

1993

THE BIG FOUR-0

Dear Doug,

Well, I bring you interesting personal news.

It comes as our generation takes over the day shift. Bill and Al, those two great southern joggers, are now large and in charge.

And just coincidentally, I turn forty this month.

I know. I know. I should be writing one of those pithy pieces about turning "THE BIG 4-0."

About my vasectomy and the way I walked for a week.

About hair growing out of my ears.

About wearing my pants either very high.

Or very low.

Asking inane Rooneyesque questions like "What is it about

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men as they get older? Why do their noses begin to look like spoiled fruit. Why is that?"

But I can't bring myself to do it. I like being the age that I am.

I know it doesn't make great copy but I have three beautiful kids. A sexy wife. Business is good.

I would have to stretch to bitch.

Sure I flirt with 220. Sure I am having trouble focusing on fine print.

So my dirty little secret is that I would prefer not to drive at night.

So what?

I don't have zits.

I am not afraid of sex.

I don't live in an apartment with nine other guys.

My car starts.

I enjoy having Sunday breakfast with the woman I slept with on Saturday night.

My nose isn't bulbous. Yet.

And I bought really good firewood this year.

I am also beginning to realize a true gift of maturity.

Freedom.

Like some crusty, whittling backwoodsman, I am starting to treat dopes rudely.

I am beginning to not give a damn about petty opinions.

Oh, I'm not totally oblivious to the sensitivities of others. I mean, I still bathe.

But as I approach 40, I find that I have less time to waste time.

Is that a clock I hear ticking?

I was in a meeting in Chicago last month. Pitching a project. It was a moderately high-level gathering. There were some expensive suits at the table. Some mope began telling why I would have difficulty guiding my production to fruition. After he went into his pessimistic harangue for the third time I pulled him up short and

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proclaimed, "Hey John. I turn 40 next month. If I wait for you to get enthused about a project, I'll be dead. This will happen. With or without you."

The other guys at the table pricked up their ears. The thing is happening.

It was kinda fun being up on my hind legs.

This isn't happening all of a sudden, however.

It is melodrama to assume that the curtain of middle age drops abruptly as you take the call at 40.

The onset of middle age seems to come in fits and bursts.

Your little sister gets gray hair.

Your son races you down the driveway. You work to keep it close.

Your nine-year-old daughter turns her head and laughs. For a moment she looks like a woman.

Middle age began for me in Boston.

I was thirty-seven.

I was shooting Dennis Miller at The Garden. You got it. The Hallowed Parquet. At lunch a game ensued.

We were going two-on-two. Our opponents were two younger stagehands. Strong, but a lot of wasted motion. Poor passers. They had never seen anyone fight through a pick in their lives.

My shot had nice rotation that day and was dropping enough to engender heckling from the crew.

With three seconds of my youth remaining, I put up an 18 foot jump shot from just inside and left of the key.

With two seconds left in my prolonged boyhood the shot caromed off the iron and came deep to the left corner.

I moved to the ball.

In the last second in the life of Young John, I picked the ball off the second bounce and planted my left foot to turn and shoot again.

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A sharp bang.

I still can't believe the soft tissue around the knee called the anterior cruciate and medial collateral ligaments can make that much noise.

But they did.

I fell to the parquet (nice touch, eh?). Thought I might toss breakfast for a moment. Went a little cold and shocky. I remember thinking at that moment that I had become old.

Eventually finished the shot. Returned to Madison via Northwest and wheel chair.

The pain didn't interfere with my sleep that night but I kept jerking awake. I kept hearing my knee explode.

It was yelling good-bye to the days when I could do anything I wanted.

The next morning I asked the good doctor for the prognosis.

"Well, John, if you were a young athlete I would operate on you today," he said.

"Doc. I am a young athlete," I replied.

He laughed.

What the hell. You can't run without a limp forever. Besides, I take more pleasure watching my son run than running myself. Certainly worth the price of bidding one's knee adieu. Such is the trade.

But there is the downside of 40. It has to do with all those good-byes.

Wife Diane ran into Susan at Hilldale the other day. She gave Di a big hug. My wife was a bit surprised by this as she had just seen her at volleyball the week before. Diane asked her how she was doing. "Not so well," Susan replied. "I was just diagnosed with breast cancer. I start chemo next week."

"Say good-bye to my hair," she said.

There are even tougher good-byes.

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A man died last month. He influenced my life. He was healthy. And then he died in his sleep.

The last time I talked with George he was telling us to let ourselves into his new cabin in Manitowish Waters. We could wait and chat when he got back from dinner with friends.

We stopped by the empty retreat. We idled in the quiet. The smell of new knotty pine. A lone loon calling on the lake. It was drizzling and twilight.

The kids were getting tired so we left. I didn't cry for George till I got to his funeral. I leafed through the program. Then Diane, eyes misting, pointed to the cover. It was a hand-drawn picture of the cabin.

We had been thinking about building our own place some day up North. When we got older.

We break ground this month.

Regards,
John

February 1993



HOME ALONE 3

Dear Doug,

She left.

Packed her bags.

Walked out the door.

Now it's just me, Kate, Maggie and Johnny.

And a note about medications and car pools.