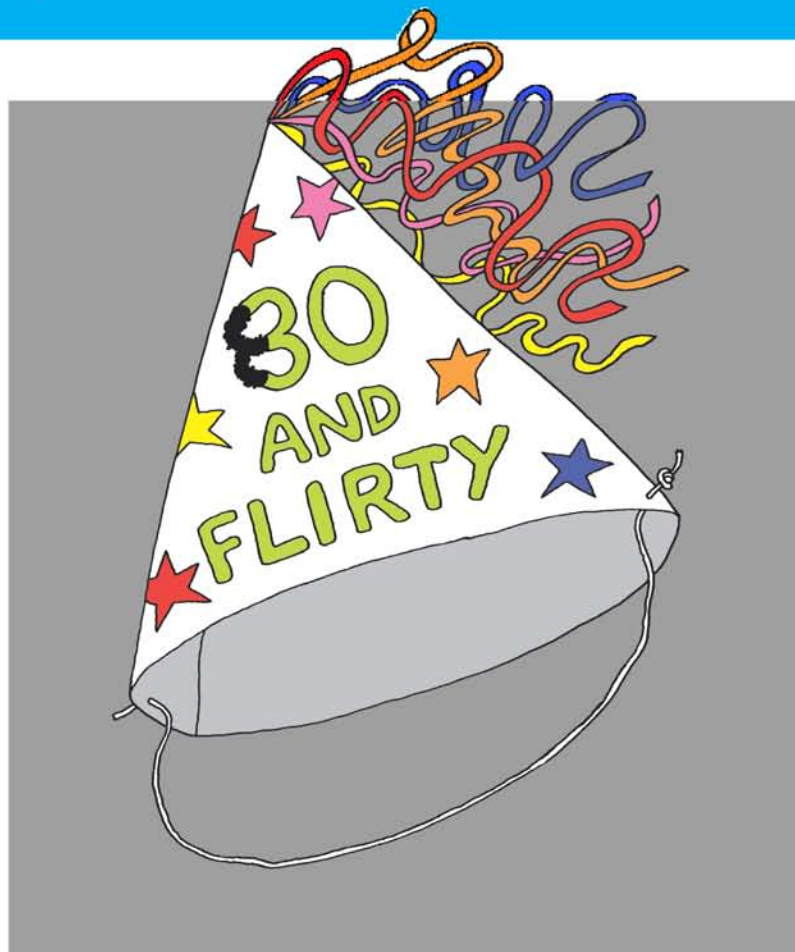


Forever Young

By Firoozeh Dumas



On the fourth night of the cruise, we all waited in the main restaurant, Versailles, while my brother escorted my parents from their cabin. The restaurant, complete with gilded columns, sun-patterned wallpaper and enormous chandeliers, highlighted all that has remained in Western culture from the reign of Louis XIV, mainly the words “faux” and “buffet.”

As soon as my father showed up, we started singing “Happy Birthday” in English. It would have been more natural for us to sing in Persian, but if you are part of a large Middle Eastern contingency these days, you’re already scaring people. Add to that a loud song with guttural sounds and clapping, and you have passengers speed-dialing the Department of Homeland Security.

Once we finished singing, my father looked rather pleased. That’s when another passenger approached my father, introduced himself as “Chuck” and said that it was also *his* 80th birthday. “I am not 80,” my father declared. This left Chuck a bit confused. My father was, after all, wearing a hat declaring “80!”

“I am 76,” my father continued. “Maybe 75.” At this point, Chuck left.

My father, Kazem, was born in Ahwaz, Iran. That much he knows for sure. His birth date — the year, the month, the day — is anybody’s guess. Whenever a child was born in my father’s family, my grandfather, Javad,

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recited a prayer and noted the birth date in the family Koran. The system worked without a glitch until someone lost the Koran. Not a big deal. Back then, you only needed the year of your birth, exact or approximate, to obtain a passport. And birthday parties did not exist.

When my father obtained an engineering job in America in the early 70’s, the immigration forms required a birth date. He picked March 18, my mother’s birthday. “Forms will be easier to fill out,” he said. “And if I ever forget my birthday, I can ask your mom.” (Needless to say, my mother resents the fact that my father is a birthday squatter.)

When immigrants come to America, they often have the opportunity to develop in ways not possible in their native lands, perhaps becoming lawyers or owners of Jiffy Lubes. For my father, America meant having perfect strangers sing him “Happy Birthday.” It all started innocently one day when my brother told our waitress in Bob’s Big Boy that it was my father’s birthday. My father had never in his lifetime blown out a birthday candle or had anyone sing him “Happy Birthday.”

When the kind waitress appeared with a free slice of cake, a candle, two other waitresses and a busboy as backup singers, a dormant gene awakened. My father’s face went from confusion to elation. He was shocked. From then on, several times a year, my father made a point of telling waitresses that it was his birthday. His favorite recurring birthday spot was a local Mexican chain with a particularly rousing rendition of “Feliz Compleanos,” complete with maracas and a guitar. As his birthday sombrero collection amassed, so did our objections. “Aren’t you embarrassed?” I often asked.

“I have a party deficit,” he always said.

“But it’s not your birthday,” I reminded him.

“It *could* be,” he said.

Then when my father entered his mid-70’s, something strange happened. He decided that his birth certificate was wrong and that he was definitely two, if not four or five, years younger than previously thought. We laughed, but he was adamant. “I can still eat spicy foods before bedtime. No *way* is that late 70’s.”

As his 80th birthday approached, we wanted to celebrate in a place where he would feel too self-conscious to object to the fact of his age. That is why 47 members of my extended family ended up on an Alaskan cruise, with my unsuspecting father in tow. I was responsible for buying the hats before the cruise. I soon discovered that preprinted hats go up to age “50 and Fabulous!” One place had “60 and Sexy!” but nothing higher; “80 and . . . What Was I Saying?” would have been perfect for my father, but that’s a winning slogan not yet widely available. I finally purchased hats declaring “30!” With the help of my willing 10-year-old daughter and a permanent marker, the hats became “80!”

None of my aunts wanted to wear the conical hat. “I didn’t do my hair and put on hair spray for this,” Aunt Fatima declared, getting the rest of my aunts riled up. “He won’t even admit he’s 80!” added my Aunt Sedi-geh. As our ship glided past majestic glaciers, a sight that should impress anyone born in the arid climate of Ahwaz, my aunts and uncles continued discussing the hats. My aunts added that if they had the bald spots like their brothers had, *then* they would wear them. I understood their opposition. Why flatten the do for someone who is aging backward while they, the now much older siblings, age forward every single year?

That evening, my father received not just a free slice but an entire white cake covered with pink roses. There are benefits to turning 80, even if he would never admit it. ■