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Age waits for no man

By Neil Humphreys

He was a muscle-bulging beefcake. But he was one of those who pretend to be indifferent about their sculpted physique. That made it worse. I actually prefer the body-builders who strut along the beach like they've shoved a cork up their arse. At least they're honest about their transparent vanity.

This guy hid his buffed biceps behind an ill-fitting t-shirt to tell the opposite sex that yes, he had the body, but no, it wasn't a big deal. Of course it's a big deal. Otherwise he wouldn't spend two excruciatingly tedious hours pumping iron every bloody day.

It takes a certain kind of man to crave bigger boobs than women. Quite pertinently, he's usually a bit of a tit. But this guy wasn't a tit. On the contrary, he had patented the Nice Guy routine. Think Bill Gates trapped inside David Hasselhoff's body.

If his passable Arnie impersonation and his personable demeanour were not humbling enough, his reason for being in my house was humiliating: He was assembling some gym equipment.

Not only will I never be able to bench-press like this guy can: I can't even wield a bloody monkey wrench with the same panache.
Bastard.

In a calculated attempt to convince Charles Atlas Junior that I still retained a shred of masculine coolness, I switched on the I-pod and whacked on the trendiest band in my album list.

"That's Oasis, isn't it?" Said the buffed one, tightening a screw as several of mine came loose.

"Yeah, mate. Been my favourite band for years. You like 'em?"

"Bit before my time. My dad likes 'em though."

I never saw that coming. Didn't even see the signs.

When the hell was Oasis moved from the Britpop pioneers category and reclassified in the Dad Rock section, along with Deep Purple, Led Zeppelin, long hair and leather trousers?

Mr Muscles hadn't kicked sand in my face, but he had pushed me further down a slippery slope I never realised I was on.

What was next?

Dancing to the Bee Gees at family weddings? Developing a penchant for comfy sandals? Bemoaning the state of modern youth? A night in with Kenny G?

It's all beginning to make sense now. I was stuck in a lift recently and found myself humming along to Kenny G's Songbird, remarking to myself how nimble he was on his sax.

Had I been a few years younger, I would've childishly remarked how competent he was with the "skin flute": Now I'm assessing the merits of a musician who voluntarily sports a long perm.

Craving reassurance, I thought I'd found it in the venerable music magazine Q. According to their recent top 100 singles poll, Oasis' Live Forever was voted the greatest ever single. Wonderwall came in at No 2. Being in such a contemplative state, however, ensured the poll had only a detrimental effect on my mood.

I now sought comfort in trendy, coffee table magazines. I once poured scorn on the coffee table class, living in their suburban boxes and listening to Phil Collins and Simply Red on their sleek, German sound systems.

To add a token notch to their credibility, they'd usually have a couple of greatest hits compilations or signature albums from a couple of seemingly anarchic bands like Nirvana or Red Hot Chili Peppers to temper all that easy listening fluff. But smelling like teen spirit from time to time was never enough to mask their yearnings for A Groovy Kind of Love.

You can't buy youthful cool in a CD case. Yet here I was attempting a similar, equally pathetic, feat with Oasis. I've never been at the cutting edge of cool, although God knows I've tried (the Rick Astley quiff was the read nadir), but when did I become, to quote my teenage brother, the proverbial Sad Old Bastard?

It's only a matter of time before I'm working out in my home gym to Phil Collins' Tarzan soundtrack. Now I'm curious to learn when it happened: That moment in your life when cool becomes crap. Boy to man was obvious enough: Voice breaks; hair grows; balls drop; job done. But man to Sad Old Bastard is a more complicated affair.

After all, when does a Colin Farrell metamorphose into a Hugh Hefner? At what point, did Rod Stewart, circa 1970, become Rod Stewart, circa 2006? Watching the craggy, tanned vocalist sing "If you want my body/And you think I'm sexy" now requires more of his audience than a willing suspension of disbelief. It requires a blindfold.

But when do men (and women) stop saying, "he's a bit of a lad isn't he?" and start saying "put it away, you Sad Old Bastard. You'll give yourself a hernia." The changes are barely perceptible.

Indulgent, slow rock hits like Stairway to Heaven and Hotel California serve as useful indicators though.

When I was a kid, I dismissed the lengthy solos, riffs and fills as Dad Rock that should be quietly stored away in a file marked '70s excess'. Now I find myself admiring the guitar work in both songs and commenting favourably upon the hidden meanings of the lyrics. It's most disconcerting.

I still possess the youthful will to restrain myself. I haven't yet descended to the depressing depths of throwing my head back and playing an air guitar in public places, but I fear it is only a matter of time.

I was there a decade ago at Knebworth, when Oasis played the biggest gigs ever witnessed in Europe. Just one of 250,000 faces, I sang along to Champagne Supernova, told Sally to wait in Don't Look Back In Anger and assured my drunk mates that we were all going to Live Forever.

I spent most of this morning watching Elton John belt out Rocket Man on an episode of Parkinson, horrified at the goosebumps spreading across my arms like an anti-cool virus. I wasn't even compelled to make a half-hearted joke about his golden rug. In fact, I found myself acknowledging what an improvement the current weave was on the previous effort, which looked like a fox had crawled onto his head and gone too sleep.

Something is clearly amiss.

My wife has also started to mutter comments about my attire. The phrase "you can't pull that off anymore" is beginning to crop up in conversation with alarming regularity.

It's a cause for concern because I've never been able to pull anything off.

Unless the catwalks begin parading the prisoner-of-war look, it's say to say my frame will keep me away from the cutting edge of fashion.

But that word "anymore", with its sense of finality, hammers home like a stake through the ego.

The horrifying image of my middle-aged father attempting to pull off a luminous tracksuit and white trainers is now seared into the memory for the rest of my days.

He still thinks he can get away with it. No one else does.

I still believe I can pull off the surfer dude look. Clearly, no one else in the shop did.

When teenagers wear their baggy short bands beneath their hips, they exchange a few street credits with their peers.

When I tried it, I looked like I was in need of medical attention.

So I'm no longer cool. No, that's nonsense. I never was cool. I'm just not a teenager anymore.

When I think of snake bites now, I think of the Australian Bush and not a drink that once worked like a magic potion: It turned ugly girls into prom queens.

I no longer feel compelled to lie either. Jackass isn't funny and Gangsta rap is puerile, contemptible shit. It always was. But at least, I don't have to pretend otherwise now. I'm being fast-tracked down the Sad Old Bastard route.

Designer labels are now less important than value for money. I'm not ready for the slippers and button-down cardigans just yet, but I refuse to hand over a week's salary to have someone else's name stitched over my left nipple. And damn it, I want to listen to songs with lyrics and indulgent guitar solos when the mood takes me.

You may point a mocking finger and gesture towards your hip 50 Cent albums in your collection, but you're only living in denial.

Our paths are pre-determined. We're all on a Stairway to Heaven.