

**VIEWPOINT**

# who wants to live forever?

In a world obsessed with looking young for as long as possible, ANGELA SAINI wonders if ageing isn't such a bad thing after all



**DORIAN GRAY SYNDROME**

Science makes it possible to keep looking young, but it comes at a cost

**I**n my apartment block there used to live this business tycoon who refused to accept that he was getting older. He had white hair, was slightly balding, but his chest was as gym-hard as a builder's. Masking laughter lines with a cheeky grin, he would lead a new woman up the stairs most weekends. And he dressed like Justin Bieber. Then, without notice, one day he sold his bachelor pad and disappeared.

I occasionally imagine what happened to him. Was the effort finally too much? Did he get married and retire? Or did he just dye his hair and transfer to a tropical paradise with more women and more dancing? I suspect the latter. I used to tell myself that people like him were objects of ridicule, mutton dressed as lamb. But these days, millions of men and women are performing the same Peter Pan trick and living like twenty-somethings into their sixties.

## The numbers

It seems that those among us having the most fun are no longer awkward teenagers but middle-aged go-getters and spirited pensioners with the money and freedom to live the high life. Realising that youth really is wasted on the young, they've claimed it for themselves. Journalist Catherine Mayer describes this god-defying phenomenon as "amortality" in her latest book, *Amortality: The Pleasures and Perils of Living Agelessly*: in other words, how millions of us are locking away our birth certificates and ignoring the passage of time.

So, over time, my pity for that young old man in my apartment block has become mixed with a pinch of envy. While I'm cooking dinner with my husband, he's no doubt in a nightclub somewhere sipping mojitos. By rights, as the younger of the two of us, at 30, shouldn't that be me? It's almost a cosmic injustice.

Fifty years ago, the cold, hard facts of science—namely, the twin pressures of gravity and genetics—would have stopped any of us from being able to defy mortality. But now the same science that once condemned us is pulling us back from the brink of unsightly age. Cutting-edge technology means age is no longer a deterrent. It's perfectly possible to sidestep the decades and enter an alternate reality where our thirties, forties, fifties and sixties melt into one another.

Was the sprightly tycoon in my building taking Viagra? It's estimated that at least nine of these little blue pills are sold every second worldwide, pumping life back into millions of men. And we women can get our shots of youth in the form of the female hormone oestrogen. Studies have suggested that hormone replacement therapy, administered post-menopause, not only treats hot flushes and low sex drive but also makes older brains behave more like those of younger women. Meanwhile, fertility treatments, though gruelling, are freeing us from our biological clocks—IVF allowed Bhateri Devi, a 66-year-old from Haryana, to give birth to triplets last year.

## The prescription

Of course, half the battle lies in looking youthful. Being a kid at heart is a little less fun when your face is halfway down to your elbows and your wrinkles are as deep as canyons. Half a century ago, only moisturising day and night would have had any hope of holding back the ravages of time. But anti-ageing products have come a long way since then. Lotions nowadays aren't just stuffed with vitamins A, C and E, but also pumped with peptides, retinols, even ingredients derived from stem cell re-

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search, all of which claim to boost the skin's natural healing processes.

And if it's too late for creams, there are always more drastic measures: a surgical facelift perhaps, or pumping fat from the bulgier parts of your body into your cheeks. Cosmetic fillers, chemical peels and Botox have become staples of beauty salon menus. And hair transplants are common among actors on the Hollywood circuit. Of course, that's just from the neck upwards. Don't forget liposuction, liposculpture, breast uplifts, knee lifts and varicose vein removal. *Phew!* It's enough to have you cashing in your pension early.

## The dark side

The real problem with clinging to your teens and twenties is that it takes such an enormous amount of effort. Who wants to be stuck in an operating theatre under a plastic surgeon's knife, followed

by weeks in a hospital bed? Who wants to skip every late-night party to make sure they don't miss out on their beauty sleep? And who wants to forgo chocolate cake and spend hours in the gym? Although I envied the bachelor who lived in the apartment above mine, I never saw the lengths to which he must have gone to stay young. Lissome actors and pop stars in their late fifties probably spend more time with their personal trainers than they do in fancy restaurants.

So I can't help wondering just how much of their lives fabulously amortal men and women actually have remaining to behave like young people. Being in your twenties isn't just about having taut skin; it's about going partying, dating, eating junk food and staying up all night. My most youthful trait, for instance, is my love for McDonald's burgers—something only a teenager would eat. The real pleasure of being young is being carefree, knowing that you have your whole life ahead of you to take risks and make mistakes. You can't buy that kind of spirit.

And even if you could, would you want it? The hard reality of youth is acne and boy trouble. There are advantages to being an older woman: for one, fewer inhibitions—and bags of confidence, hard-won over decades of life experience;

more often than not, a settled career, which means extra funds for designer clothes and exotic holidays. No amount of cajoling will ever get me to load up a backpack again and hitch a ride like a student on vacation. And given the choice, I would rather have a civilised drink in an air-conditioned bar than line up for a sweaty rave.

And that's why, despite the wrinkles, I like to think that I'm happy being an ordinary old mortal. Of course, I still moisturise twice a day. And naturally, I go to the gym more often than I used to. I guess I don't want to look like the oldest one of my friends... Dammit, I can already feel myself being pulled into the black hole of amortality. If scientists do ever invent a magic pill that makes us truly young again, you'll find me at the front of the queue at the pharmacy. ■

Angela Saini is the author of *Geek Nation: How Indian Science is Taking Over the World*