NOR CUSTOM STALE

An antic disposition.

BY ANATOLY BELILOVSKY

Old people move slowly. A knee may work just fine today and buckle tomorrow. A tiny turn can change a functioning joint into a monolithic block of agony.

Old people need to remember things like that.

"You look great," said Bob, looking down and chewing at his dentures.

Bob had been a good striker, back in the day, but he never learned to fool goalies. He always looked where he wanted the ball to go. So in the end, I went pro, and Bob went into insurance.

"Really good," Bob added. His feelings littered his face the way his lunch decorated his tie: a forced tight, guilty smile with pity in the tilt of his head, and a tiny trace of *Schadenfreude* in the crow's feet around his eyes.

I knew how I looked. I looked terrible: slumped shoulders, shuffling gait, shabby jacket, stained pants.

"Thanks," I whispered. "Look at us. Sixtieth reunion. Who'd'a thunk we'd live this long, eh, roomie?"

Bob looked up, his smile genuine now. "Athletes don't age as fast," he said. "I still play nine holes, every week. Like clockwork. Keeps me young."

I nodded. "It's working," I whispered. "You haven't changed a bit."

He barked out a single laugh. "Right. Not a bit," he said. Leaning back, he turned his head slowly through a short arc, sweeping his gaze over the far side of the quad. "Princeton sure has changed," he continued. "There's dorms where soccer fields used to be. Where you and I played. Mixed dorms! Not just co-ed. Mixed. Ain't that something!" He slapped his knee, winced slightly.

I nodded again.

"Trouble with your voice?" he asked.

"Sort of," I whispered.

He sighed. "Joanie had a stroke, she can't talk at all," he said. "And Todd died last year of throat cancer, he had a tracheostomy. Had to plug the hole in his neck when he wanted to say anything."

I sighed, too, and lowered my eyes. Joanie and I lived together, sophomore year. I'd never fool her for a minute.

"I worked as long as I could, only retired after I got my bypass," he said. His face took on that look again: guilt, pity and a dash of gloat. Same look he had when I'd told him

Joanie had left me. Minus the dentures and the hand tremor. "Joanie gets round-the-clock nursing. Government pays for everything," he added. "Wouldn't wanna get old in a country where you pay for medicine."

Joanie moved in with him a week later. Maybe that was why I went overseas, so I'd never have to see that look again. In either of their faces.

Bob reached for my shoulder, his fingers trembling as if rolling an invisible cigarette. I fought the urge to move away.

"I heard health care is expensive where you live," he said.

I nodded, with far more force than I expected.

Bob looked up sharply.

I winced and rubbed my neck a fraction of a second later. Bob leaned closer to me. His shiny dentures clashed with his cracked, spit-flecked lips; his eyes, once brown, were now ochre iris on yellow sclera.

"You could get your citizenship back," he said, barely moving his lips. "My grandson is a damn good immigration lawyer."

I shrugged.

"Think about it," he said.

"I will," I said. "But now I have to go. Don't want to miss my flight." "Stay with me," he said quickly. "We've

guest rooms at the home. We can go see Joanie tomorrow."

I counted to five and held my breath: an old voice actor's trick.

"No," I said.

The word came out as I intended: with longing. With reluctance. With regret.

Bob shook my hand and hobbled away as quickly as he could.

I had to sprint across the terminal to reach my gate on time. People stared. My wrinkles itched; I detoured to the lavatory to peel them off. The TranSec agent looked at me with a suspicious squint.

I called the Farm from the plane while it waited for clearance. Gulnara answered.

"Well, hello, stranger," she purred. "Do we have a date?"

"Sure," I said. "When can you fit me in?"

"You want a quickie," she said, "or the whole jalapeño?"

"Enchilada," I said. Gulnara's English was perfect. It was American she had trouble with. "I want the whole enchilada. It's been a while."

"So I see." She paused; I heard keys tapping. "I have an opening Wednesday. Is this good?"

"Sure," I said. "Training camp doesn't start for another fortnight."

I heard tapping again. "Excellent. Full rejuvenation, a five-day course starting Wednesday, shall I debit your fee now?"

"Go ahead," I said. "Did it go through?"

"With your credit rating?" she said. "Of course it went through." She paused. "I'm so glad you haven't retired. Watching you play — it never gets old. It's like, you are not just playing soccer, but also poker and chess at the same time. Does this make sense?"

"Sweetheart," I said, "I can't afford to retire."

Her answer drowned in the turbine spin-up. I disconnected my phone, leaned back, turned on the viewscreen. The plane made a climbing turn above central Jersey before heading over the Atlantic. Somewhere below, shabby, weed-choked Princeton sweltered in the heat, and Bob shambled with a cane to the train that would take him to his nursing home.

Pity about poor Bob. ■

Anatoly Belilovsky learned English from Star Trek reruns and is now a paediatrician in New York.

JACEY