

# 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 sufferance 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.

# **‘STARE AT THEM, NICK. THEY DON’T LIKE IT!’**

**Johnny Ball by Nick Ball**

Wednesday, 7 January 2004. It’s cold. We are stood outside Stamford Bridge’s Matthew Harding Stand as my friend Dan hands us our tickets, Chelsea vs Liverpool. Big game.

‘You know that where you’re sat you can’t support Liverpool, right? Or you’ll get lynched.’ We both nod in agreement and head off to our seats.

As soon as we sit down Dad stands up, arms out, and shouts, ‘LIVERRRRRRRRPOOL.’

I grab his elbow. ‘Dad, what are you doing?’

‘I’m a sixty-five-year-old man. What possible harm can I do?’

As the game begins so do the dirty looks.

It’s a feisty opening few minutes: both teams have chances and now the fans behind us are waving twenty-pound notes and chanting, ‘WE’RE FACKIN’ LOADED, DA, DA, DA, DA, DA, DA, WE’RE FACKIN’ LOADED, DA, DA, DA, DA, DA.’



I can see in Dad's face that he's irritated by it – it's the swearing: we're sat next to some young kids and he doesn't think this use of language is appropriate. On the Kop, growing up, it was always witty and fun. It had a sense of humour – he's proud of that: it's part of what being a Liverpool fan is.

The game is close and still nil-nil. Next up from the Chelsea repertoire is the classic 'YOU ARE SHIT, YOU ARE SHIT, YOU ARE SHIT, YOU ARE SHIT'.

My dad can't help himself. I try to stop him by putting my hand on his arm but it's no good. Instead I pretend it isn't happening, I try to focus on the game but I can't: I'm listening. He turns and addresses the bank of lads directly behind us. 'I don't mind you waving your twenty-pound notes and singing about being loaded, at least that has a modicum of wit, but *You are shit?* How is that clever or funny or witty? And there are kids here. What message are you sending out?'

Oh, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, I'm thinking, as I hear the reactions, like a wave passing up the bank.

'It's fackin' Johnny Boll.'

'Look fackin' ell it's only bloody Johnny Boll.'

'Johnny Boll just told us off for swearin'.'

'Fackin' Johnny Boll off the telly don't like me swearin', you fackin' what?!'

I can hear this guy's mind exploding.

Somehow – perhaps it's the shock, the sheer temerity of it, perhaps it's because on the whole he's universally loved, the eccentric, crazy, funny one off the TV who impossibly got everyone into maths and science by dressing up as Archimedes and fooling around, the classroom prankster, but a clever adult version who knows stuff – I don't know exactly why but they let this interruption slide, this impudence; it doesn't kick off. Not yet.

I breathe a sigh of relief while thinking, The balls on this

guy. (I shouldn't have been surprised. Years before, at Old Trafford, when Michael Owen was sent off, we caught the eye of a group of United fans. 'Stare at them, Nick. They don't like it!' Dad said. 'STARE AT THEM? THEY DON'T LIKE IT? ARE YOU CRAZY?'). Dad smiles at me, a smile that says, 'That's them told,' and then I hear it. The next chant up. The same but different. 'YOU ARE RUBBISH, YOU ARE RUBBISH, YOU ARE RUBBISH,' and then, 'WE'RE REALLY LOADED, DA, DA, DA, DA, DA, WE'RE REALLY LOADED.' I dare to glance back at the sniggering faces looking down on us, so pleased with their swear-less chants. Just get to half-time, I think. If we can just make it to half-time, it'll calm down.

And then – BOSH! Bruno Cheyrou buries one for Liverpool and we're both out of our seats.

We sit back down but things aren't the same any more. The Chelsea fans are livid. It's no longer funny that the clever fella off the telly told them off for swearing. All goodwill has been eclipsed by the massive unavoidable fact that there are two Scouse fans among them. This will not stand. There will be no more swear-less chanting. 'OUT, OUT, OUT, OUT, OUT, OUT' is the call now, their faces twisted and thick, furious gargoyles, features bulging, fingers pointing. It spreads upwards fast, Borg-like, assimilating the vacant minds of fans who are so far away they can have no idea why they suddenly find themselves shouting, 'OUT,' repeatedly. The hive mind in full effect.

And now furiously rotund stewards in hi-vis jackets are pointing at me, and shouting the same thing. I turn to Dad, who is ignoring the hate, trying to watch the game, oblivious. 'We're being thrown out, Dad.'

'I'm not moving,' he says. And he repeats his mantra, 'I'm a sixty-five-year-old man. What possible harm can I do?'

The stewards are coming down both ends of our aisle, faces like smashed crabs. They're gesticulating angrily at me while the fans behind us shout far worse things than just 'Out.' With the stewards almost upon us I stand up, resigned to my fate, and a flicker of disappointment passes across my dad's face. I wonder how he had seen this ending. Actual physical violence is seconds away. 'Well, I'll see you later, then, Dad . . .' I say.

He reluctantly stands too and begins remonstrating with the steward as we're shown to the door. But now the gob is raining down on me, gloopy saliva slamming into the back of my head. The abuse is horrific. Dog's abuse. Those kids are learning some new words today, I think. Dad is ahead of me now, impervious, no doubt repeating his mantra to the uncaring steward. I feel like I'm in *Midnight Express* or any of those prison movies. Just focus on the exit, I tell myself, the perimeter fence. It's close but very far away, a glowing light, freedom. Everything is in slow motion. If I can just make it to the exit, make it to the light . . .

Stay on target. Blinkers on. I'm covered in spittle but I'm nearly there. Just as I'm out I feel a hand on my shoulder and I'm yanked back in. 'I HOPE YOU BREAK YOUR NECK ON THE STAIRS, YOU SCOUSE CUNT!' An old swollen cab-driver type is screaming this into my face with such vitriol, his mouth so wide that I wonder if he's going to swallow me whole. I pull myself clear and fly down the steps to safety. I find Dad going bonkers, repeating his 'I'M SIXTY-FIVE' mantra over and over. We're shown to a tiny poster that apparently says there's to be no away support here. The adrenalin is ripping through me, the rush so strong I can't focus on the words. We're hauled off to the exit. Game over.

But just as we're walking through the door the steward turns, his face curious, as though a light just got switched on in a derelict house. 'Eh, I know you, you're Johnny Ball off

the telly, I love your stuff. Think of a what's-it-called and all that. You're the reason I'm where I am today!' Dad and I share a look, eyebrows raised. 'Ere, I'll get you in the away end.'

So we're ushered into the Liverpool end where Dad recounts our ordeal to a growing audience of adoring Liverpool fans. 'Get these boys a beer,' someone shouts, and we're handed pints. Heroes back from war. As he tells our story I can see from their faces what they're all thinking: THE FUCKING BALLS ON THIS GUY.

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