

CAN BIRTHDAYS STILL BE HAPPY AFTER AN EIGHTIETH?

Felix Kessler by Ted Kessler

My Old Man began as a blog in 2013. I had Ian Dury's gently melancholic song of the same name in mind at the time, along with two other ideas. First, a quote from Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. 'We can never know what to want,' wrote Kundera, 'because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come.' Hot damn, that cut me in two when I read it pulled out of context on the jacket flap of another book. I never know what I want. I always think there's some great experience, or party, that I've accidentally opted out of by choosing a different path. Maybe there was a way of comparing notes.

Also in my mind was my own father, Felix, who was about to turn eighty. It seemed an epic age for anybody to become and there was to be a rare family gathering to celebrate this in Paris, home to my middle brother Mark, his wife and kids.

As the day in May approached, I brooded. Could birthdays still be happy after an eightieth? I kept thinking about the shadows that the passage of time cast and how my dad, at his stage of the game, embodied some of my queries about time's flight.

When we're young, and if we're lucky, our idiosyncrasies add nuance and mysterious shape to our selves. They give us edge. But as life progresses, those quirks fossilise and warp our personalities into a permanently awkward shape. What may have seemed unique, hip, even, to a younger entourage curdles over the years. By the time middle age is standing in the hallway hysterically ringing its bell, those characteristics are ending marriages and making weekly appointments with a counsellor. If we survive long enough to become a question mark for our children, our nearest and dearest acknowledge those same USPs by rolling their eyes and making cuckoo signs behind our backs. It's the cycle of life. Your must-have value just diminishes.

That night in Paris I had a lot of that on my mind. On the way to dinner I remembered the intense, pensive man I mainly saw only in charismatic glimpses growing up: head wrapped in bandages after a car crash in Egypt; standing knee-deep in seawater, one hand behind his back, reading, for hours; breaking 100 mph in the driving-seat during explosive in-car rows with my mother; inventing complex bedtime stories about the mystically gifted Squeaky the Mouse; typing furiously through the night at the living-room table, predicting my own future. I contrasted that man with the gently eccentric old moose of today, pottering around New York doing his dry-cleaning in the spring and tending his yard in Florida in winter. Which period of his existence does he feel best represented by?

On the night of his birthday I wanted to fast forward through

the chit-chat and get right into it with him. As usual, the opposite happened. I couldn't find the space to pin him down, choking on the pathos as we all sat in a darkened bistro, cupping our ears and chinking our glasses.

So, obviously, I wrote something on the Internet about him when I got home instead. Others, encouraged by my fearlessness, followed suit and, as the site gathered more contributions, I realised that, despite dominating my interior for so long, my own paternal story was really a very minor drama. There were sons and daughters writing about how their fathers had abandoned them as babies on My Old Man, about cruel and violent men, about those whipped away by dehumanising illness just as life was motoring, about frauds and thieves, about coming home to find their father swinging dead from the bathroom door frame. Really, how bad had my story been? I'd been lucky.

My dad was a complex but always loving, generous father. He moved my family out of central London to suburban Paris for work just as my teens dawned, which at the time seemed cruel to me. I was hormonal, exceedingly English and ill-prepared for the vastness of the change. France was hostile both on the streets and in my enormous school, where I pretended I'd read *Le Grand Meaulnes* in the barest pidgin French to the audible disgust of my teachers. I was so homesick that when Felix surprisingly announced he was leaving us, soon after he'd deposited us in our strange model new town a million miles from anywhere, I was relieved. My now emotionally distracted mother was such a liberal parent that I knew I'd be able to do exactly what I wanted – i.e. all the things teenage boys dream of but generally don't get away with.

So, there were a couple of difficult years at the start of my teens. Big deal. There followed years of unbridled hedonism and freedom. I was able to leave home and school exactly when I wanted (much too soon) and by the time I was seventeen I

was living it up back in swinging London on my own as my brothers, too young to leave home, struggled through another new beginning in Washington DC with my mother as she foraged for independence and work. What did I have to complain about?

In 1988, three years after I'd returned to London, Felix provided an important coda to this story on a sunny pavement outside a New York café. He'd picked me up from the airport and insisted he needed to talk to me before I did anything else. Okay, I thought. Maybe he's going to drop some money on me, away from my girlfriend, who was sleeping at the apartment. Nice. Or maybe he's dying.

'Teddy, I need to tell you something,' he began nervously. Here we go.

'I have a girlfriend, whom I love very much.'

The clarifying relief rushed through me like a hit of ecstasy. 'Great,' I replied. About time!

'And we have a beautiful little girl together.'

Woah, that was quick.

'She's called Gabriella and she's eight years old.'

Even my rudimentary maths could work out that Gaby, my lovely sister, was born shortly after we arrived in Paris and had therefore been conceived before we moved. So that would explain why Felix had spent so much time after we emigrated 'working in Belgium'. His girlfriend, Jair, lived in central Paris at the time and he'd been running a two-family operation. Complicated. Especially when you're a hotshot foreign correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal*, trying to keep the job on track in a competitive bureau when both eyes were not on that ball. I looked at the guy in a whole new light. I almost admired him for it.

Everyone freaked out for a little while over that news, but in time it all worked out for the best. At the time of writing,

some twenty-eight years later, my father and Jair remain a married couple. My mother later found a much more suitable, devoted husband, Jim, with whom she lived happily for years before dying suddenly in 2013. And my brothers, Gaby and I, well, we're all right too.

Just as I was editing the last contributions to this book, my old man coincidentally announced he was coming to London the week before its deadline. He wanted to hang out with me and my family before going on to Paris to visit my brother and Gaby, who also lives there. He did the same thing last year and it felt, once again, like his European farewell tour. He's eighty-two and I always wonder if this will be the last time I see him. Let's make the most of it, I vow.

But how? As my dad's grown older, conversation with him has become smaller. Not because any faculties are diminishing. It's simply that he seems less interested in heading anywhere difficult. The waters are very still. Once, around 2009, I accidentally made him cry in the stairwell of his apartment block, so frustrated had I become by his inability to talk about his feelings. 'What do you want from me, Teddy? I cannot be sorry any more than I am!' It wasn't what I was after and I felt dreadful.

Elsewhere in this book Dorian Lynskey writes powerfully about all the conversations he wishes he could have now with his dead father. I feel guilty because I can have them with mine, but I'm no longer sure what the big topics are. We all want to live painlessly for ever – I don't need to make him beg for it. I wondered what we could do together that would have meaning.

I checked the football fixtures. In March 1976, my dad had, on a whim, wrapped me up in too many layers and taken me to see QPR play Wolves at Loftus Road, Shepherd's Bush, near to Paddington where we lived. This small act of curiosity on

his behalf inadvertently triggered a lifelong obsession in my seven-year-old self that has determined everything from the timing of holidays to the suitability of romantic partners. When my marriage was breaking up, a relationship counsellor suggested that my domestically unpopular determination to go weekly to QPR was linked to that perfect moment of felicity, when the floodlit blues and whites, gold and black danced upon the electric-green grass, exploding in technicolour in my mind – it was the one thing of pure, abstract pleasure I ever did alone with my old man and I was constantly trying to head back there. I didn't entirely buy it, but I used it on the way to the exit all the same.

But it is my end of that thread that tugs, not his. Not all fundamental memories are two-way streets, it seems. Sometimes, when I'm telling a coat hanger to fuck off or scrolling through my phone distractedly at the soft-play centre, I catch the bewildered look on the faces of my two small children and wonder how they'll remember me. As a whimsical pal, perhaps, full of hilarious anecdote and insight, or will it be as a perpetually distracted wage slave, simmering in quiet desperation? What will their strongest memories of me be? I'd like to think it's of us skipping down Nightingale Lane together after park playtime. But maybe it'll be me punching the wall over a text relaying a last-minute defeat. And in thirty-five years, what will my eldest force me to endure in a bid to make us reconnect?

In 2015, as we sat near our old seats in the Ellerslie Road Stand, watching the modern QPR huff and puff against MK Dons, a team that didn't even exist when my dad last came to a match, I knew it wasn't going to unlock anything in Felix. He stoically delivered the blank smile of clock-watching suffering throughout. What did I expect? He'd done his best.

After a final dinner, I walked him back to his hotel around the corner from our too-small-for-dads house.

‘So . . .’ he began, with a sly, cautious smile, ‘. . . anything you want to talk about?’

I didn’t know what to say. So much and so little, and we had about five hundred yards to go. I left it hanging there.

‘Oh,’ he said, as a diversion. ‘I brought you a shirt which I forgot to give you. What size are you?’

‘Medium,’ I replied.

‘It’s a large. Let me tell you why I brought you a large . . .’

‘Dad,’ I barked testily, embarrassingly losing my temper, ‘I don’t want to talk about the shirt you brought me that doesn’t fit me and that you’ve forgotten to give me.’

Why is my temper so short with him? I don’t know. We walked on in excruciating silence.

At the crossroads before his hotel, I let him go. As we waited for the lights, we hugged and I gave him a kiss. ‘Love you, Dad,’ I said. I really meant it.

I watched him cross the street, his stride still rolling, like that of the jazzy hipster I remember from my youth.

‘Bye, Dad!’ I shouted.

‘Bye, Teddy!’ he called back, with a wave, and then that same closed-mouth Kessler smile we share. I wonder when I’ll see it again.