

## I Punched The Old Man In The Face

As the coronavirus pandemic rages across the world, a nasty Old Man keeps knocking on my door



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The author zip-lining through a rainforest in Fiji (Photo courtesy Gustasp Irani)

A country and western singer once asked Clint Eastwood what kept him going; directing a movie at 80 plus? The rugged star's reply was as crisp as the characters he had portrayed: "Don't let the old man in!" I realized that the nasty Old Man has been knocking on my door. Even more so recently, when the whole world is in the grip of a pandemic in which the elderly are particularly vulnerable.

Well-meaning young men and women have been repeatedly calling me, attempting to introduce me to him (he goes by the name of Senior Citizen). Without being rude, I thank them for their efforts and after the call is over, I turn to deal with the Old Man they have left at my doorstep. And the best way of dealing with him is slamming the door in his face. Truth be told, I have punched him a number of times and will not hesitate if I have to do so again.

A distant relative, who looked 10 years older than his actual age, introduced him to me too. I had met the relative after a decade and with a cheery pat on his back, I informed him that he looked 10 years younger. His face lit up, but then he had the gall to say: "I can't say the same about you. You look your age." That was the first time I punched the Old Man and told him to keep his distance.

Over the years, I have learnt that the Old Man is a stubborn and deaf mule who keeps creeping up on me in the most unexpected way. Like the time I was on my walk down Mumbai's Marine Drive. A young lad, a clipboard and pen in hand, waved me down. He was obviously conducting a survey to supplement his pocket money. Breaking stride, I stopped the moment he said, "I'm doing a survey of Senior Citizens ..." I cut in immediately. "Senior Citizens," I snapped. "Keep pace with me and I will answer your questions," I said and marched off. The fellow tagged on. As I upped the pace, he realized a little too late that I had no intention of acknowledging the Senior Citizen who lurked in his clipboard.

The problem with the Old Man is that he often tags along with genuinely nice people and creates situations that show me up as mean and nasty. For instance, once my wife and I were at a restaurant having a wonderful time together, laughing over fond memories. Suddenly, a fellow diner at a neighbouring table leaned across and sprung it on me by saying: "It's so nice to see Senior Citizens going out and having fun."

"You are not exactly a spring chicken. In a couple of years, you will be a Senior Citizen too!" I shot back. My wife said that it was a mean remark. The lady with the man reprimanded him and apologized on his behalf. The rest of the evening, that had started out with much promise, turned to dust, as did the meal.



**The author rafting on the Ganges in Rishikesh (Photo courtesy Gustasp Irani)**

More recently, my wife and I were at an Ayurvedic spa resort when the masseur leading me to a treatment room held me by my upper arm to assist me up a short flight of steps. I pulled my arm free of his offensive grasp and grabbed his upper arm and helped him up the

steps instead. The laughter that followed masked the nasty streak that lurks within me, one the Old Man brings to the surface.

One of the few drawbacks of our line of work—my wife and I are travel writers—is that it opens doors for the Old Man to sneak in. We have had many adventures--zip-lined over forest canopies, rafted across churning rapids, trekked up forest trails, snorkelled with sea lions in kelp forest oceans, scuba-dived in coral-rich reefs, tracked the snow leopard in its freezing terrain. People are actually complimenting our fitness levels when they say: "We admire your energy. How old are you?" I send the Old Man packing when he shows up in these situations by giving them a figure that is half my actual age. And as the Old Man looks up at me in bewilderment, I unleash the sucker punch. "A strange thing happened to me once I turned 25. I started to age by a year, once in every five years."

So, listen, Old Man and listen good: I may not be able to stop you from knocking on my door but I won't let you in.