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Falling

There's the moment before it happens, and there's afterward. Too fast to register, "I'm falling!"—it happens and you're down. Just like that.

I move smoothly, swiftly on my five-mile power walk around Balboa Park, past fountains, gardens, the lily pond—in late spring the lotus are in bloom—the Spanish-Renaissance facades of the museums. Early morning squawks, bellows, and roars carry over the fence from the more loquacious inhabitants of the adjacent zoo. Today I've walked the route in reverse and exit the park at the northwest corner, Sixth and Upas, for the final mile home. I've sworn off jaywalking—at busy intersections like this one, anyway. A woman was hit and killed at this corner last year, walking against the light (as I've been known to do) or just not looking; the newspaper said she was texting. My phone is in my pocket, just for emergencies, the "I've fallen and I can't get up" kind. I wait and cross with the "walk" indicator, but some asshole-in-a-hurry barrels past his red light and slams on the brakes halfway through the intersection. I shake my fist and shout obscenities at him; a block away I'm still fuming.

And then I'm down, sprawled across the sidewalk. What happened? Did my foot catch on the curb? Was it a crack in the pavement?

An evil spirit? Speculation is hindsight—it could have been anything; I was still distracted by the close call at the corner. I wiggle my torso, flex my limbs, take inventory. No shooting pains, nothing appears to be broken. My back is my big worry; I have osteoporosis but have refused the recommended meds because of risks and side-effects. My chiropractor agrees, says, "Osteoporosis doesn't cause fractures; falling does." It's that simple—don't fall. But this isn't the first time. In the past ten years I've escaped a few scary spills with negligible damage. Maybe my bones are stronger than my malady would indicate, my reflexes quick enough that I can catch myself on the way down. Or maybe I'm just lucky, but how many chances do I get?

My right knee is scraped, shoulder banged, my thumb puffing up before my eyes. Minor stuff. No one's around; I'm on my own. I get up and dust myself off, walk home. I ice my throbbing thumb and splint it with an emery board, clean the wounds with peroxide, smear first aid cream on my knee and shoulder.

"What happened?" my husband asks.

"It's nothing," I say, in the clipped voice of warning my daughter calls *the tone*. "I banged my thumb." He knows I get angry with myself when I do something klutzy. He

knows better than to ask questions or say “poor baby.” He scurries off to work.

My friend Kirby, an artist, has won third place in a Watercolor Society competition and has invited me to the opening reception tomorrow night. Now she calls to say she has to miss it. Just back from hiking New Mexico’s Sangre de Cristo Mountains, she tripped and fell walking on the sidewalk near her home and shattered her pelvis. “It happened so fast,” she said. “Just like that.” She tells me how she had to be transported by ambulance, for the first time. How it took thirty minutes, assisted, to get out of bed and into a wheelchair for her first physical therapy session.

Another friend, Eva, emails to make a date to get together when she returns from her summer in Portland. Eva and I take long, brisk, chatty walks around the perimeter of Coronado Island, where she lives. But she won’t be able to walk when we meet next week. She fell while hiking on a wooded Oregon trail. “I tripped over a root or something, fell on my left hip ... my right ankle went in the opposite direction.” She tried to walk on it too soon and re-sprained it. She’s hobbling, her ankle taped.

Is this what we mean when we say “shit happens”? Maybe something in the air caused by climate change, or supernatural, bad karma. The three of us are getting up there, but we’re strong and fit, notwithstanding age-induced aches and pains, wear and tear. We’re active fitness walkers—perhaps both blessing and curse since our mishaps all occurred on walks. Maybe our good health and good fortune make us feel invincible; maybe we’re not as resilient as we think and need to pace ourselves. Has it come to that? I add balance exercises, variations of standing on one foot at a time, to my morning stretch and warm-up routine.

I google “seniors falling.” The Center for Disease Control pops up first among eighteen-million-plus results. I learn that one of three over-65 adults tumbles every year. Falls are the leading cause of fatal and

nonfatal injuries, especially hip fractures and head traumas, among this population. Another site, *Learnnottofall.com*, links to Philips Lifeline, “America’s #1 Medical Alert Service.” No sales pitch, just a public service from folks who care (and while you’re here, check out our cool product...). I’m on a roll—you know how searches go—and google “kids falling.” No statistics or horror stories here, just, as described by one, “little humans falling over, for your joy.”

When I was five my parents gave me a pair of ball-bearing skates to replace my clunky, outgrown baby skates. I was so proud of their sleekness, their shiny, skinny wheels. I took them out to the sidewalk, where my father helped me put them on for the first trial run. I was an over-cautious child—a sissy by my brother’s assessment—and I can see myself as I take those first mincing steps, then let myself slide in short, slow spurts along the sidewalk, braking often to test the toe stops. But I lost control at the top of the driveway and skittered down the slope. The garage door would have stopped me, but I didn’t get that far. I toppled and fell, hit my head. No concussion, no blood or injury—I was young and supple and close to the ground. I’m no longer young or supple or close to the ground. I’m vigilant, as the consequences escalate every year. Yet it happens. There’s that moment before, and then I’m down. Just like that.

