

Not Just Clumsy



I was in my 20s the first time I tripped while I was jogging. I skinned my knee and my hands. I didn't think much of it. It was dark and I was running in an older neighborhood in Washington, D.C., with lots of cracked sidewalks and tree roots. It could happen to anyone. Right?

Over the next 15 years, there were many more falls. Sometimes while I was running, sometimes walking. Sometimes in very famous places (good morning, Grand Central Station!), sometimes on anonymous sidewalks in quiet towns. I never had any trouble making excuses for my tumbles - clumsiness, ice or too-high heels. I told my stories for sport at cocktail parties, laughing them off and inviting friends to join me in that laughter.

Two years ago, on a perfect October day, I fell again. This time it wasn't funny. I hit my face on the sidewalk, cut up my mouth and broke some teeth. I retired from running and found other exercises, but I was still chalking it up to clumsiness, even after a radiologist friend suggested there might be something more to it.

About six months ago, not long after my 40th birthday, I noticed that on long walks, my right foot was dragging a bit. Not enough to fall, but plenty to notice. I finally had reason to investigate further. I'm sure you can imagine what happened next.

My family doctor was stumped, and sent me to a neurologist. The neurologist put me through a series of tests and determined that there was nothing wrong with my foot or leg, but there was a slight weakness on my right side. He scheduled an MRI "to rule out" multiple sclerosis. I shared the news of my upcoming MRI with friends with concern, but not panic because MS is the kind of thing that happens to other people, not to me. Surely in a few months this would

just be another good story to tell.

The appointment at which I received the diagnosis of primary-progressive MS was on December 12, at noon. (And I was late, so it might even have been 12/12/12 at 12:12. How about that?) My neurologist told me there were lesions, told me it was MS, gave me a lumbar puncture, and then left me to lay still for 30 minutes. Those are minutes that I'll never forget. These have been months that I'll never forget.

Suddenly, the future that I'd imagined for myself no longer exists. I need to begin creating a new one. In some ways, I've been forced to reimagine my past as well. All those falls: not just clumsiness. I'm 40, but I'm getting to know myself all over again. The past few months have been scary, disappointing, stressful and dark. (And believe me, winter in Vermont can be dark dark dark even without MS specialists to see). Surprisingly, they've also been joyful, reassuring and filled with hope and laughter. I'm just getting started, but I look forward to sharing more about my journey with you here.