

WORKING LIFE

Stop the Ma'amness

Ma'am this.

By Haidee E. Allerton

"Can I help you, ma'am?"

"Here's your soy extra-foam double latte, ma'am."

"Would you like fries with that, ma'am?"

"Can I show you something in a walker, ma'am?"

Arghh.

Let's just cut to the chase: Calling any woman on the sultry side of 35 *ma'am* is not polite; it's an observance—intended or not—of her membership in AARP. Which, by the way, shouldn't start at 50 offering you discounts on

hearing aids (and thank goodness AARP started the magazine *My Generation* with such fifty-somethings as Springsteen on the cover), but I digress.

OK, OK, so I do hear waitpersons, salespeople, and the like call twenty-somethings ma'am, especially in the southern part of the United States. So what? They're TWENTY-SOMETHING. Nothing fazes them, nothing insults them, they have the world by the tail; they're immune.

I admit it: Calling me ma'am gets you a glaring look and the mini-

Illustration by R.Gregory Christie

mum tip. Once I even left a young bartender a note saying, “Here’s some valuable advice. Never call a mature woman ma’am. This will serve you in good stead all of your life.” I advised my son of this practice as well, and he has taken it to heart, good boy that he is. Women of all ages will love him always.

Now, there are exceptions to my rule. If you’re a French waitperson, for instance, you can call me *madam* all the live-long day and a sweet smile shall appear on my face. Don’t ask me why; that’s just the way it is. But I digress.

Now is probably a good time to point out that people consistently tell me I look about 10 years younger than I am. But that’s really of no consequence regarding the ma’amness issue.

When I’m 102, you can call me ma’am as I sit at the bar having a whiskey and smoking a Pall Mall.

Do all service people in the world always call me ma’am? Thankfully, no. My favorite Starbucks is where the guy says, with no hint of irony or sarcasm, “Can I take your drink call, miss?” I tip \$2 on a \$4 latte. “Thank you, miss.” God love him.

You know, it’s really not necessary to say miss *or* ma’am. “Can I help you?” is sufficient in itself, don’t you think? “Bye, have a nice day!” The missing

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ma’am or miss isn’t, in fact, missed at all. Still polite, not labeling.

Do men of any age object to being called *sir* by complete strangers serving them espressos or burgers? No, they do not. There’s no younger version of *sir*—as in the case of *miss* and *ma’am*—unless you count the archaic *master*, which no one uses. (Well, that’s what *archaic* means.) There’s just respect in the appellation *sir*.

But I digress.

In conclusion, I seek ma’am-nesty. No more ma’am, please—slam, bam, thank you!