# The New Model: Some Assembly Required

There was a time when my biggest concern was making sure my selfies were on point. These days, I'm more interested in whether my MRI images are looking good. Somewhere along the way, my dating priorities shifted, too. I'm no longer just hoping to meet Mr Right; I'm also checking whether our first-date venue has accessible parking, ramp access and accessible toilets. Romance is alive and well. It just requires considerably more research these days.

“Love going on hikes, catching up for coffee or drinks” might once have featured on my dating profile. But at 41, a gay fella living with a physical disability who drinks neither alcohol nor caffeine, I've had to reconsider my place in the great dating ocean. You know the saying: plenty of fish in the sea? Well, I'm beginning to suspect I'm a tadpole in a small cup of water.

Tadpoles are cute, though. And if we're being honest, there's a cheeky double entendre in there, too. But for me, the tadpole represents something else: new life.

Ten years ago, I was upgraded to a new model. The package included state-of-the-art mobility issues, progressive nerve damage, power steering as standard and a drive-away-no-more-to-pay pricing structure. Terms and conditions apply. Unfortunately, the warranty doesn't cover further deterioration, and the manufacturer has been remarkably difficult to get hold of.

As someone with a marketing mind, I've always believed presentation is everything. But how do you market a product when the specifications keep changing?

Before my body decided to diversify its portfolio, I could sell the lifestyle. Spontaneous hikes. Coffee dates. A few drinks. The promise of an energetic, carefree fella who could meet you somewhere without first conducting an accessibility audit.

Now I find myself asking a rather different question: how am I going to sell this new version of myself?

The truth is, when your body changes, you don't just lose abilities. You lose the future you thought you'd ordered. Nobody tells you that grief can arrive without a funeral, or that you can miss someone who is still technically you.

But eventually, the marketing department has to get back to work.

And frankly, this new model has a few selling points of its own.

For starters, I'm a bit like a vintage car. Getting me from A to B can involve considerable planning, unexpected noises and the occasional pit stop. Some mornings, simply getting the engine started feels like a full-time job. By the time I've showered, dressed and persuaded my nervous system to cooperate, I've expended enough energy to qualify for a long weekend.

A quick trip to the shops can require more preparation than an overseas holiday. Distance, fatigue, pain, parking: all must be considered. Spontaneity has been replaced by a risk assessment, and my body has appointed itself chief operating officer.

But every car has its perks. Mine comes with VIP parking.

While you're circling the car park like a contestant in *The Hunger Games*, I'm potentially pulling into an accessible bay near the entrance. It's not a disability lottery win, and I'd happily trade the permit for a body that worked as it once did. But if life insists on giving me the occasional advantage, I'm not going to pretend I haven't noticed.

Then there's commitment. Dating me comes with one reassuring feature: I'm unlikely to run away with another man. Not because I'm exceptionally loyal, but because my legs have developed a rather independent approach to movement. Between nerve pain and spasticity, a dramatic exit would require choreography, favourable weather and possibly a support crew.

I'm looking for a long-term relationship. I'm also unlikely to make a quick getaway.

And before anyone assumes limited mobility means a limited capacity for mischief, let's address the elephant in the bedroom.

My nervous system has a few settings I didn't personally select. Nerve pain and spasticity can make my body do things without consulting management first. I prefer to think of it as neurological improvisation. Some men bring rhythm to the bedroom; I bring an element of surprise.

No refunds on the choreography.

Of course, the real selling point isn't the parking, the questionable warranty or the unpredictable special effects. It's what comes with the package.

I'm still the bloke who can make you laugh when a date goes horribly wrong. I'm curious, affectionate, occasionally cheeky and perfectly capable of flirting with someone who has absolutely no business being that attractive. I've acquired a few extra considerations, not a complete personality transplant.

Dating someone with a disability might require communication, flexibility and a little advance planning. Sometimes plans change. Sometimes a quiet night in beats a big night out. And sometimes the most romantic gesture imaginable is finding a venue with an accessible toilet without expecting a standing ovation for your contribution to humanity.

In return, you might get someone who appreciates the small things, knows that a good day can be a gift and has developed a finely honed appreciation for life's absurdities. When your body keeps rewriting the script, you learn to improvise. You also learn that laughing together is an excellent compatibility test.

So, how do I market this new version of myself?

I could list the upgrades, disclose the defects and attach a maintenance schedule. I could bury the difficult bits in the fine print and hope nobody reads it until the third date.

Or I could tell the truth.

I'm a 41-year-old gay man with a body that doesn't always cooperate, a dating profile in desperate need of a rewrite and a sense of humour that remains stubbornly intact.

I'm not the original model. Some days, the engine warning light is on, the fuel economy is appalling and the owner's manual is nowhere to be found.

But I'm still in circulation.

And if you're looking for a man with power steering, VIP parking and a few unexpected extras, don't be put off by the fine print.

This tadpole still has plenty of life in him.