"Come on, Boomer, you can do it! You can do it, old man!"

My daughter, Aida, is trying to help me, I'm sure, but just two summers ago, I was learning to play Pickleball in my retirement. I was biking, hiking and swimming. Now it's all I can do to release the brake on my walker with my left hand. I'm working on learning to lift and not drag my left foot. I used to be a robust, formidable and energetic specimen of a man who did not look or act his age.

I liked that man. He was perhaps a little portly and more rotund then was good for him, but he was content and secure. He knew who he was. He carried himself with a physical confidence, and he walked with purpose.

If a person cutting in front of him while he was getting on a bus, he felt comfortable putting a hand on their shoulder and saying,"Excuse me, you seem to be butting in, get back where you were." Then he would stare and wait and keep his hand on the shoulder.He looked like a retired NFL football player, he could be an intimidating presence when he needed to be.

After attempting to dress to impress in his teens and failing, he opted for blending in. His wardrobe and demeanor communicated that he didn't care and he wasn't going to try. The truth may have been that rejection hurt. He settled into a look: plaid shirts, the occasional fisherman's sweater, khaki pants, and nondescript brown shoes. To dress up he put on a cream-colored shirt, slapped on a conservative tie and slipped into a dark sports coat.

He cut his hair the same way for 40 years and he wore a neat little goatee which he trimmed into a soul patch for a few months in his early 40s. Someone told him that they didn't really like that look. It made him look like he was trying too hard to look young. So he grew the goatee back.

When his hair started to thin and he developed a little bald spot at the back of his head, he started to obsess about what he might be able be do to make it not seem so noticeable. But he decided that he wasn't going to let his hair become so important to him. It was never great hair, and it was always thin and he never invested in hairstyles, just haircuts. So, he shaved his head.

When his eyesight started to go, he got round glasses and a black leather jacket. Someone told him he looked like a man in his early forties! Clearly, the hair had not been doing him any favors. He was glad he decided to shave it all off. His wife told him he had a well shaped head. That whole look, with the leather jacket and all, was very popular in 2003. He even started to wear a subtle masculine smelling cologne.

If you asked him, he would have told you that he didn't care about style. When his daughters hit their teens and started to fuss about hair, nails and clothes, he just rolled his eyes was thankful not to have to work that hard to fit in or feel good about himself. He had a sense of humor and a personality. He expected people to like him, or not to like him. As long as enough people liked him for who he was, the rest could go to hell.

The goatee turned to white and he considered dying it, but that would be to care. He was determined not to be vain and not to pander or work hard for approval and acceptance. He had more dignity than that. He was active. He was fit. Head was well read. And he was comfortable in his skin.

And then things went all to shit when I was 65. Here I am, in a hospital hallway, in diapers, pushing a walker down the hall while my daughter calls me an old man. I want to snap at her, but I don't want to show that she's getting under my skin. Being called a boomer bothered me, too. Of course, I was a boomer, but the word had overtones and connotations that I did not like. So, I smiled and continued trudging to my room.

After a Whipple surgery for my bile duct cancer, and chemotherapy, I lost 70 pounds, or as the doctor put it, 32 kilos. My heart started to beat irregularly and became enlarged. It became weak and stopped circulating as much blood as it should. I became puffed up with excess fluid, and my kidney function started to decline. Every morning I had to take a handful of pills, including a diuretic to help me get rid of excess fluid. I was so tired!

Then I caught covid which led to a stroke: three blood clots in the brain. They sucked them out of my brain with a hollow tube that they pushed through one of my arteries and into my skull, but there was damage. Now, I can't walk without a walker. I am working very hard to regain the use of my left hand, I have very poor balance, and all of my muscles have atrophied and shrunk. I am unable to go to the bathroom or wash without assistance, and I need help getting dressed and getting out of bed.

Now I am definitely not comfortable in my skin. in fact, my skin hangs like bat wings under my arms. My pectoral muscles have shrunk. When I look in the mirror I am reminded of those Indigenous women in the National Geographic magazines I grew up with: wizened flaps of skin, hanging from my chest with nipples on the ends of them. My belly is gone and has been replaced by a flappy apron of skin.

My face has collapsed and my cheeks are Hollow. My glasses look huge on my face. my goatee has grown and I am unable to trim it as I usually do because I only have the full use of my right hand. I don't recognize myself when I look in the mirror. I look too much like my father in the months before he died. The nurses are bringing me meal replacements between besides and high calorie snacks to help me gain some weight.

Cancer blocked my bile duct, stopping the flow of bile to my intestines to help me digest my food. I was starving. besides, I was in so much pain, I didn't really feel like eating anyway. I feel like one of those giant Michelin man balloons. Life just let the air out of me and it's preparing to fold me up and put me away.

One night, I couldn't sleep and I realized that, even if my stroke rehabilitation is successful, if I walk again without a walker and if I relearn to use my left hand, the doctors have set my expectations: they expect the cancer to come back. The surgery was unsuccessful. They left macroscopic traces of cancer behind. Before the stroke, they told me that, if I wanted to go on any trips, I should do it soon, but now that's out of the question. I need a wheelchair to leave the hospital.

I lay in my bed and despaired. That's it, I thought, my life is over. I always thought it would be more pleasant to look back on than it was right now, but maybe that's just because I'm depressed.

in the morning, I wake up in practice pinching my thumb and forefinger. I lift my left foot off the bed and try to hold it there as long as I can. I wiggle whatever fingers will move on my left hand haphazardly and I try to flex my foot up and down as many times as I can. Depression aside, I start the day fighting. I recite the alphabet and repeat difficult words over and over again to improve my speech. I swallow sips of thickened water and pay attention to the swallowing action so that it can become easier.

later, I attend appointments with a physiotherapist, who puts me on a sort of exercise bike at a low setting for as long as I can pedal. At first I could do it for 5 minutes, but now I'm trying to make it to 10.

Then, we do some strengthening exercises that leave me Breathless. my hands tremble. a nurse comes to get me and wheels me back to my room and, when he pours me back into bed, I feel like a marionette after someone has cut the strings. I am so terribly weak, unable to assist very much at all.