

I am Benjamin Button
By Susan Metcalf

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button follows a man who lives life in reverse, growing younger with time. This is me.

When I was 28, I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. My body numbed, my cognition diminished, my energy evaporated, and eventually, I could no longer walk. Thanks to the first-ever MS drug in pill form, I went from “my life is over” at age 45 to “I can do anything” at 60.

I can walk. I can dance. I can work a ten-hour wedding on my feet and never sit down. And yet, my new reality is that no one wants to hire a super-qualified 60-year-old.

I remember when my dad retired from the Navy after serving for 28 years. He retired as Commander, Fleet Activities Okinawa—a major command position—and he was at the top of his game. My parents attended 28 farewell parties in their honor. And then, just like that, he went from hero to zero.

He returned to the United States and settled in Sacramento. He sent out his impressive resume. He was overqualified for everything he applied for, and no one responded. He was only 51. I remember thinking they were intimidated by him.

He decided to go back to school to become an accountant. He hated it. He was depressed and stayed in bed for nearly three months.

Decades later, I found myself facing my own version of the same thing. For one job, I was interviewed by thirteen people. Their vote to hire me was unanimous. The \$110,000 job was short-lived. My dad got sick, and I chose him. Next, I applied for a part-time volunteer coordinator job and was hired even though I didn’t have experience. I thought Tennessee was great—people seemed more open to hiring candidates in their 50s. Fair statement until I turned 57½. I lost that job due to a merger.

As you get older, you find yourself doing things you never dreamed you would do. Like removing dates from your resume. Dumbing down your resume. Trying to present yourself as non-threatening. Willing to take salaries that are lower, lower and still lower. How low would you go? How far down the totem pole are you willing to fall?

I applied for a job as a copywriter at a local ad agency. I wasn't trying to run the agency. I just wanted to write. I can be a team player. I can be non-threatening. I don't want your job. Let me be a minion.

I started thinking about health insurance and how I was going to make it until I turned 65. Conversations with friends now revolve around: "When are you going to retire?" "What are you doing for health insurance?" and "What aches and pains do you have?"

Like my dad, I understand the disappointment and depression now.

But I'm Benjamin Button! Every day my body gets a little stronger and my mind a little sharper. I can do things I couldn't do in my forties and early fifties. Put me to use, please.

Benjamin Button or not, I'm beginning to accept that I may never have the kind of job I once took for granted.

It is hard to feel that the very things that should make me more valuable—knowledge, experience, and expertise—may now be working against me. You can go to space when you are 77. You can be president of the United States when you are 82. You can serve in the U.S. Senate until you are 100 years and 29 days old—but forget working past 59.

The world sees me as a 60-year-old woman getting older. I see Benjamin Button.