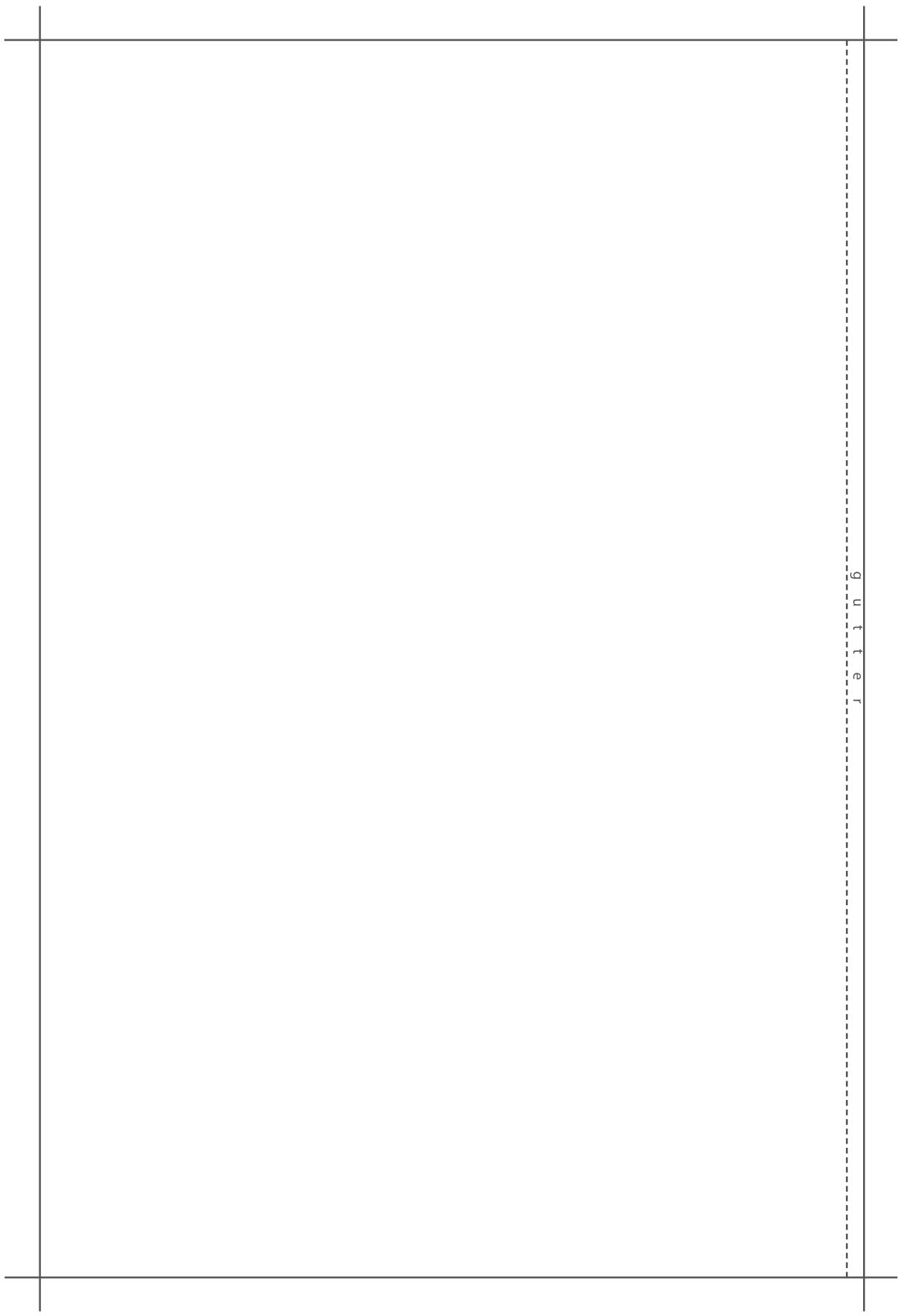


Running with Stiletos

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Running with Stilettos



Living a Balanced Life in Dangerous Shoes

Mary T. Wagner

iUniverse, Inc.
New York Bloomington

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Running with Stilettos
Living a Balanced Life in Dangerous Shoes

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ISBN: 978-0-595-49242-8 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-0-595-61023-5 (ebk)

Printed in the United States of America

First edition published March, 2008
Second edition published December, 2008

iUniverse rev. date: 11/06/2008

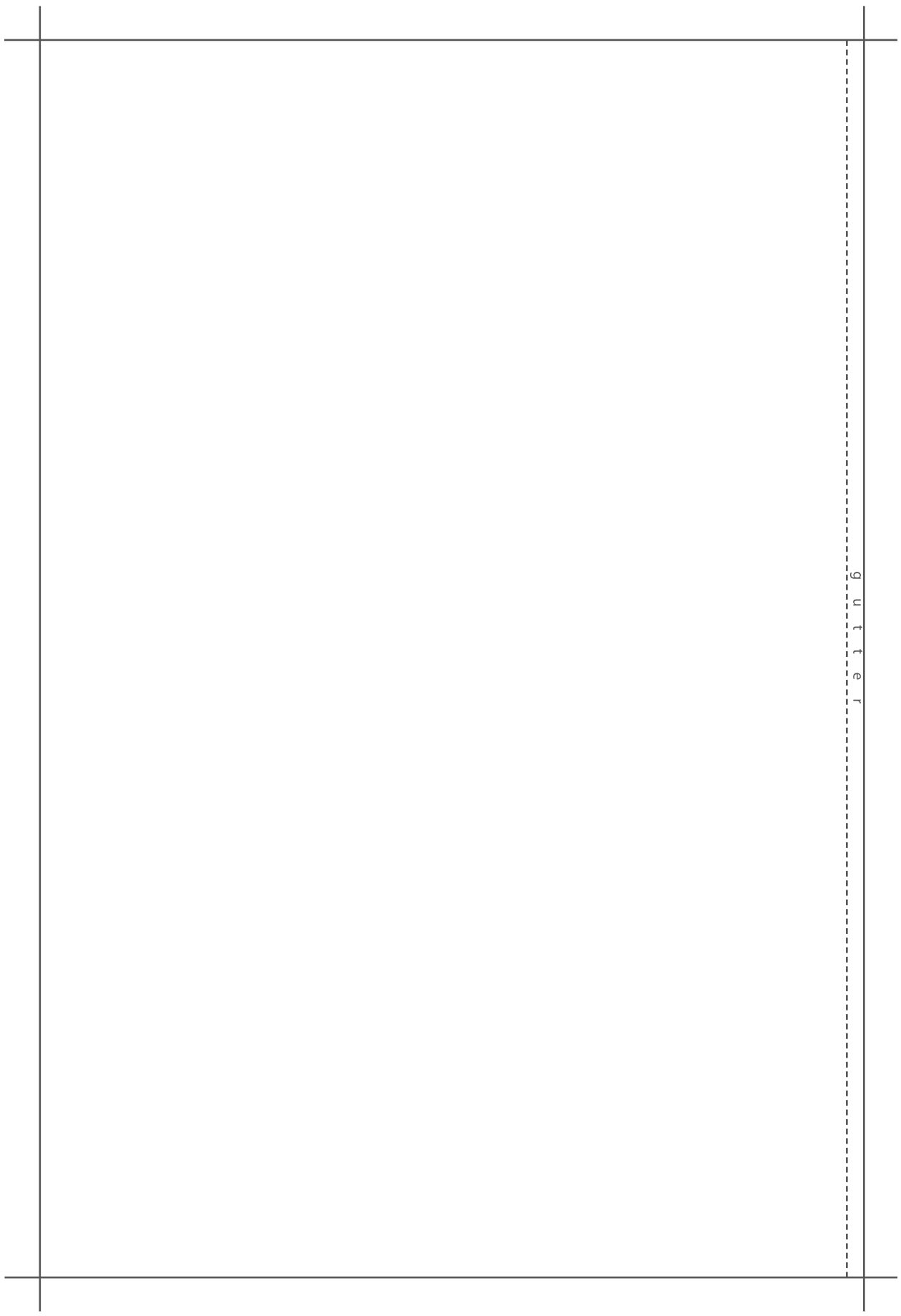
This leap of faith is dedicated to ...

my children—Deborah, Sarah, Michael and Robert—

for the joy of your existence, your love, your laughter, and your fearless example.

and to Chuck ... for the lightness and music in my heart.

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Foreword

I bought my first set of stilettos not when I was a lithe and lissome young twenty-something, but when I was ... oh, never mind. The fresh-faced and skinny days as a journalism student in college had been lived quite naturally in jeans and sneakers. Marriage and motherhood followed closely on the heels of my graduation and brand-new career as a newspaper reporter. And as every mother knows, rounding up energetic toddlers is a lot like herding cats. You have the best chance of success when you're in running shoes.

Even law school and then a job as a prosecutor didn't reverse the sartorial tide. I'd already gotten too used to comfort in the interval, conducting transatlantic phone interviews as a freelance writer in my shorts and bare feet and occasionally my pajamas, taking the kids to the beach in flip-flops, racing through the grocery store and leading Brownie troops through adventures in the woods in scuffed Reeboks. Sensible shoes did just fine.

The turning point came, as they usually do, during a time of high stress. One of my brood had a mysterious health crisis, and I was killing time between driving her around campus by reading cases in a overstuffed chair by the fireside at Starbucks. Ever the multi-tasker, I was researching drunk driving law for an upcoming argument in court when I had one of those "eureka" moments that Archimedes made famous. Unlike Archimedes, I didn't then get up and run wet and naked out into the street. My uniquely personal response was to stash the photocopied cases, notebooks, pens and yellow highlighters back

in the tote bag and go shoe shopping. I said I was “sensible.” I didn’t say I was dead!

I picked a mall on the west side of Madison, and went looking for brown shoes. Well “brown” can cover a lot of plain and uninspired ground. But for some whimsical reason I decided to try on, in the midst of all the utilitarian shoes I was looking at, a drop-dead dangerous pair of faux brown alligator sling-back heels with three inch ice-pick spikes. They looked great. I was timid, and asked the salesperson to put them on “hold.” I picked my daughter up from class and brought her back to the mall with me. It took her about five seconds to size me up as I teetered, and then she delivered a verdict. “Mom, those are really cute. You should buy them.” She’d been voted “best dressed” two or three times at her high school. Who was I to argue?

The alligator spikes came home with me and I wore them to work the next day. Another attorney in the courthouse who happened to be male and who shall forever mercifully remain nameless took one look at them, laughed self-consciously, and said “My God, Mary, those are the sexiest shoes I’ve ever seen!” And I immediately realized two things. One was “*hey, I think I’m on to something here!*” And the other was, “*oh, I am gonna have me some FUN!*”

That was a good two dozen pairs ago. Smooth leather, suede, brocade, snakeskin, pink fake-alligator, plaid, tweed, spectators, cutouts, sling-backs, stacked heels, wood heels, curved heels, bows, they’ve all been singing my song at some point. Most have made it into a courtroom at one time or another. And yes, they’ve certainly been fun.

If there’s a broader lesson to be learned from this eleventh-hour style conversion, its simply that it’s never too late to take a few chances, pick up a new vice, find some new and unaffected joy, and of vital importance, simply open your eyes and your heart to things you just never thought or imagined you’d do.

And if you can keep from breaking an ankle in the process, so much the better ...

Chain Reaction

You can look at it finally abandoning the last of the feminine “rescue” fantasies. Or maybe it was just a dose of latent pioneer spirit finally coming to the surface. Though Davy Crockett never had one of these. (Of course, Davy Crockett never had a pair of leopard-print stilettos in his closet either. Or so we hope.)

Either way, I bought a chain saw.

My favorite dead tree came down last week in a thunderstorm that swept through with brief and sudden fury while I was standing in the video section of Pick ‘n’ Save looking for a copy of the chick flick, “Ever After.” Not getting drenched as I dashed to the car—or alternatively, swept off to Oz or maybe just the next county—was the only thing on my mind as I made a run for it through the sheets of water flying sideways through the parking lot.

Then I rounded the last of the curve in the driveway, and hit the brakes, fast. High beams illuminated a swath of splintered dead wood spread across the concrete, making the last fifty feet to the garage completely impassable. Bark and branches were scattered everywhere, the trunk split and broken into huge chunks. I’d have my work cut out for me the next morning. I drove my itty-bitty Honda delicately around the carnage on the grass next to the flower beds, and put the car away. I went to sleep pondering my options.

As dead trees stood, I hated to see this one go. It had died several years earlier from unknown causes, along with a dozen or more in the same stretch of the front acres. I spent the last few winters wondering

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just when this one would either come down on one of the cars, or just drop across the drive moments before we had to leave for work or school. But where most visitors surveyed its precarious placement and said “that’s gotta come down before it falls on something!,” I looked at it and wistfully countered, “maybe another year?”

Perched just feet from the edge of the drive, this tree came to provide more amusement dead than alive. Woodpeckers had drilled holes in the trunk, and they nested there last summer. I found this out when I searched for the source of incredible chattering nearby in the mornings while I was trying to catch a little more sleep. Living out in the country, the birds are never silent in the morning. But this took nature’s alarm clock to a whole new decibel level.

Process of elimination led me to the dead tree, and so I stationed myself in front of it and waited. And waited. Minutes passed, and nothing happened. Finally, there was movement in the shadow of one of the holes. A fluffy, black-and-white head with a pointy beak popped up long enough to get a bead on me, then vanished again. Downy woodpeckers, for years frequent visitors to my backyard feeder. Catching a glimpse of them in the hole-ridden snag became a daily game for me, sort of a “Wild America” version of the arcade game “whack-amole.” But now the next set of nesting woodpeckers would just have to live elsewhere.

The tree had shattered when it hit the pavement, and I separated most of the giant tangle of wood and bark by just finding the fracture lines and then snapping the branches in the other direction and dragging them out of the way. A pile of dead wood grew in the back yard, promising a blaze of glory like a Viking funeral pyre when I finally set a match to it. The driveway eventually cleared, but huge twisted branches and shattered trunks still lay across the lawn, like naked corpses waiting for burial.

Hmmmmm ... what to do? Wait a month for the-boyfriend-with-chainsaw to get done with his own voluminous yard work and finally cut me some firewood? Break out my handsaw and try to do it the old fashioned way? My shoulders and neck still ached from the rudimentary clean-up job I’d already done. It might finally be time to go window shopping.

Chain Reaction

I'd been in the same position a couple of years earlier. Stumbling across fallen branches on the snowy footpath in the dark one evening on my way to admire the deer my son had just brought down nearby, I knew that snowshoeing was going to be a deathtrap if I didn't clear the trail soon. I took myself to Menards the next morning, and reluctantly perused the chain saw section.

They looked big. They looked dangerous. They looked heavy, and menacing, and manly, and hard to handle. They looked like an invitation to gasoline-powered amputation. I furrowed my brow and paced back and forth. "Can I help you, ma'am?" A polite young man in a blue apron stood ready to assist. I wasn't going to be easy to please.

"Do you have anything smaller?" I asked, already knowing the answer. Did these come in anything like a 'Lady Remington' version? Something stamped "SAFETY" all over it, suitable for the Sesame Street set? Something that could guarantee that I wouldn't cut off a limb? Something specifically built for the female customer, and you know, it would look just great in pink?

"Maybe you'd be more comfortable with a hand saw," he suggested, and that's what I eventually walked through the checkout line with. It worked fine—and gave my back and arms a good workout to boot—for just about every woodcutting project I had until now.

I made my way back to Menards. Stopped at Starbucks first on this glorious and sunny day for a tall mocha frappuccino with "half the whip." A girl's got to start the day right. And caffeine gives you courage. I walked through the front door of the store with no more enthusiasm than I'd had the last time. Even less, in fact. I've **seen** that episode of "CSI" where the bloody homicide scene is eventually solved by the revelation that some idiot didn't know how to handle his own chainsaw and killed himself by accident.

I found the death and dismemberment row ... oops, the chainsaw section. Made my way down the aisle once more, noting that the main distinguishing feature of all these was that some were powered by small gasoline motors (eewwww ... the smell!), and others operated with an electric cord. Yes, I could foresee much in the way of disaster from tripping over the cord the same way you trip over the cord to the living room lamp.

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And then I saw it. Nearly overlooked it in my gloom, and in the shadows cast by its larger cousins. Sitting at eye level, but chain facing away from me, like a puppy burrowed into a pile of blankets, was ... the answer. Since the last time I went looking, Black & Decker had made a cordless chain saw. I stared in amazement. It was tiny, weighing barely six pounds. I picked it up. I have kitchen appliances that are bigger. It was rechargeable. The “bar” was only eight inches long. It looked like two bigger chain saws had had a baby. My breadmaker came in a bigger box. Despite the color scheme—a utilitarian, no, let’s be honest, ugly—black and orange, it was actually CUTE.

It seemed like a perfect fit. I bought it, of course. I like being rescued just as much as the next girl, but I confess that my favorite scene in “Ever After” comes at the very end when Drew Barrymore, the beleaguered Cinderella of the story, manages to turn the tables on her odious captor and frees herself at sword point. It takes her handsome prince a bit by surprise when he gallantly shows up late for the rescue, but they gamely set out to live happily ever after anyway.

I suspect that when winter comes and I throw the first log on the fire that I’ve actually cut from a real tree myself, it’s going to be a very interesting moment. Definitely one to mark with a celebratory toast. In the meantime, I’m just enjoying owning my newest toy.

Now if only it came in pink ...

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Chocolate Sobriety

I made it forty-five days once. Forty five days of grasping, white-knuckle determination, of denial, of yearning, of walking past the siren call of an unfinished Kit Kat on the kitchen table, of reaching for a pretzel instead of another Hershey Kiss.

Chocolate sobriety ain't for the faint of heart. The forty-five day stretch was a benchmark more than a dozen years ago that hasn't been equaled since. Though I tried it again earlier this year, thought once more that even if I started not that long before the national chocolate holiday of Easter, I could hold my breath and tough it out. I should have known better. I made it nineteen days this time, each day of denial meticulously marked off on a three-by-five card stuck to the refrigerator door, each day a badge of pride and punishment and self-control. I got derailed, not by the Easter Bunny this time, but by my cousin Ann in Ireland, when she cheerfully welcomed me and my son to her lovely kitchen overlooking the Atlantic Ocean by opening a box of Irish chocolate-covered biscuits. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. When in Dunmore East ... well, the chocolate always DOES taste better in Europe.

Yes, we're talking hard-core addiction here. Whatever chocolate cake happens to be in the refrigerator left-over from a birthday celebration is of course breakfast du jour with a cup of tea, whether it's my sour-cream chocolate layer cake with buttercream frosting, chocolate covered mint squares, death-by-chocolate brownies, or chocolate amaretto cheesecake. I can eat chocolate for breakfast, lunch, dinner, and mid-day snacks. And frequently do. While I raid the candy

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bowl at work on a daily basis, I also keep a stash of Dove chocolates in a co-worker's file cabinet in his office down the hall. My theory is that if I keep them in my office they'll be gone in a few hours, but if they're in his, I'll be too embarrassed to make more than one or two raids a day. Some days it even works.

I knew I was in serious addiction territory many years ago when I read a lengthy and serious article about alcoholism, went through the checklist that accompanied the article and realized that you could substitute "chocolate" for the word "alcohol" in each of the dozen red-flag questions designed to getting you to run for your life toward a recovery group.

And yes, I've heard the joke. "Why are there no twelve-step programs for chocoholics?" "Because nobody wants to quit."

Not that I don't want to, for a lot of good reasons. The extra pounds I'm carrying in my caboose, for one. All the cravings and the mood swings and blood sugar spikes and crashes for another. You can tell me all you want about new medical findings that dark chocolate is actually good for your health in any number of ways. (And yes, in fact, my cholesterol level is admirably, remarkably healthy, as is my blood pressure.) The fact of the matter is, I've been good and hooked since I was a little girl and my mother started me off on Hershey Kisses as treats on the theory that all other candies containing artificial food colorings were bad. And addiction is never a good thing. Chocolate is my comfort food, my "brain food" when I'm on a heavy thinking deadline, my preferred dessert, my ultimate self-indulgence. Give up sex or chocolate? Hmmmmmm ... Gotta think about that one for a minute.

I still look back at that forty-five day stretch with longing, and pride, and ultimately disappointment. And I remember exactly what tipped me back off the wagon.

I'd taken four kids down to Chicago for a family visit around Easter time. Four kids aged eleven down through through one-and-a half. Suitcases, collapsible stroller, diaper bag, snacks, toys, books. It was like packing to emigrate. And we crammed a lot into a day that didn't go nearly as smoothly in real life as it had in the planning stages.

We shoe-horned my Aunt Mary into the minivan with us that morning and took off to visit the Museum of Science and Industry on the city's far south side. Got there and found that the exhibit she meant us to see wasn't available. Drove back toward the city and decided to hit the Field Museum of Natural History at the south end of the Loop instead. Parked in another zip code because of parking lot renovations around the museum. Waited for about a half hour in line to get our lunches at the crowded McDonald's in the basement of the museum. Holiday cheer with your fries, anyone? Rescheduled seeing a college pal until later in the day because of all the hitches in meandering so far. Tried to beat the rush hour traffic on the Kennedy Expressway by taking the side roads out from the Loop. Got snarled up instead in the traffic jam surrounding Wrigley Field for NBA star Michael Jordan's professional baseball debut in an exhibition game between the White Sox and the Chicago Cubs. April 7, 1994. A day that will live in infamy, both for professional baseball and me.

We dragged ourselves back into the house, lugged the kids and all their gear up to my aunt's second story apartment where we planned to settle in. She reached behind the pictures on the fireplace mantle, took out some Easter treats for the kids she'd hidden behind them. Fannie May chocolate, the holy grail of self-indulgence. I'd spent a college summer working in the Loop, never packing a lunch, making a three-day circuit between Fannie May, Baskin Robbins and Heinemann's bakery. She'd bought each kid a bag of Fannie May chocolate eggs and a Fannie May chocolate bunny, and started handing them out.

"Gee, Mary Therese, it's such a shame that now's the time you've decided to give up eating chocolate." It wasn't a taunt, just an observation, but I felt something inside me tip. I looked down at Robert who was not quite two, and realized he would have no memory of this moment. I turned to my aunt, and ordered, "Give me that bunny." It was gone in seconds.

That was the high point on the chocolate sobriety meter, or the low point, however you look at it. Though addiction has just now shown its better side.

I had some surgery done on an outpatient basis not long ago, and my friend Judy came out to the hospital to babysit me there and then take me home later. Blessed with both a nursing degree, a wicked sense

Running with Stiletos

of humor, and friendship of more than three decades, she came fully equipped with an apple (“an apple a day keeps the doctor away!”), a box of Garfield decorated bandages, a gardening magazine, a box of chocolate-dipped devil’s food donuts for my breakfast the next day, a bag of Dove dark chocolate miniatures, and a bag of Ghirardelli 60% cacao dark chocolate squares. Chocolate of thoroughly medicinal strength if you believe the scientific research these days. Not on the hospital menu, but still assuredly very, very good for you.

The operation went off without a hitch, though with the combination of a short stretch under general anesthetic and then a shot of morphine for pain later, I was pretty out of it for a while. Still, after a half hour of chewing on the ice chips Judy was spoon-feeding me, I was starting to feel restless and ready to leave.

The thing about hospitals and nurses though, is, there are certain benchmarks they want you to hit before they let you out the door with their blessing and a sheet of instructions in six point type. Chewing ice chips is one. Not falling over when you get up is another. And proving that you can eat something without throwing it back up a minute later is another key test. Okay, I played ball. “I want some sherbet.”

The order went out into the hospital universe somewhere. She wants sherbet, not soup, not sandwiches, not cheesecake. More ice chips followed, along with an unassisted trip to the bathroom (another benchmark, yea!), some sips of water, and the question, “where’s my sherbet?” Somewhere in transit. I settled in yet again, watched the clock, watched Dr. Phil, ate some more ice chips, got dressed in my street clothes. Still no sherbet.

It appeared the hospital had had to dispatch someone from the kitchen to go to the Himalayas to shoot the elusive Tibetan sherbet yak, and preparation was still going to take a while. Time to take matters into our own hands. “Judy, I think it’s time we broke into the chocolate you smuggled in.”

We hit the Ghirardelli first, then the Dove. I kept it all down, though it was a little hard getting it down my throat in the first place because of the “cotton mouth” effect of the anesthesia. Still, it was enough to impress the powers that be, and after signing the paperwork

Chocolate Sobriety

they popped me into a wheelchair and pushed me out to Judy's car waiting at the curb.

I finally dug into the sherbet as I was going through the sliding doors, finished it as we were driving down the street to my house. Score one for my demons.

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