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## The beginning of the end

Few experiences leave one feeling fundamentally different from how one was before. Having one's first child is one, with the heady combination of pride in achievement, new responsibility, and the sense of participation in the flow of history producing an internal re-orientation which can never be completely reversed. Becoming a Christian is another such experience, though getting married, for some reason is usually not—I suppose because marriage is just a stage in a relationship. Coming very close to death, or perhaps being imprisoned, can be a crucial turning point, but I cannot claim to have personal experience of either. Apart from these few, though, it is difficult to think of any more.

I certainly never expected to have my world shaken radically by such a mundane occurrence as my thirtieth birthday. I woke with an indefinable conviction that something in the world about me had changed. I didn't seem to *look* any different—the usual narcissistic glance in the bathroom mirror was as disheartening as ever—and the children treated me with no more or less respect than hitherto—as usual, they treated me with none—but something felt odd. It was almost as if one had slipped into another space/time continuum, where one might suddenly notice that the toaster was plugged into the gas, or the dog was reading the paper.

And as I walked into the surgery, was it my imagination, or did the receptionists glance at me with that deferential smile usual reserved for a venerated senior partner? Had I at last acquired that measured, unhurried tread so typical of a seasoned member of the medical profession?

Eventually I realised that somewhere in my subconscious, the magic number 30 held a deep and mystical significance. It seemed to mark the belated end of that unnaturally long medical adolescence and the arrival of a new era of. . . not maturity, exactly.

## Ruminant

That comes much earlier (if it comes at all, which isn't invariable, even for doctors), when the child who believed that everything his father said was right has passed through the stage of realising that everything his father said was wrong, to the understanding that it doesn't matter either way. No, it was more a sense of completion, of belonging, of having found a place in the world.

The time had come when a difference of opinion with a hospital doctor made one doubt *his* competence, rather than one's own. It was the time when the patient's remark that one looks too young to be a doctor ceases to be embarrassing, and becomes complimentary.

Unfortunately, it was also an untimely reminder that years are passing. I first began to realise this in my first month of house-surgeondom, when I was talking to one of the nurses on the late evening shift. I chanced to ask her what she thought of Jimi Hendrix, whom I had seen in concert only a few weeks before I had commenced my now recently ended time as a student. "Oh," she said scathingly, "he was a bit before my time." Suddenly, one sees that life is no longer plodding on in an orderly fashion, but hurtling unchecked towards some imminent and undefined cataclysm. One's thirty-first year comes, and one has scarcely had time to look around one, let alone get a Nobel Prize, write a novel or two, or learn to listen to Janaček's *Sinfonietta* without thinking of *Crown Court*, when bang! Suddenly you're menopausal.

I can see myself before too long desperately chatting up female medical students, and running in the London Marathon, in a vain attempt to prove that the elixir of youth still courses in my veins, but my body knows better. The scales show that those late-night chinkies are no longer being metabolised away into thin air by juvenescent enzymes; I am afraid of taking up yoga in case I get stuck, and there is an irritating clunk in my neck whenever I move my head to the right.

To quote the famous song (or it will be famous, one of these days),

*"When I'm old I won't be sad  
If I don't go blind or mad."*

Or, as Robert Browning put it (they said it was Robert Browning in the science fiction novel in which I read it),

*"Grow old along with me!  
The best is yet to be  
The last of life,*

*for which the first was made. . ."*

No, I cannot say that the approach of old age has any terrors for me. Indeed, I look forward to retiring from the rat race and sitting, like Malcolm Muggeridge, smiling at the idiocy of the young. Age will come to me like an old friend.

I just wish it wouldn't come so flaming soon.▪

## Late diagnosis

They don't make diseases like they used to. I refer to a very interesting programme on the box recently about Philip II of Spain, who apart from being a keen supporter of the Spanish Inquisition, and inventing the Spanish Armada and hence the Royal Navy, died of a horrible and loathsome disease.

It never seems easy to decide from ancient records what illnesses actually afflicted people. In some cases this may be due to poor observation, but in some cases the diseases themselves must have changed, for example, the leprosy of the Old Testament, which is painstakingly described and categorised, but bears no resemblance to any modern disease, least of all leprosy.

But back to our Philip. It is recorded that he spent his last 53 days in agony from loathsome sores, which made it too painful to move, so that his sheets were never changed and he lay in a stinking mound of pus and excrement until his loathsome end. All these old diseases seem to have included loathsome sores. But it is hard to think of any contemporary disease which would produce them, even untreated. A lot of diseases produce one or two loathsome sores (such as cancer), or a lot of not-very-loathsome ones, but although I am sure speculation is rife, putting a diagnostic label on Philip's disease is not easy. I wonder if in fact the sores were not simply the result of poor nursing care—perhaps he just had a bad case of bronchitis, and simply developed pressure areas which were allowed to get out of hand. That would certainly have been unpleasant.

It is easy to take two-hourly turning for granted, but oh, Miss Nightingale, what a debt the world owes to you and your disciples!▪