

# Off The cuff

DON MILLIGAN'S

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## I kissed a girl and I liked it!

**JUST JOKING.** This, at any rate, is what Katheryn Elizabeth Hudson, better known as Katy Perry, wants us to think. In her 2008 song she leaped to fame with this tawdry staple of heterosexual pornography – girls kissing girls – while being reassuringly in need of a man to satisfy her real, as opposed to her merely “experimental” desires. This is of a piece with the rest of her repertoire, which includes “Ur So Gay”, an attack on a boy for being effeminate and ineffectual and perhaps not very interested in Katy Perry.

Now, she appears to have landed Russell Brand as a fiancé; from now on they will be able to share notes on exactly how to build upon their talent for celebrity. Whichever way you look at it, its got to beat being the child of Pentecostal preachers, speaking in tongues, and having to pray for really great waves at Christian surf camp. The girl done good – leaving home at seventeen making her own way in the world – it’s an achievement. Not as impressive as Brand’s talent and timing, but still considerable. No doubt she’d like to be Lady Gaga, but that spot’s taken, so skimpy outfits and cheeky irreverent pop chick will have to do.

Katy is all over the place at the moment doing promo appearances for the launch of her album, *Teenage Dream*, which will be released this week. I have no doubt that it will not be a patch on *The Undertones*, but then they had something to sing about. “Teenage Kicks” had none of the ‘just joking’ leers and the ironic offensiveness of Katy’s stock-in-trade, just the enthusiastic voice of those eager to break free from parental restraint:

I’m gonna call her on the telephone  
Have her over ‘cause I’m all alone  
I need excitement oh I need it bad

And she's the best, I've ever had.

"Teenage dreams, so hard to beat" in 1978, and I imagine they still are, even though times are even harder now for young people, who are lucky if they become independent by their late twenties. Often they find themselves having to juggle their emotional and sexual lives in the privacy of their childhood bedrooms, stranded in the bosom of the parental home. Both jobs and mortgages out of reach, retreat from the flatshare and their bid for freedom, back to Mum and Dad.

It was different when they set out for university at eighteen, full of adventure and the promise of independence. Nowadays, of course, even that is beginning to ebb away, as eighteen-year-olds are encouraged to stay home, do apprenticeships, or study at the local college – the debts will be smaller – it's more sensible all around. Even those who make it to university will still be financially in hock to the bank and in thrall to their parents for many years to come; the option of a return 'home' on graduation cannot be ruled out.

This lengthening dependence is presenting a new challenge to sociologists to find a term as good as 'teenager' for people in their twenties who have yet to become self-supporting. As education and training gets longer, and entry-level jobs get harder to come by, the pay is often so miserable that renting without sharing is out of the question. If there is no romantic attachment with a person who can help with the rent and bills, then a shifting constellation of friends must be counted on and – when all else fails – there's always Mum and Dad.

Indeed, this dependence is often blamed on "baby on board" parents who are over protective, and refuse to let their kids go out into the world unaided. Indeed, very soon many will be driving their kids to university for the first time. They will arrive with cars packed with laptops, TVs, iPod docks, clothes, and even a month's supply of food for their offspring. In cities like Manchester there will literally be traffic jams as the

parents arrive with the First Year kids in tow. For those who have omitted to fill the student's fridge a trip to the nearest supermarket is an obligatory part of the package as Mum or Dad wields their credit card for the vaguely detached boy or girl at their side.

In a small country like England the parents don't attempt to stick around, after all their kids are usually no more than a couple of hours drive away; if the mood takes them they can always see each other on the weekend. In the States though it's a different story. There, parents can be tempted to stay over, on or near the campus, attempting to participate at every stage of the freshman's entry into college life. Things have got so bad that colleges are beginning to introduce collective formal 'parting ceremonies' in order to prise the kids away from their parents – "It's time to go home now Mom".

No doubt, letting go of your kids for the first time, is challenging for parents. After all they know exactly how rough things can get out there in the world; it is hardly surprising that they find it difficult to suddenly relinquish the habits of close supervision built up over the preceding eighteen years. The cord must be cut however, and the colleges are doing their best to help the kids get rid of the folks as quickly as possible after unloading the contents of the car into the dorm room.

Unfortunately, this might not be such a challenging moment, as students are now encouraged to shun the unpredictable business of meeting entirely different kinds of unfamiliar people and personalities. Instead of beginning to acquire one of the key skills needed for independence – learning how to get to know complete strangers – they are now encouraged to search for the "perfect roommate" on the Internet before they set foot in college. *Uroomsurf.com* and many others will offer to match you with a roommate just like you.

Erica who's going to Bowling Green State University in Ohio put it like this: "OMG! I found my roommate, I'm so excited! We're meeting on President's Day. Our 94% match made everything set in stone!"

What a depressing thought, “everything set in stone” from your first day in college. The “94% match” is a reference to the survey she’s taken online to match her up with the ideal person – compatibility determined by questionnaire, rather than the ropey old trial and error, and realising that people who are different, unfamiliar, challenging and even irritating might be really worth knowing.

Like their parents the kids feel the pressure to become risk averse, even when choosing their roommates and negotiating relationships on their dorm floor or (as we say in the UK) your “Hall”. It now appears to be increasingly common to attribute these phenomena to a paradoxical lack of maturity in the parents who have failed to realise the importance of instilling a spirit of independence and adventure in their kids. These so-called “Velcro parents” are being held responsible for the extraordinary delay in the onset of adulthood.

The truth is, of course, that the years between 18 and 30 have become a new sort of period in which young people have to negotiate the complicated business of establishing themselves as independent adults in circumstances in which settled material independence is difficult or unachievable for several years after graduation.

This is not simply a transient product of recession, of overprotective parents, or of young men and women who lack the gumption to stand on their own two feet. The lengthening of years of dependence is the result of profound structural changes in economic and cultural life – everybody needs to build this into their plans and expectations – otherwise the delay in full independence will simply go on being blamed on Mum and Dad or on wimpy incompetent kids or on all of them together. Of course, Katy Perry started out on her own at 17, but she was fleeing from evangelical Christians, and anyway, we can’t all be pop stars, can we?