

9 Lives for a Weeble

by Dorri Olds



WISH I COULD blame nuclear weapons, a mutant virus or Hitler for the malformation in my Russian Jewish bloodline, but my theory is a suicide gene. That coupled with an inability to bond during difficult times. We held our sorrow separately, a silent pact—if we didn't put words to it, nothing was awry. With a child's vocabulary I tried to convey the dark storms in my head, but felt my efforts swept aside. "What the hell does that kid have to be depressed about?" Dad asked. Mom shushed him. I was unglued and my family found me exhausting.

But, I wasn't the only spooked member of the herd. June 1973, my sister Jenny was 15, I was 12. At dinner, Mommy said, "Please pass the peas." As Jenny picked up the bowl, I stared at her white-banded wrists.

"Does it hurt?" I asked softly.

She turned her head down to her plate. Her lip quivered.

"A little," she whispered.

"Anybody want another Tab?"

Mom asked. Before anyone answered, she disappeared into the kitchen.

In our Long Island home, generations of ancestors marched in photo display up the foyer walls. I spent hours staring at what a perfect family we appeared to be: Ma, a bestselling self-help author, who looked like Jackie O in jeans; Dad, a radio man with Sinatra's angular cheekbones and straight white teeth. People often said, "None of you look Jewish." It was a backhanded compliment, meaning we had nice noses and frizz-free hair.

Later that same year, 1973, I stepped on the third rail of the Long Island Railroad and nothing happened. So I stepped on it again. I was under the impression it would electrocute me instantly.

"Hey, kid," a station worker called out. "You could get yourself killed."

Next day in science, I asked a classmate, "Hypothetically, what would happen if I accidentally stepped on the third rail?"

"Nothing," he said. "You're wearing sneakers. Rubber can't conduct electricity."

At 15, in 1975, I ran away via the same train rails, back to my native Manhattan. I'd absconded to escape despair and shake off suburbia. In Greenwich Village I found my Mardi Gras and became a street urchin. One day, at West Fourth Street, I jumped a turnstile. While I fled from a cop, the subway tunnel summoned me. The iron rails promised an instant solution to loneliness—death. I looked back to see who or what I was running from. Then, magnetically pulled toward my dead heroes, Jimi and Janis, I jumped down onto the subway tracks in front of an oncoming train. Steel hurtled at me with the promise of ram-ming, crunching, killing. At the speed of that E train, it hit me:

I could be maimed—and live.

Existence would be far worse as an amputee.

I squeezed tight against the wall. Blast of horn and screech of metal blew out my eardrums while manic swirls of grit choked off my breath. After the train passed, I followed the rails to the nearest exit and kept running.

Years later, shrinks attributed my morbidity to low levels of serotonin and poor impulse control. My dopamine receptors didn't light up. That is, until I poured drugs and alcohol on them. Too bad Mom's bestselling parenting books didn't have all the answers. Both of us wished she knew what to do. I was missing the brain piece that signals enough. I might have learned to compensate for my genetic

predisposition if anti-depressants had been the Tic-Tacs they are today.

In 1977, when I was 17, Mom's brother Carl shot himself in the heart. He died before he fell back on his bed. Ma was angry. Words like selfish and thoughtless circled the air until she put the kibosh on that topic.

Last night, I Googled my gene theory—if one family member tried to off themselves, were others more likely to try? The overwhelming proof shone on my monitor like a spiritual white light. I'd never known how to explain my self-destruction before. Questions regarding my suicidal tendencies seemed as cockamamie as asking me why I was allergic to cats.

Junior year of high school, I was in a car crash. Three died and I almost did too. For years I'd prayed to God to get me the hell out of here, but clearly he'd aimed and missed. Apparently, my envy for the three dead was a peculiar response. Along with other deficiencies, I was told I lacked gratitude. Mom and Dad took me to doctors who fixed my broken bones. My reaction to this miraculous recovery was to guzzle Quaaludes, Valiums and vodka, then I laid down and waited to exit in repose. With no note, it would appear accidental, nobody could ever label me selfish. But I popped up again after two days, like the egg-shaped toy in a popular commercial, Weebles wobble but they don't fall down. My response? I took to shooting up coke.

In 1983, more family woes. Dad's sister wrapped a plastic bag around her head. Her sons were livid but relieved they found her in time. When we got the news, Dad slammed the Arts section of the Times down and said, "Jesus H. Christ."

But it wasn't all a grim deathwatch waiting for who was going to drop next. There were happy times. Dad worked in radio and cracked us up with on-air bloopers, like the Princeton cheerleaders making a big "P" on the field. Ma framed my artwork and gave great birthday parties. At Broadway plays, we all sat in orchestra seats.

I remember Ma's soft hands against my forehead when I was sick. But more vivid is how our hard heads rammed into each other. Brutal words we couldn't take back, scenes we could not rewind. My rebellion became predictable. I found life and everyone in it unacceptable. It wasn't a fear of death that disturbed me, it was being stuck here endlessly spiraling down. I ached for a connection more intimate than my Washington Square dealer, but alcohol, amphetamines and acid consumed all of my trust and devotion.

At 26, in a typical drunken haze, I wept. In my MacDougal Street apartment, I cried for Jenny's scarred wrists, poor Uncle Carl and my own failed attempts. I groped in the dark through ashtrays and bottles, dialed the phone and woke up in rehab. Too late for a do-over, I trudged through 20 years of therapy, the Twelve Steps and countless chocolates. I sold my first painting, opened a business, got my first dog. In 1994, I bought a one-bedroom in Chelsea. By 2003, I'd paid it off. I treated Ma and Dad to dinners and orchestra seats. After years of breakups and a heart like ground chuck, I stopped picking what-was-I-thinking men and finally fell in love. Mine was a quick success story—it only took 40 years.

Watching Johnny Depp recently portray John Dillinger, my adrenalin pumped at the thrill of bloodshed. I laughed at my continued fascination with death—bookshelves packed with true crime, OD'd rockers magnets on the fridge, prayers for the new season of Dexter to start—and the occasional urge to poke a bobby pin into the wall socket just to see what would happen. ☺

Dorri Olds is a web designer and writer whose work has appeared in New York magazine and several book anthologies. Read more at DorriOlds.com.

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