

ONWARD AND OUTWARD | FEBRUARY 17 & 24, 2014 ISSUE

THIS OLD MAN

Life in the nineties.

BY ROGER ANGELL

Roger Angell and Andy; Central Park, January, 2014.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIGITTE LACOMBE

Check me out. The top two knuckles of my left hand look as if I'd been worked over by the K.G.B. No, it's more as if I'd been a catcher for the Hall of Fame pitcher Candy Cummings, the inventor of the curveball, who retired from the game in 1877. To put this another way, if I pointed that hand at you like a pistol and fired at your nose, the bullet would nail you in the left knee. Arthritis.



Now, still facing you, if I cover my left, or better, eye with one hand, what I see is a blurry encircling version of the ceiling and floor and walls or windows to our right and left but no sign of your face or head: nothing in the middle. But cheer up: if I reverse things and cover my right eye, there you are, back again. If I take my hand away and look at you with both eyes, the empty hole disappears and you're in 3-D, and actually looking pretty terrific today. Macular degeneration.

I'm ninety-three, and I'm feeling great. Well, pretty great, unless I've forgotten to take a couple of Tylenols in the past four or five hours, in which case I've begun to feel some jagged little pains shooting down my left forearm and into the base of the thumb. Shingles, in 1996, with resultant nerve damage.

Like many men and women my age, I get around with a couple of arterial stents that keep my heart chunking. I also sport a minute plastic seashell that clamps shut a congenital hole in my heart, discovered in my early eighties. The surgeon at Mass General who fixed up this PFO (a patent foramen ovale—I

love to say it) was a Mexican-born character actor in beads and clogs, and a fervent admirer of Derek Jeter. Counting this procedure and the stents, plus a passing balloon angioplasty and two or three false alarms, I've become sort of a table potato, unalarmed by the X-ray cameras swooping eerily about just above my naked body in a darkened and icy operating room; there's also a little TV screen up there that presents my heart as a pendant ragbag attached to tacky ribbons of veins and arteries. But never mind. Nowadays, I pop a pink beta-blocker and a white statin at breakfast, along with several lesser pills, and head off to my human-wreckage gym, and it's been a couple of years since the last showing.

My left knee is thicker but shakier than my right. I messed it up playing football, eons ago, but can't remember what went wrong there more recently. I had a date to have the joint replaced by a famous knee man (he's listed in the Metropolitan Opera program as a major supporter) but changed course at the last moment, opting elsewhere for injections of synthetic frog hair or rooster combs or something, which magically took away the pain. I walk around with a cane now when outdoors—"Stop *brandishing!*" I hear my wife, Carol, admonishing—which gives me a nice little edge when hailing cabs.

The lower-middle sector of my spine twists and jogs like a Connecticut county road, thanks to a herniated disk seven or eight years ago. This has cost me two or three inches of height, transforming me from Gary Cooper to Geppetto. After days spent groaning on the floor, I received a blessed epidural, ending the ordeal. "You can sit up now," the doctor said, whisking off his shower cap. "Listen, do you know who Dominic Chianese is?"

"Isn't that Uncle Junior?" I said, confused. "You know—from 'The Sopranos'?"

"Yes," he said. "He and I play in a mandolin quartet every Wednesday night at the Hotel Edison. Do you think you could help us get a listing in the front of *The New Yorker*?"

I've endured a few knocks but missed worse. I know how lucky I am, and secretly tap wood, greet the day, and grab a sneaky pleasure from my survival at long odds. The pains and insults are bearable. My conversation may be full of holes and pauses, but I've learned to dispatch a private Apache scout ahead into the next sentence, the one coming up, to see if there are any vacant names or verbs in the landscape up there. If he sends back a warning, I'll pause meaningfully, duh, until something else comes to mind.

On the other hand, I've not yet forgotten Keats or Dick Cheney or what's waiting for me at the dry cleaner's today. As of right now, I'm not Christopher Hitchens or Tony Judt or Nora Ephron; I'm not dead and not yet mindless in a reliable upstate facility. Decline and disaster impend, but my thoughts don't linger there. It shouldn't surprise me if at this time next week I'm surrounded by family, gathered on short notice—they're sad and shocked but also a little pissed off to be here—to help decide, after what's happened, what's to be done with me now. It must be this hovering knowledge, that two-ton safe swaying on a frayed rope just over my head, that makes everyone so glad to see me again. "How great you're looking! Wow, tell me your secret!" they kindly cry when they happen upon me crossing the street or exiting a dinghy or departing an X-ray room, while the little balloon over their heads reads, "Holy shit—he's still vertical!"

Let's move on. A smooth fox terrier of ours named Harry was full of surprises. Wildly sociable, like others of his breed, he grew a fraction more reserved in maturity, and learned to cultivate a separate wagging acquaintance with each fresh visitor or old pal he came upon in the living room. If friends had come for dinner, he'd arise from an evening nap and leisurely tour the table in imitation of a three-star headwaiter: Everything O.K. here? Is there anything we could bring you? How was the crème brûlée? Terriers aren't water dogs, but Harry enjoyed kayaking in Maine, sitting like a figurehead between my knees for an hour or more and scoping out the passing cormorant or yachtsman. Back in the city, he established his personality and dashing good looks on the neighborhood to the extent that a local artist executed a striking head-on portrait in pointillist oils, based on a snapshot of him she'd sneaked in Central Park. Harry took his leave (another surprise) on a June afternoon three years ago, a few days after his eighth birthday. Alone in our fifth-floor apartment, as was usual during working hours, he became unhinged by a noisy thunderstorm and went out a front window left a quarter open on a muggy day. I knew him well and could summon up his feelings during the brief moments of that leap: the welcome coolness of rain on his muzzle and shoulders, the excitement of air and space around his outstretched body.

Here in my tenth decade, I can testify that the downside of great age is the room it provides for rotten news. Living long means enough already. When Harry died, Carol and I couldn't stop weeping; we sat in the bathroom with his retrieved body on a mat between us, the light-brown patches on his back and the near-black of his ears still darkened by the rain, and passed a Kleenex box back and forth between us. Not

all the tears were for him. Two months earlier, a beautiful daughter of mine, my oldest child, had ended her life, and the oceanic force and mystery of that event had not left full space for tears. Now we could cry without reserve, weep together for Harry and Callie and ourselves. Harry cut us loose.

A few notes about age is my aim here, but a little more about loss is inevitable. “Most of the people my age is dead. You could look it up” was the way Casey Stengel put it. He was seventy-five at the time, and contemporary social scientists might prefer Casey’s line delivered at eighty-five now, for accuracy, but the point remains. We geezers carry about a bulging directory of dead husbands or wives, children, parents, lovers, brothers and sisters, dentists and shrinks, office sidekicks, summer neighbors, classmates, and bosses, all once entirely familiar to us and seen as part of the safe landscape of the day. It’s no wonder we’re a bit bent. The surprise, for me, is that the accruing weight of these departures doesn’t bury us, and that even the pain of an almost unbearable loss gives way quite quickly to something more distant but still stubbornly gleaming. The dead have departed, but gestures and glances and tones of voice of theirs, even scraps of clothing—that pale-yellow Saks scarf—reappear unexpectedly, along with accompanying touches of sweetness or irritation.

Our dead are almost beyond counting and we want to herd them along, pen them up somewhere in order to keep them straight. I like to think of mine as fellow-voyagers crowded aboard the Île de France (the idea is swiped from “Outward Bound”). Here’s my father, still handsome in his tuxedo, lighting a Lucky Strike. There’s Ted Smith, about to name-drop his Gloucester home town again. Here comes Slim Aarons. Here’s Esther Mae Counts, from fourth grade: hi, Esther Mae. There’s Gardner—with Cecille Shawn, for some reason. Here’s Ted Yates. Anna Hamburger. Colba F. Gucker, better known as Chief. Bob Ascheim. Victor Pritchett—and Dorothy. Henry Allen. Bart Giamatti. My elder old-maid cousin Jean Webster and her unexpected, late-arriving Brit husband, Capel Hanbury. Kitty Stableford. Dan Quisenberry. Nancy Field. Freddy Alexandre. I look around for others and at times can almost produce someone at will. Callie returns, via a phone call. “Dad?” It’s her, all right, her voice affectionately rising at the end—“Da-ad?”—but sounding a bit impatient this time. She’s in a hurry. And now Harold Eads. Toni Robin. Dick Salmon, his face bright red with laughter. Edith Oliver. Sue Dawson. Herb Mitgang. Coop. Tудie. Elwood Carter.

These names are best kept in mind rather than boxed and put away somewhere. Old letters are engrossing but feel historic in numbers, photo albums delightful but with a glum after-kick like a chocolate caramel. Home movies are killers: Zeke, a long-gone Lab, alive again, rushing from right to left

with a tennis ball in his mouth; my sister Nancy, stunning at seventeen, smoking a lipstick-stained cigarette aboard Astrid, with the breeze stirring her tied-up brown hair; my mother laughing and ducking out of the picture again, waving her hands in front of her face in embarrassment—she’s about thirty-five. Me sitting cross-legged under a Ping-Pong table, at eleven. Take us away.

My list of names is banal but astounding, and it’s barely a fraction, the ones that slip into view in the first minute or two. Anyone over sixty knows this; my list is only longer. I don’t go there often, but, once I start, the battalion of the dead is on duty, alertly waiting. Why do they sustain me so, cheer me up, remind me of life? I don’t understand this. Why am I not endlessly grieving?

What I’ve come to count on is the white-coated attendant of memory, silently here again to deliver dabs from the laboratory dish of me. In the days before Carol died, twenty months ago, she lay semiconscious in bed at home, alternating periods of faint or imperceptible breathing with deep, shuddering catch-up breaths. Then, in a delicate gesture, she would run the pointed tip of her tongue lightly around the upper curve of her teeth. She repeated this pattern again and again. I’ve forgotten, perhaps mercifully, much of what happened in that last week and the weeks after, but this recurs.

Carol is around still, but less reliably. For almost a year, I would wake up from another late-afternoon mini-nap in the same living-room chair, and, in the instants before clarity, would sense her sitting in her own chair, just opposite. Not a ghost but a presence, alive as before and in the same instant gone again. This happened often, and I almost came to count on it, knowing that it wouldn’t last. Then it stopped.

People my age and younger friends as well seem able to recall entire tapestries of childhood, and swatches from their children’s early lives as well: conversations, exact meals, birthday parties, illnesses, picnics, vacation B. and B.s, trips to the ballet, the time when . . . I can’t do this and it eats at me, but then, without announcement or connection, something turns up. I am walking on Ludlow Lane, in Snedens, with my two young daughters, years ago on a summer morning. I’m in my late thirties; they’re about nine and six, and I’m complaining about the steep little stretch of road between us and our house, just up the hill. Maybe I’m getting old, I offer. Then I say that one day I’ll be really old and they’ll have to hold me up. I imitate an old man mumbling nonsense and start to walk with wobbly legs. Callie and Alice scream with laughter and hold me up, one on each side. When I stop, they ask for more, and we do this over and over.

I'm leaving out a lot, I see. My work—I'm still working, or sort of. Reading. The collapsing, grossly insistent world. Stuff I get excited about or depressed about all the time. Dailiness—but how can I explain this one? Perhaps with a blog recently posted on Facebook by a woman I know who lives in Australia. “Good Lord, we’ve run out of nutmeg!” it began. “How in the world did that ever happen?” Dozens of days are like that with me lately.

Intimates and my family—mine not very near me now but always on call, always with me. My children Alice and John Henry and my daughter-in-law Alice—yes, another one—and my granddaughters Laura and Lily and Clara, who together and separately were as steely and resplendent as a company of Marines on the day we buried Carol. And on other days and in other ways as well. Laura, for example, who will appear almost overnight, on demand, to drive me and my dog and my stuff five hundred miles Down East, then does it again, backward, later in the summer. Hours of talk and sleep (mine, not hers) and renewal—the abandoned mills at Lawrence, Mass., Cat Mousam Road, the Narramissic River still there—plus a couple of nights together, with the summer candles again.

“I need you to honk.”



Friends in great numbers now, taking me to dinner or cooking in for me. (One afternoon, I found a freshly roasted chicken sitting outside my front door; two hours later, another one appeared in the same spot.) Friends inviting me to the opera, or to Fairway on Sunday morning, or to dine with their kids at the East Side Deli, or to a wedding at the Rockbound Chapel, or bringing in ice cream to share at my place while we catch another

Yankees game. They saved my life. In the first summer after Carol had gone, a man I'd known slightly and pleasantly for decades listened while I talked about my changed routines and my doctors and dog walkers and the magazine. I paused for a moment, and he said, “Plus you have us.”

Another message—also brief, also breathtaking—came on an earlier afternoon at my longtime therapist's, at a time when I felt I'd lost almost everything. “I don't know how I'm going to get through this,” I said at last.

A silence, then: “Neither do I. But you will.”

I am a world-class complainer but find palpable joy arriving with my evening Dewar's, from Robinson Cano between pitches, from the first pages once again of "Appointment in Samarra" or the last lines of the Elizabeth Bishop poem called "Poem." From the briefest strains of Handel or Roy Orbison, or Dennis Brain playing the early bars of his stunning Mozart horn concertos. (This Angel recording may have been one of the first things Carol and I acquired just after our marriage, and I hear it playing on a sunny Saturday morning in our Ninety-fourth Street walkup.) Also the recalled faces and then the names of Jean Dixon or Roscoe Karns or Porter Hall or Brad Dourif in another Netflix rerun. Chloë Sevigny in "Trees Lounge." Gail Collins on a good day. Family ice-skating up near Harlem in the nineteen-eighties, with the Park employees, high on youth or weed, looping past us backward to show their smiles.

Recent and not so recent surveys (including the six-decades-long Grant Study of the lives of some nineteen-forties Harvard graduates) confirm that a majority of us people over seventy-five keep surprising ourselves with happiness. Put me on that list. Our children are adults now and mostly gone off, and let's hope full of their own lives. We've outgrown our ambitions. If our wives or husbands are still with us, we sense a trickle of contentment flowing from the reliable springs of routine, affection in long silences, calm within the light boredom of well-worn friends, retold stories, and mossy opinions. Also the distant whoosh of a surfaced porpoise outside our night windows.

We elders—what kind of a handle is this, anyway, halfway between a tree and an eel?—we elders have learned a thing or two, including invisibility. Here I am in a conversation with some trusty friends—old friends but actually not all that old: they're in their sixties—and we're finishing the wine and in serious converse about global warming in Nyack or Virginia Woolf the cross-dresser. There's a pause, and I chime in with a couple of sentences. The others look at me politely, then resume the talk exactly at the point where they've just left it. What? Hello? Didn't I just say something? Have I left the room? Have I experienced what neurologists call a TIA—a transient ischemic attack? I didn't expect to take over the chat but did await a word or two of response. Not tonight, though. (Women I know say that this began to happen to them when they passed fifty.) When I mention the phenomenon to anyone around my age, I get back nods and smiles. Yes, we're invisible. Honored, respected, even loved, but not quite worth listening to anymore. You've had your turn, Pops; now it's ours.

I've been asking myself why I don't think about my approaching visitor, death. He was often on my mind thirty or forty years ago, I believe, though more of a stranger. Death terrified me then, because I had so many engagements. The enforced opposite—no dinner dates or coming attractions, no urgent business, no fun, no calls, no errands, no returned words or touches—left a blank that I could not light or furnish: a condition I recognized from childhood bad dreams and sudden awakenings. Well, not yet, not soon, or probably not, I would console myself, and that welcome but then tediously repeated postponement felt in time less like a threat than like a family obligation—tea with Aunt Molly in Montclair, someday soon but not now. Death, meanwhile, was constantly onstage or changing costume for his next engagement—as Bergman's thick-faced chess player; as the medieval night-rider in a hoodie; as Woody Allen's awkward visitor half-falling into the room as he enters through the window; as W. C. Fields's man in the bright nightgown—and in my mind had gone from spectre to a waiting second-level celebrity on the Letterman show. Or almost. Some people I knew seemed to have lost all fear when dying and awaited the end with a certain impatience. "I'm tired of lying here," said one. "Why is this taking so long?" asked another. Death will get it on with me eventually, and stay much too long, and though I'm in no hurry about the meeting, I feel I know him almost too well by now.

A weariness about death exists in me and in us all in another way, as well, though we scarcely notice it. We have become tireless voyeurs of death: he is on the morning news and the evening news and on the breaking, middle-of-the-day news as well—not the celebrity death, I mean, but the everyone-else death. A roadside-accident figure, covered with a sheet. A dead family, removed from a ramshackle faraway building pocked and torn by bullets. The transportation dead. The dead in floods and hurricanes and tsunamis, in numbers called "tolls." The military dead, presented in silence on your home screen, looking youthful and well combed. The enemy war dead or rediscovered war dead, in higher figures. Appalling and dulling totals not just from this year's war but from the ones before that, and the ones way back that some of us still around may have also attended. All the dead from wars and natural events and school shootings and street crimes and domestic crimes that each of us has once again escaped and felt terrible about and plans to go and leave wreaths or paper flowers at the site of. There's never anything new about death, to be sure, except its improved publicity. At second hand, we have become death's expert witnesses;

we know more about death than morticians, feel as much at home with it as those poor bygone schlunks trying to survive a continent-ravaging, low-digit-century epidemic. Death sucks but, enh—click the channel.

get along. Now and then it comes to me that I appear to have more energy and hope than some of my coevals, but I take no credit for this. I don't belong to a book club or a bridge club; I'm not taking up Mandarin or practicing the viola. In a sporadic effort to keep my brain from moldering, I've begun to memorize shorter poems—by Auden, Donne, Ogden Nash, and more—which I recite to myself some nights while walking my dog, Harry's successor fox terrier, Andy. I've also become a blogger, and enjoy the ease and freedom of the form: it's a bit like making a paper airplane and then watching it take wing below your window. But shouldn't I have something more scholarly or complex than this put away by now—late paragraphs of accomplishments, good works, some weightier op cits? I'm afraid not. The thoughts of age are short, short thoughts. I don't read Scripture and cling to no life precepts, except perhaps to Walter Cronkite's rules for old men, which he did not deliver over the air: Never trust a fart. Never pass up a drink. Never ignore an erection.

I count on jokes, even jokes about death.

TEACHER: Good morning, class. This is the first day of school and we're going to introduce ourselves. I'll call on you, one by one, and you can tell us your name and maybe what your dad or your mom does for a living. You, please, over at this end.

SMALL BOY: My name is Irving and my dad is a mechanic.

TEACHER: A mechanic! Thank you, Irving. Next?

SMALL GIRL: My name is Emma and my mom is a lawyer.

TEACHER: How nice for you, Emma! Next?

SECOND SMALL BOY: My name is Luke and my dad is dead.

TEACHER: Oh, Luke, how sad for you. We're all very sorry about that, aren't we, class? Luke, do you think you could tell us what Dad did before he died?

LUKE (*seizes his throat*): He went “*N’gungghhh!*”

Not bad—I’m told that fourth graders really go for this one. Let’s try another.

A man and his wife tried and tried to have a baby, but without success. Years went by and they went on trying, but no luck. They liked each other, so the work was always a pleasure, but they grew a bit sad along the way. Finally, she got pregnant, was very careful, and gave birth to a beautiful eight-pound-two-ounce baby boy. The couple were beside themselves with happiness. At the hospital that night, she told her husband to stop by the local newspaper and arrange for a birth announcement, to tell all their friends the good news. First thing next morning, she asked if he’d done the errand.

“Yes, I did,” he said, “but I had no idea those little notices in the paper were so expensive.”

“Expensive?” she said. “How much was it?”

“It was eight hundred and thirty-seven dollars. I have the receipt.”

“Eight hundred and thirty-seven dollars!” she cried. “But that’s impossible. You must have made some mistake. Tell me exactly what happened.”

“There was a young lady behind a counter at the paper, who gave me the form to fill out,” he said. “I put in your name and my name and little Teddy’s name and weight, and when we’d be home again and, you know, ready to see friends. I handed it back to her and she counted up the words and said, ‘How many insertions?’ I said twice a week for fourteen years, and she gave me the bill. O.K.?”

I heard this tale more than fifty years ago, when my first wife, Evelyn, and I were invited to tea by a rather elegant older couple who were new to our little Rockland County community. They were in their seventies, at least, and very welcoming, and it was just the four of us. We barely knew them and I was surprised when he turned and asked her to tell us the joke about the couple trying to have a baby. “Oh, no,” she said, “they wouldn’t want to hear that.”

“Oh, come on, dear—they’ll love it,” he said, smiling at her. I groaned inwardly and was preparing a forced smile while she started off shyly, but then, of course, the four of us fell over laughing together.

That night, Evelyn said, “Did you see Keith’s face while Edie was telling that story? Did you see hers? Do you think it’s possible that they’re still—you know, still doing it?”

“Yes, I did—yes, I do,” I said. “I was thinking exactly the same thing. They’re amazing.”

This was news back then, but probably shouldn’t be by now. I remember a passage I came upon years later, in an Op-Ed piece in the *Times*, written by a man who’d just lost his wife. “We slept naked in the same bed for forty years,” it went. There was also my splendid colleague Bob Bingham, dying in his late fifties, who was asked by a friend what he’d missed or would do differently if given the chance. He thought for an instant, and said, “More ventry.”

More ventry. More love; more closeness; more sex and romance. Bring it back, no matter what, no matter how old we are. This fervent cry of ours has been certified by Simone de Beauvoir and Alice Munro and Laurence Olivier and any number of remarried or recoupled ancient classmates of ours. Laurence Olivier? I’m thinking of what he says somewhere in an interview: “Inside, we’re all seventeen, with red lips.”

This is a dodgy subject, coming as it does here from a recent widower, and I will risk a further breach of code and add that this was something that Carol and I now and then idly discussed. We didn’t quite see the point of memorial fidelity. In our view, the departed spouse—we always thought it would be me—wouldn’t be around anymore but knew or had known that he or she was loved forever. Please go ahead, then, sweetheart—don’t miss a moment. Carol said this last: “If you haven’t found someone else by a year after I’m gone I’ll come back and haunt you.”

Getting old is the second-biggest surprise of my life, but the first, by a mile, is our unceasing need for deep attachment and intimate love. We oldies yearn daily and hourly for conversation and a renewed domesticity, for company at the movies or while visiting a museum, for someone close by in the car when coming home at night. This is why we throng Match.com and OkCupid in such numbers—but not just for this, surely. Rowing in Eden (in Emily Dickinson’s words: “Rowing in Eden— / Ah—the sea”) isn’t reserved for the lithe and young, the dating or the hooked-up or the just lavishly married, or even for couples in the middle-aged mixed-doubles semifinals, thank God. No personal confession or revelation impends here, but these feelings in old folks are widely treated like a raunchy secret. The invisibility factor—you’ve had your turn—is back at it again. But I believe that everyone in the world wants to be with someone else tonight, together in the dark, with

the sweet warmth of a hip or a foot or a bare expanse of shoulder within reach. Those of us who have lost that, whatever our age, never lose the longing: just look at our faces. If it returns, we seize upon it avidly, stunned and altered again.

Nothing is easy at this age, and first meetings for old lovers can be a high-risk venture. Reticence and awkwardness slip into the room. Also happiness. A wealthy old widower I knew married a nurse he met while in the hospital, but had trouble remembering her name afterward. He called her “kid.” An eighty-plus, twice-widowed lady I’d once known found still another love, a frail but vibrant Midwest professor, now close to ninety, and the pair got in two or three happy years together before he died as well. When she called his children and arranged to pick up her things at his house, she found every possession of hers lined up outside the front door.

But to hell with them and with all that, O.K.? Here’s to you, old dears. You got this right, every one of you. Hook, line, and sinker; never mind the why or wherefore; somewhere in the night; love me forever, or at least until next week. For us and for anyone this unsettles, anyone who’s younger and still squirms at the vision of an old couple embracing, I’d offer John Updike’s “Sex or death: you take your pick”—a line that appears (in a slightly different form) in a late story of his, “Playing with Dynamite.”

This is a great question, an excellent insurance-plan choice, I mean. I think it’s in the Affordable Care Act somewhere. Take it from us, who know about the emptiness of loss, and are still cruising along here feeling lucky and not yet entirely alone. ♦



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