaded her with my guitar and wrote her a letter that she said made her laugh so much she cried.

She called me a week later suggesting we meet for a drink. In another three weeks she had moved in with me and three weeks after that we set our wedding date.

I have always got on well with older women. From an early age I lusted after some of my sister's friends, five

years my senior. Judith, bless her, excluded me from her parties until I was in my late teens so I suppose the older woman became a sort of exotic forbidden fruit.

But if I targeted an older woman, it was sub-conscious. What I do know is that my life had been turbulent since my mother's death from cancer when I was 14. The thought of marrying a woman 10 years younger than me who did not have the depth of experience to understand what I had been through in my life, had a soap opera view of marriage and felt she has not sowed her wild oats held little appeal for me.

There was a certain security in marrying a woman of 36, I felt. It seemed that if she had waited that long to find the man of her dreams, I was the real McCoy. The last thing I wanted to worry about was that she might

**Andrew Don launched a 'woo Liz' campaign to overcome his future wife's prejudices about his youth (above). Chris Martin and Gwyneth Paltrow, (inset) continue the trend**

TOM PILSTON

run off with the newest stud in town.

What I got was a lover and best friend who had emotional maturity and wisdom, a woman who really would stick with me for better or for worse. We were also both financially independent. This was important to me and we still do not have a joint bank account.

There are downsides. I have a consuming fear of those I love dying before me. Our age difference intensifies that anxiety although I should take comfort from research published in the American journal *Psychology Today*, which found that women who married younger men lived longer than those who did not.

Our age difference also brought fertility issues. Liz had two miscarriages, one at five months, and we eventually adopted – a wonderful, challenging, option. The wisdom and maturity of an older woman combined with my energy, experiences, lust for life and comparative youth have proved the perfect combination for this role.

Liz asks, only half-jokingly, I suspect, if I will still fancy her when the stockings and suspenders make her look like a Giles caricature and her boobs look like yesterday's baguettes. But this is a fear many older women have. I tell her she'll still turn me on when we're bent double over Zimmer frames.

James Gabbani, 33, a drinks marketing consultant, from south-west London, says he believes the five-year age gap with his wife Kate, a broadcasting executive, may be more of a problem for her than for him when they are out with his friends.

"When age comes up she seems to brush it off with a bit of a laugh that she's the oldest person there. It's only Kate that reminds me of it."

At 38, Kate's fertility has also become an issue. They have one child but ideally would like three, and James says they are worried about the risks of Kate getting pregnant in her forties.

But if she has insecurities about what will happen in later life, they are misplaced. The idea of turning to a younger woman repulses him. His 65-year-old father has married a 29-year-old and had a child with her. "I'm incredibly disturbed by this," he says.

Brian Snell, 66, lives in Northolt, Middlesex, with Barbara Burrows, 80, and has done so happily for seven years.

"I was a divorcé – I had been married for 39 years when things went wrong. Then I came into contact with Barbara through the British Legion.

"Barbara does not look anywhere near her age. Since we've been together, we've been around the world and we've just bought a villa in Spain which we are moving to in March."

Barbara asked Brian shortly after they met if he realised how old she was. "She said she was ancient but I couldn't believe it. She's so agile. She loves her dancing which keeps her on her toes. She looks after me."

Brian says he has never been one who likes being mothered and they both enjoy their own space. He is fond of sports, particularly football. She likes to watch television and tend the garden.

He says he has more energy than his wife but he says it does not affect the relationship.

They have not encountered any hostility to their relationship, despite the age gap. "Barbara's daughter accepted it and thought it was pretty good and my younger daughter and grandchildren have accepted Barbara," says Brian.

My best friend Ron was evidently impressed by my marriage to Liz. A few years later, he, too, found happiness with an older woman. It is a cliché that love is blind. Another truth is that it is ageless.

