

Life Experience

by Nigel Doylerush

Karen likes to make a big deal about life experience. Specifically how much more she has than me. What that actually means, she's never made clear. The definition changes and mutates as the years go by, always in her favour.

She's a year older when we first meet. We were kids and a year really meant something. When you've only seen 9 years, that extra one is like an unknowable gulf. Imagine all the extra things you can see in one year. A whole summer of extra trees climbed, another winter of snowballs thrown. 12 months of secrets discovered, 365 days of growing and learning and maturing. About to go into Secondary school where they teach you the secret, adult things that kids can't be told. 10 seemed impossibly exotic back then. Double figures! You could sit on the grown ups table at Christmas, get a sip of champagne, play scrabble and stay up at least an hour longer. Parents never understand that. They don't remember. They just see kids. You're roughly the same size so you're lumped together. Karen's mum and mine were old uni friends. So when she came up from Cambridge following a messy divorce, me and Karen became de-facto friends by virtue of our parents being in the same room a lot. We'd be shut away upstairs so Karen's Mum could weep loudly, bemoaning men everywhere ("Not you Mark. I'm sure Mary's raised you right. I'm sure you wouldn't drain a woman of all she's worth and shit her out at the side of the road").

That was the first time that Karen felt older. Once that sensation was established it became impossible to shake for years afterwards. Looking back it's obvious now that she was being indulged, patronised with heavily watered down booze and double points on board games. (Look at the poor love. Hasn't she been through a lot. Oh go on then, have a little champagne.)

That feeling peaked when I was 17. It was a house party, an 18th we had improbably both ended up being invited to. She had all kinds of drinking games practiced and prepared, a big bottle of Wodka and a seemingly impenetrable tolerance. I made the mistake of trying to keep up with her and threw up bad. Oh god! Heart, Lungs, liver and spleen. The only thing I really remember about that night was the taxi home, my head lolling against the passenger door, sucking in the cool air from the open window, willing my stomach to settle down. "Oh Mark" she cooed, "This really wont do. Someone needs to whip you into shape". That summer was probably when we were closest. Most of her friends had gone travelling, narrowing her social options. So she decided that I needed preparing for the big wide world. My cultural knowledge was judged to be wildly underdeveloped so I was issued with a curriculum including books:

- Catcher in the Rye,
- 1984,
- No Logo

Music:

- Bowie,
- Pixies,
- Aphex Twin

Art-house films

- La-Haine,
- Kubrick,
- Irreversible (taking great pleasure in watching me squirm)

I was taken to clubs, being theatrically snuck past bouncers who she would distract with a smile and a low cut top. She'd flirt drinks for us from gullible men. I'd be her fake brother when she wanted attention and her fake boyfriend when she didn't. And yeah, I'm willing to admit that those moments when she'd grab my hand and press herself against me until random guy number 12 got the hint and left her alone, gave me a bit of a thrill.

That was just before she went on her gap year. I went straight to

uni from college so we graduated at the same time. I saw her infrequently over that time as she rarely came home over summer. There was always a boyfriend to stay with or a once-in-a-lifetime holiday paid by her father in one of his periodic guilt explosions. I think it panicked her that we were going through university at the same time, that she had lost her apprentice. I was doing much better than her on my course and by the end I'd pretty much been guaranteed a job from an engineering firm I'd done work experience with. At one point she had to beg to be allowed to stay on her course. When I saw her she was always full of stories of wild nights out and adventures. Although when you judged the facts later the events didn't seem so extraordinary. She was always a good storyteller though. She still used the term "life experience" a lot. Becoming more and more of a mantra as we got older as it became less and less relevant, it's definition getting more vague. When you've seen 20 years, one year is much less impressive. As we got older it seemed that life experience could only be accrued through certain activities, crucially the kind of activities that she had done more of. Travelling for example: all the cultures and sights she had seen that I hadn't. I don't know how much life experience you can accrue by spending 6 weeks stoned on a beach in Thailand. According to Karen it's a lot.

Whatever distance there had been between us finally evaporated in the moments after we slept together. She held me so tight. Buried her face in my neck. Her arms gripped me tightly. I had expected her to disengage suddenly with a bright smile and some constructive criticism of my technique. That had been the pretext of this encounter. It was a lesson, the final one in my education. Her Dad was living in the same city as the firm I worked for. She had come up to see him but been bailed on at the last minute. She turned up at my door with a bottle of Gordons Gin in one hand and an overnight bag in the other. We ordered pizza, watched trash TV, talked old times and slowly got pleasantly, warmly, smoothly drunk. We sat each end of the sofa our legs meeting in the middle. She said

something, I cant even remember what, and I laughed in mock outrage, grabbing her foot and tickling the surface. She wriggled, spasming with laughter before she could pull free, launching herself at me just like a million times when we were kids. I let her pin me and there was a moment where we looked at each other, suddenly aware of how much had changed. She looked at me with the same sly smile she had when she introduced me to absinthe (Heart, Lungs, Liver and Spleen!), when she put on the DVD of Irreversible (don't look away Mark) and so many other times in our youth. "You have almost completed your training young apprentice." She said quietly, leaning back and pulling her top off in one movement "I have one more lesson". But things had changed since we were 17. I'd had a couple of girlfriends and, without wanting to make a big deal about it, there wasn't anything for her to teach me. But that wasn't what changed. In those moments after, I moved to break away but she just pulled me tighter, entwining our legs further. "No. Just for now,just..." It became clear, in that moment that this wasn't about completing my apprenticeship. For the first time she was willing to admit, or perhaps she was just forced to admit that she needed me. Attention, affection, a warm body held close, no words, just need. With my free hand I pulled the duvet over us and we slept. She was gone in the morning.

