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WEEKEND BREAK

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A struggle for self-acceptance in a body with limitations

By **JOAN HERMAN**
 For EO Media Group

Recently, Facebook popped up a photo of me from 22 years ago for its popular “On This Day” feature. In the picture, I am riding my Italian racing bike “Bella” through the scorching-hot wheat fields near Athena in eastern Oregon.

WILD AND PRECIOUS LIFE

Decked out in my black Lycra shorts and traditional cycling jersey bearing the name of the bike shop I once co-owned, I am lean, strong and extremely fit.

I miss that body.

My struggle today, as I sit in a wheelchair 19 years out from a diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, or MS, is not to despise the body I now have. I fight to accept it for all its limitations — and there are many. Self-acceptance eludes me.

In fact, as I study the picture and others of myself a few years back — on horseback at the beach at Fort Stevens, hiking up South Sister in the Central Oregon Cascades, even “just” gardening at my former Longview home — I marvel at what I once could do, to the point of questioning whether the self I see in the photos ever really existed.

I know, of course, that all of us, as we age and lose ability, mourn for the youthful bodies we once had. Yet more and more, I find myself envying those who are elderly and still mobile, such as the woman, easily in her 80s, whom I observed using a walker to navigate, albeit slowly, inside the doctor’s office last week.

“At least she is walking,” I think to myself. Indeed, that has become a mantra of mine: “At least he/she is walking.”

I am 58, and although I am fortunate that I can still concentrate and follow a complex plot, skills that many with MS lose, in pretty much all other regards, my body feels like a depleted husk of its former powerful self.

At the Providence MS Center in Portland, my neurologist looks at me pointedly and asks whether I am depressed after reading my answers to questions about my emotional state on a form I completed before the appointment.

Depressed? Believe it or not, no, I am not. Instead I harbor just below the surface of my public face a despair about my physical condition and my future. But I am not depressed.

I can put on a smile and feel genuinely happy much of the time; I have quite a few friends, and I’m active in my community, volunteering for several organizations I love. But that sense of unease rarely leaves me.

When I am alone and quiet, I think in disbelief about the body I now have, and I still can’t wrap my brain around my condition. “When did this happen?” I ask myself, even though I know all too well.

I question whether I did anything to bring on the disease, one for which scientists have not been able to pinpoint a definitive cause, but nevertheless, in my moments of magical thinking, I imagine there must be something I did.

I realize I am not alone, and all who face a serious diagnosis feel a sense of despair, at least sometimes.

And yet ... I am alive. As hard and as compromised as my life is in some ways, I know that I’m far from alone in my suffering on this planet. It comes with the territory of being human.

My dear friend Laura Snyder, who is living with a Stage 4 cancer diagnosis, and I joke that we “got grit.” We have to in order to get through the day.

But don’t call me inspiring or special because I feel this way. Just as in other species, in humans the will to survive is pretty hard to tamp down for long.

So I do my volunteer thing to keep the despair at bay — for at least as long as I am preoccupied.

On a recent May morning, with temperatures hovering in the high 40s and rain falling in squall-like fashion, I’m out on the Astoria Riverwalk in my purple waterproof garb to greet passengers off the cruise ship Oceania Regatta. It’s hard not to feel alive in the elements.

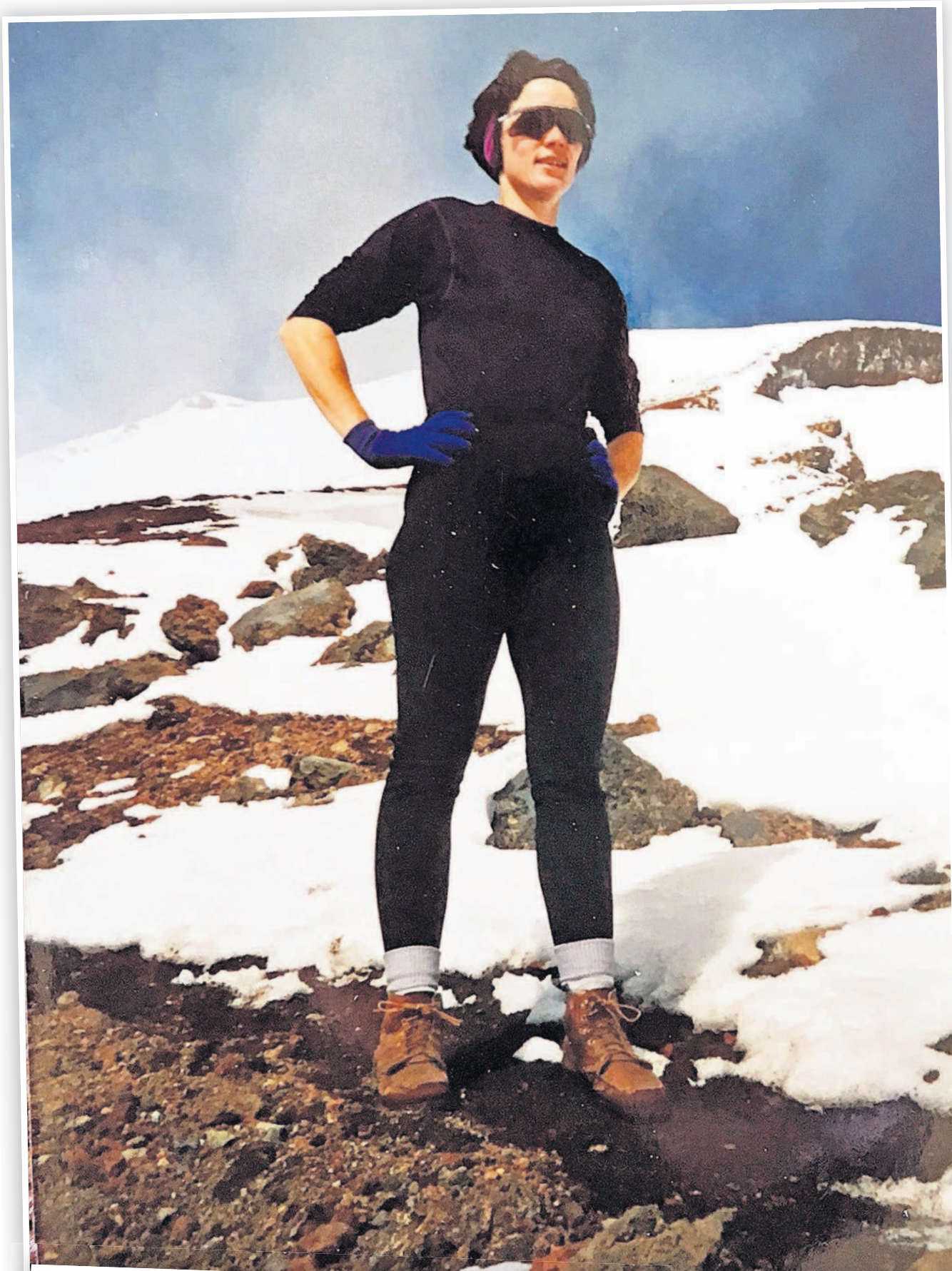
The ship is heading north to Alaska, and I am acutely aware that I almost surely will never take such a trip. Even if I had the money, traveling is too complicated for someone in my condition.

Instead, I will give them a warm welcome to town and wish them well on their journey.

Writer’s note: The column’s title comes from the poem “The Summer Day” by American poet Mary Oliver:

“Doesn’t everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?”



Submitted Photos
TOP: Joan Herman climbing South Sister in the 1990s.

MIDDLE: Joan Herman on her bike in the mid-1990s as a Cycle Oregon participant.

BOTTOM: Joan Herman, an Astoria resident, outside Street 14 Cafe in summer 2016.

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