

So what?

It's really not that big of a deal. After all, it wasn't a dramatic fall and it's not even that good of a story. It was late at night and you were on the way home when you stopped at a burger place just off the Interstate. You decided that you wanted a hamburger that, now that you give it some more thought, you didn't really need that badly anyway.

So maybe the parking lot was wet. Maybe your sneakers didn't have the right tread on them anymore. Maybe a shoe lace came untied and you didn't notice. Maybe you stumbled over a broken curb. Maybe your foot "fell asleep" while you were driving? Maybe you were just thinking about something else. There could've been a hundred reasons why you went down and only one of them is that you're getting old and unsteady.

But there's really no need to overthink this, is there? After all, the important thing is not that you fell, but that you jumped back up. Because that's what counts, isn't it? When something bad happens, what you need to do is to bounce back up. Put an end to it. Cut it short. You've watched enough nature videos to know that the wounded wildebeest is the one that gets eaten

first. So the trick here is to get up and move on as quickly as you can. Keep running, Everybody knows that.

You need to act cool but there are people looking at you, wondering if you're ok. You want to tell them to leave you the fuck alone but you can't do that because they look like nice people and their intentions are probably good.

So, you just nod and wave them all off, even the late-shift supervisor who is clearly worried that somehow this will all crack back on him.

No, he shouldn't call a fucking ambulance. But you don't say that either because he seems to be a nice kid and his intentions are probably good too, even if they're covered with a thick layer of employee-handbook paranoia.

And meanwhile there's a dime-sized hole in the knee of your jeans with blood blooming around it like dark petals around a tiny flower.

The moral here is that growing old is confusing. There are road signs, but who reads road signs? When you were teaching college in the Midwest, you had some heart problems. But the doctors said they fixed them, didn't they? A couple of your students even found their way to your hospital room, but you told them stupid jokes and smiled and tried to act all nonchalant and cool. But it's hard to act cool in a hospital bed, isn't it? And you knew that you were failing when they started checking their phones and then headed back toward campus.

On the other hand, maybe you didn't really know anything. Maybe when it comes down to it, the only thing you know is that you don't really know anything.

Because ever since then there were doubts that crept into your mind. Every time a student opened a door for you on campus, you had to stop and think. Did they open the door because they were being friendly, or was it because they thought you couldn't open the door by yourself? Should you feel thankful, or offended? Was this even a sign? And if it was a sign, what did it mean?

It's really not fair. This whole thing creeps up on you like a dark 18-wheeler in your mirror, then blasts past you in a sudden explosion of sound and light. One day, somebody opens a door for you. Next thing, you're laying on your belly in the parking lot of a burger place off the Interstate. And then time roars rudely past and you find yourself picking through health-care pamphlets in some doctor's waiting room. What just happened?

At some point, doctors started mentioning the idea of a defibrillator. A defibrillator is a battery pack implanted in your chest that would automatically come to life if your heart ever needed a jolt to get it going. And the doctors said that their tests had convinced them that someday you might actually need a jolt to get your heart going.

Someday you might really need help to open the door.

Still you dragged your feet at the idea because there was no doubt that a defibrillator *was* a big fucking sign. And to be honest, you were afraid. This didn't fit into the story you wanted to tell about yourself. This just wasn't you. After all, a defibrillator was a electronic device that was actually implanted in your chest and you're a guy who didn't even like to wear a watch.

The doctors didn't really get that joke either.

It was also right around this time that you noticed that “Have you ever fallen?” had become one of the robotic interview questions that they used to open their doctor visits.

“Do you ever feel depressed?” Pause. “Have you ever fallen?”

And you want to answer with a snarky “Sure, doesn’t everybody?” tone. But they probably wouldn’t laugh at that joke either, so you just keep it to yourself.

But now you’ve wandered way off track.

Your knee is stinging, but you pretend to not notice it. That little blood flower is still growing on the knee of your jeans, but you act like you don’t care. Actually, you act like it’s not even there.

You grab the big glass door of the burger place and swing it open wider and more powerfully than you need to and it makes a loud noise and now people are looking at you again.

It’s getting harder and harder to be cool. Or maybe you’re just failing at it more and more.

You hope that your hamburger is ready and waiting for you behind the counter so you can put an end to this embarrassing episode. And no, you don’t want any fucking fries with that.

But you can’t say any of that out loud, because the girl behind the counter is doing her best and it’s late and she probably doesn’t want to be here either. She smiles at you and you smile back at her. And you hope that tucked somewhere in those smiles is some kind of agreement that neither of you will ever speak of this again.

She's pretty and she seems sweet. Still you just met and you don't know if you can trust her. Then again, you don't really have a choice do you?

After all, when you get home you can take a shower, wash out your knee with soap and warm water, find an old movie on television, fall asleep, and try to forget that any of this happened.

But first you have to get home.

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