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Author Allan Ripp ices his knee as he works at home in New York. (Sarah Ripp)

By **Allan Ripp**
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I've fallen into the darkest of moods recently. Not from Donald Trump, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. or even the prospect of Zohran Mamdani as my city's next mayor. (This, too, shall pass.)

Rather, it's my knee. After a glorious summer of exercise and far-off wanderings, I slipped on a patch of wet pavement and fell hard on the outer side of my right leg. Embarrassed at my clumsiness, I jumped up and continued on my way, but in the following days, it was obvious something was wrong. X-rays thankfully showed no break — just a contusion, my trusty orthopedist explained, along with some jostled "stuff" under my kneecap. Give it a few weeks, and you'll be back to normal.

Only the weeks passed, and I was in more pain than before. An MRI revealed a list of scary findings — moderate joint effusion, full-thickness cartilage defect, subchondral cyst, surface flap tear and bone marrow edema, though perhaps only the latter was likely due to the slip and fall. Stay patient, I was advised, get some physical therapy, strengthen that quad and all will be fine soon. Within minutes, I renewed my long-lapsed gym membership.

But what if it won't? Be fine, that is. My mind always goes to the direst outcome with any injury. Cuts don't bleed; they gush. A head bump getting into the car could be a concussion. But usually I'm able to reset quickly after seeing the Band-Aid work or realizing I didn't lose consciousness at the steering wheel.

Still, this latest mishap is the worst, I tell myself (and my long-suffering family), the beginning of the end. I'm 71 and acutely aware of the approaching red line that will one day forever separate me from a life of vigor and mobility to one of hobbling decrepitude, pushing a walker

with green tennis-ball rollers. This could be that line! Don't try to convince me otherwise.

As I limp around my Manhattan neighborhood, I sense the divide between those freely navigating with pep and ease (me before) and the geezers and infirm cautiously proceeding with tiny steps, unable to pivot or short-stop and forced to wait for the light to change at crosswalks (me pitifully now). I feel the arrogance of a young couple breezing past and fear the collision of a little girl hurtling my way on a scooter. Forget my customary 35,000 steps a day — it's wrenching just getting up from the dining room table to bus plates into the kitchen.

It's sad that so much of my well-being is tied to constant motion and exertion, a legacy of childhood asthma, though my wife likens me to a shark, forever moving until I can't. Rest leads to indolence, which turns to mush and then death.

Perversely, I calculate how much of my retirement assets I'd forgo to have my knee back to full form, free from effused joints and jostled cartilage — 20%? Half? All of it? Luckily it's only a mind game.

I'm no stranger to athletic setbacks. The hip stress fracture in college from extreme running while taking prednisone. Three prior knee arthroscopies in my 30s and 40s to repair meniscus tears and dislodge a "loose body." A herniated disk from too much rowing and cycling. Even the ankle smash on the beach deep into middle age that gifted me with arthritic changes. It sometimes feels as if my whole adult life has been one extended rehab session. Somehow I came through those challenges with new learnings, adaptations and appreciations for how the body can heal. But those were then — the "now" window for comebacks is getting ever shorter.

It’s possible I catastrophize as a coping mechanism — exaggerating the bleakest so as not to jinx the best. Maybe there is a tad bit of superstition to my negativity, warding off the evil eye with doomsday thoughts. But I’ve always been a downsider — if I were an investor, I’d be a short, and even then, I wouldn’t have confidence that the market would head downward. It doesn’t reassure me to discover that only 13% of men ages 70 to 79 experience symptomatic knee osteoarthritis — I’m certain I reside among the unlucky 13.

And yet, somewhere faith appears, if out of proportion to the larger world. During silent prayer at my weekly synagogue service, I express gratitude for all I have, wishing health and safety for my children and grandchildren, as well as for Israel, America and the world’s unhoused dogs. But before long, my inner knee voice overtakes them all. Please, God, banish the edema!

I’m of an age in which people I know are facing serious physical issues — prostate cancer, Parkinson’s disease, multiple sclerosis. A good friend has neuropathy in his feet and broke two ribs from falling. Now he’s battling lymphoma but texts me upbeat messages following his chemo sessions, calling himself the “comeback kid.” His resilience is exemplary, but in my warped worldview I think, yeah, but at least his knees are OK.

I run my MRI through ChatGPT, and it delivers a plain-language summary of results, questions to ask my doc and a thorough nonsurgical recovery plan to discuss with the physical therapist. Plus the artificial intelligence’s encouragement that “full return to function is realistic.” But then my 7-year-old granddaughter shakes her Magic 8 ball and asks

if I'll ever walk again. "Very doubtful," the ball replies. Both prognoses sound plausible to my muddled brain.
If you happen to see me coming, avoid asking how I am. You don't want to know.

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