

Old News

Bill Bryson

‘Science finds the secret of ageing,’ announced a headline in our paper the other day, which surprised me because I’ve never thought of it as a secret. It just happens. No secret in that.

As far as I am concerned, there are three good things about getting older. I can sleep sitting up, I can watch Morse repeats over and over without knowing how they are going to finish, and I can’t remember the third thing. That’s the problem with getting older, of course — you can’t remember anything.

For me, it’s getting worse. Increasingly I have telephone conversations with my wife that go like this:

‘Hello, dear. I’m in town. Why am I here?’

‘You’ve gone to get your hair cut.’

‘Thank you.’

You would think that as I get older this would get better because there is less of my mind to grow absent, but it doesn’t seem to work that way. You know how as the years tick by you find yourself more and more standing in some part of the house you don’t often visit — the laundry area, perhaps — looking around with pursed lips and a thoughtful gaze, trying to remember why you are there? It used to be with me that if I retraced my steps to where I began, the purpose of my exploration would come back to me. No more. Now I can’t remember where I began. No idea at all.

So I wander through the house for 20 minutes looking for some sign of recent activity — a lifted floorboard, perhaps, or a burst pipe, or maybe a telephone receiver on its side and a curious little voice squawking: ‘Bill? You still there?’ — something that might have prompted me to get up and go off in search of a notepad or stopcock or goodness knows what. Usually in the course of these wanderings I find some other thing that needs attending to — a lightbulb that’s burned out, say — so I go off to the kitchen cupboard where the lightbulbs are kept and open the door and.., yes, that’s right, have no idea why I am there. So the process starts again.

Time is my particular downfall. Once something moves into the past tense, I lose all track of it. My sincerest dread in life is to be arrested and asked: ‘Where were you between the hours of 8.50 a.m. and 11.02 a.m. on the morning of December 11?’ When this happens, I will just hold out my wrists for the handcuffs and let them take me away because there isn’t the remotest chance of my recalling. It has been like this for me for as long as I can remember, which of course is not very long.

My wife does not have this problem. She can remember everything that ever happened and when. I mean every little detail. Out of the blue she will say things to me like: ‘It was sixteen years ago Sunday your grandmother died.’

‘Really?’ I reply, amazed. ‘I had a grandmother?’

The other thing that happens a lot these days is that when I am out with my wife somebody I would swear I have never seen before comes up and chats with us in a friendly and familiar fashion.

‘Who was that?’ I will ask when he has departed.

‘That was Lottie Rhubarb’s husband.’

I think for a moment, but nothing comes.

‘Who’s Lottie Rhubarb?’

‘You met her at the Talmadges’ barbecue at Big Bear Lake.’

‘I’ve never been to Big Bear Lake.’

‘Yes, you have. For the Talmadges’ barbecue.’

I think again for a minute. ‘So who are the Talmadges?’

‘The people on Park Street who had the barbecue for the Skowolskis.’

By now I am beginning to feel desperate. ‘Who are the Skowolskis?’

‘The Polish couple you met at the barbecue at Big Bear Lake.’

‘I didn’t go to a barbecue at Big Bear Lake.’

‘Of course you did. You sat on a skewer.’

‘I sat on a skewer?’

We have had conversations like this that have gone on for three days, and I have still been none the wiser at the end.

Anyway, you are probably wondering about this secret of aging I alluded to in the opening paragraph. According to the newspaper account, it appears that a Dr Gerard Schellenberg at the Seattle Veterans Administration Medical Research Center has isolated the genetic culprit behind ageing. It seems that embedded in each gene is something called a helicase, which is part of a family of enzymes, and that this helicase, for no good reason that I can see, peels apart the two strands of chromosomes that make up your DNA, and the next thing you know you are standing at the kitchen cupboard trying to remember what the dickens brought you there. I can’t give you any more details because naturally I have mislaid the article, and anyhow it hardly matters because in a week or two somebody else will come along and uncover some other secret of ageing, and everyone will forget about Dr Schellenberg and his findings — which is, of course, precisely what I have begun to do already.

So in conclusion we can see that forgetfulness is probably not such a bad thing after all. I believe that’s the point I was trying to make, but to tell you the truth I don’t remember now.