

A trip to the ballpark made Marcel Strigberger realize he's the old guy at the ballgame

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ILLUSTRATION BY RANIA ABDALLAH

Nothing prepares you for the day you start getting treated according to your age, writes Marcel Strigberger

This week, First Person writers write about fathers and family.

I went to a Blue Jays game with my son and grandson and came home with an unexpected souvenir: old age.

Now, to be clear, I am a baby boomer whose age still begins with a seven. I know the terrain. But nothing quite prepares you for the moment when the rest of the world starts treating you accordingly.

It began on the subway in Toronto.

We boarded a packed, standing-room only train, likely resembling the rush-hour transit system of Tokyo. I had been standing for perhaps 30 seconds when two people simultaneously leapt up and offered me their seats. I must have been broadcasting some sort of silent senior-in-distress signal. Between the white beard, the hearing aids and a hand that occasionally trembles, I suppose the message was not subtle.

I accepted, no hesitation. Once the train disgorged at Union Station, we joined the surge toward the stadium, a 15-minute trek involving inclined passageways, stairs and escalators. My grandson energetically shot up the steps with the grace of a gazelle and someone who has never Googled the word "arthritis." Then he turned and announced, with admirable authority, "You take the escalator, Grandpa."

I complied. But not without the uneasy feeling that somewhere above it there should have been a sign: "Old Farts I Use These"

When we arrived at the ballpark we had to go through security. A security officer kept calling out, "Open your bags please." When he saw me struggling to get my backpack off my shoulders, he said, "Take your time, sir."

I was never comfortable with being called sir. My father was called sir. And like most fathers when I was growing up, he wore a fedora hat. Here I was getting knighted to that sir salutation wearing a Blue Jays cap. What gives, I thought.

As the crowd moved on, my son offered his cellphone to be scanned allowing us entry. I thought some of the fun in entering a stadium using physical tickets was missing. I recalled as a kid in Montreal my father once secured two almost-impossible-to-get tickets to a Habs game. I proudly showed those cardboard treasures to my friends. This thrill is now *passée*. I don't see anyone approaching his peers and flashing his cellphone and boasting, "Hey look at these golds."

Our seats were in the front row overlooking the visitors' bullpen, a respectable distance from home plate and uncomfortably close to a sign that read: "Beware of Baseballs." I took this seriously. The last thing I needed at this stage of life was to be taken out by a line drive.

At one point, a bullpen pitcher warming up tossed a ball to a kid sitting nearby. The kid was ecstatic, standing up and waving around the ball while doing a Rocky Balboa cheer. I got the feeling that, had that kid not been there, the pitcher would have tossed a ball to me.

What struck me next was the baseball players' devotion to fitness. While waiting in the bullpen, they stretched, twisted and contorted themselves into positions I had previously associated only with circus performers and yoga instructors. One player executed something resembling a full leg split. I watched in awe. If I attempted that, I thought my chances of ever getting up again would be as likely as the Leafs winning the Stanley Cup.

At the end of the game, when it was time for the three of us to leave, I noticed the rest of our row stood and allowed me to exit ahead of them. Even that kid with the baseball rose, staring at me and likely thinking to himself, "Who is this old man? How did he ever make it up the steps? Maybe I should give him my baseball?"

Quite suddenly, the wisdom of old age reinterpreted this day in my mind. I remembered years ago, I had taken my own son to games. I had guided him through crowds, kept an eye on the steps, made sure he didn't wander off or fall behind. Back then, I was the one in charge, the steady hand navigating the way.

Now my son was doing that for me.

Nothing had really been lost. The direction had simply changed.

We walked out together, the three of us, carried along by the same crowd that had ushered us in. My grandson still had that boundless energy. My son walked beside me, unhurried. I realized they hadn't just taken me out to the ball game. They had taken me forward in it.

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