

It's A Different World When You Walk With A Cane

by Roz Warren

Bat Masterson! Fred Astaire! Both were debonair dudes with canes I remember fondly from my (black and white) TV-watching youth. Fred's movies were often featured on those ubiquitous "Classic Movie of the Day" shows. "Bat Masterson" was a prime time hit from 1958 - 1961.

Bat and Fred were sophisticated. Sexy. Watching them, I learned that having a cane could be cool. You can use it to fight crime. Or, if Ginger Rogers isn't around, you can dance with it.

This is if you're a guy. But where are the sophisticated, sexy dames with canes?

I'm asking because this week I'm a woman who is using a cane to get around.

Attention Boomers! When you strain a leg muscle, elevate it! Ice it. Stay off your feet. Don't ignore it and continue to walk around as usual.

When walking around for a week on my own injured leg failed to magically heal it, I turned to Michele, my awesome physical therapist. (Of course I have an awesome physical therapist on speed dial. I'm a middle-aged suburban Jew.)

She wrapped my foot, told me to ice and elevate it, and gave me a refresher course in how to use my cane.

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How come I already had a cane? Are you kidding me?

If you're AARP age and haven't yet had reason to purchase a cane, you're either very lucky, so slothful that you never venture far enough from the sofa to risk injury, or the kind of person who borrows canes from other people.

Not that there's anything wrong with that. I lend mine out often, mostly to other librarians. It's a fabulous cane. Sturdy. Adjustable. Metallic. Best of all, it's neon blue.

I have gotten many compliments on the snazziness of my cane.

Although the theme song from his TV show has been running through my head all week, when friends and co-workers see me coming they don't think "Bat Masterson." Or even "Fred Astaire.

They tend to go with Grandpappy Amos, the old codger Walter Brennan played on "The Real McCoys." In addition to "Gramps," and "Pappy," I'm also being called "Granny," "Gimpy" and "Hop-a-long."

It's partly my fault, for failing to go with my first impulse, which was to don top hat and tails for the duration. Sure, it would have puzzled the patrons at the library where I work to approach the circulation desk and find their librarian dressed more for "Putting on the Ritz, " than checking out their books.

But nobody would be calling me "Gimpy."

Even if you aren't decked out like Fred Astaire, life is different when you're using a cane.

People are nicer. They smile. They hold the door for you. They knock themselves out to perform small acts of kindness. They make sympathetic remarks. Total strangers grin when they see me coming and say "Good for you!"

For what? I wonder. Not falling over?

More likely, for not weeping in frustration as I hobble down the sidewalk as everyone else zips by me.

A cane sometimes comes in handy. I've been using mine to point and gesture. And to close any door or drawer I can't quite reach. I waive it about for emphasis when I have a point to make, or pretend to thwack anyone who makes a point I disagree with.

This week, I'm not just another smart-ass. I'm a smart-ass with a prop.

But the best thing about being a Boomer with a cane is that I'm no longer invisible. As women get older, fewer and fewer people pay attention to us. No longer young and hot and pretty, you seem to vanish. I can't tell you the number of times the commuter train conductor has walked right by without asking for my ticket, because, middle-aged librarian that I am, he simply doesn't see me.

Sure, it's fun to ride for free. But I can't say I'm crazy about this particular "senior discount."

This week, though, everyone can see me again! Not only that, but they smile and say hello. (And the train conductor both welcomes me aboard and makes sure I find a seat.) My cane not only grabs people's attention, it gives them a reason to be kind.

And people do want to be kind. It's just that sometimes they need a little push (or in a few cases, a big fat shove) in the right direction.

While it's a pity that you've got to be visibly struggling to bring out the best in people, I've enjoyed living in a world where people are at their best. Which isn't to say that I can't wait for the day when I can stop schlepping this lovely cane around and walk without it.

If you haven't yet reached that important middle-aged rite of passage, the acquisition of a "sometimes" cane, I'm here to tell you that it's only a matter of time. But it's really not so bad.

Of course, if you'd prefer not to get your own cane, you're more than welcome to borrow mine.

I won't even call you Gramps. Wear a derby. I'll call you Bat.

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