

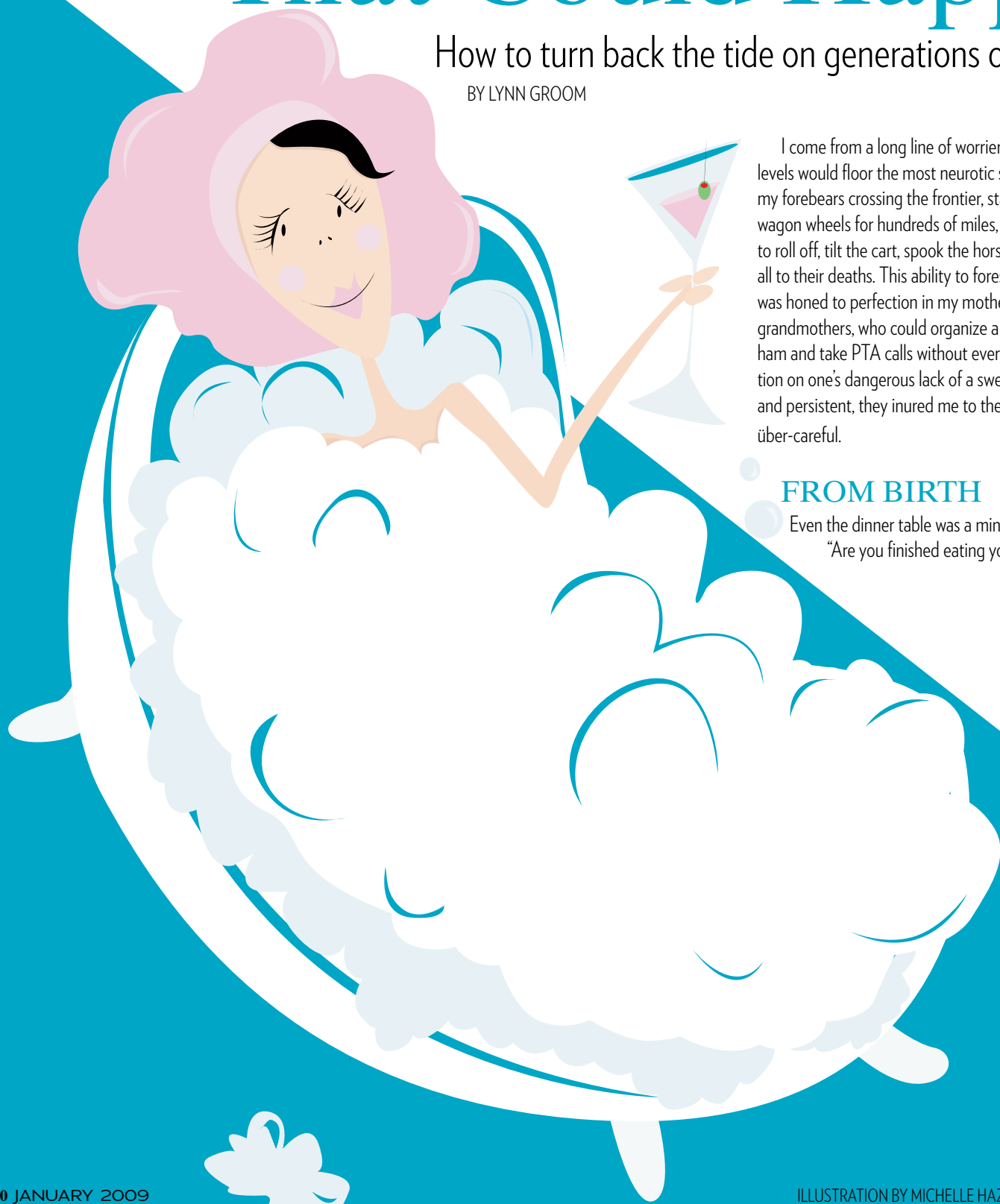
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What's the Worst That Could Happen?



How to turn back the tide on generations of worry

BY LYNN GROOM



I come from a long line of worriers whose anxiety levels would floor the most neurotic squirrel. I imagine my forebears crossing the frontier, staring down at their wagon wheels for hundreds of miles, waiting for one to roll off, tilt the cart, spook the horse and drag them all to their deaths. This ability to foresee catastrophe was honed to perfection in my mother and both of my grandmothers, who could organize a reunion, bake a ham and take PTA calls without ever losing concentration on one's dangerous lack of a sweater. Methodical and persistent, they inured me to the ways of the über-careful.

FROM BIRTH

Even the dinner table was a minefield.

"Are you finished eating your carrots?" one

grandmother would ask.

"I ate as many as you did, Gran."

"But you're growing," she'd say. "You need lots of beta carotene for your eyes."

"I can see just fine."

"For now. But if you don't start eating more carrots, you'll need Coke bottle glasses like Uncle Finus."

"What is that all over your face?" my mother would ask later, brows furrowed.

"Soap."

"So much soap! Don't get it in your nose or eyes. You might get a chemical burn."

"I bet they make soap eye- and nose-proof so it's just a mild irritant."

"Well, they haven't seen how much you use."

And so it went.

"Watch your eye!" while hanging ornaments on the tree.

"Are you going to leave the room while that candle is burning? One blast from an air vent and the whole house is in flames."

"You want fast food? You know the hormones and antibiotics in those are killing us all." Well, that was a point.

And so was my childhood.

Eventually, I picked up the knack, and it evolved as my life did. In an effort to help me relax as an adult, my friends tossed the standard aphorisms at me, which I lobbed back with the ferocity of a tennis serve.

"You need to chill," they'd say. "What's with the constant studying?"

"If I don't pass this test, my entire GPA will go down. Someone else will get hired ahead of me, I won't get a decent job and I'll live in a box."

Or, "You're going all the way back for your socks? What's the worst that can happen if you skip socks?"

"I'll get frostbite, which will spread up my legs to my vital organs, and then I'll die."

Amazingly, they stayed my friends. Eventually, they mused, I would learn to relax. The turnaround started when I set up house with my husband, Dave.

MARRIAGE

"This bill is due," I announced.

"It's not due for another week," Dave replied.

"But that's over a holiday, and it's got to make it all the way to San Diego."

"Lynn, it can wait. What's the worst that can happen?"

"It will get there late, wreck our credit scores and we won't be able to get another car when one of ours dies. Then we won't be able to get to work, and we'll lose our jobs. We'll live on the street."

"Well, honey, start decorating your box because I'm living on the edge."

"It's cold out," I would say to him. "You really need a jacket."

"It's not cold," the Pennsylvania native would say.

"It's in the 40s. My gran says that if you don't keep your torso warm in the cold, it can lower your immune system."

"You know I love your gran, but she's an over-exaggerator," he said.

"Exaggerator," said the English major irritably to the IT major. "There's no such thing as an over-exaggerator. That's like an erroneous mistake."

"Over-exaggerator," he insisted. "You need to relax. Be happy."

CHANGE

I waited for Dave to get his come-uppance. Late notices. Foreclosure. A cold. After six

If I had my life to live over, I would perhaps have more actual troubles but I'd have fewer imaginary ones. ~Don Herold

months of eyeing him warily, I began to suspect that Gran was indeed over-exaggerating. Dave flouted the rules with wanton abandon, and nothing bad seemed to happen to him. In fact, I was beginning to notice that a lot of people eschewed check registers and socks, and they were neither homeless nor dead, and I heard of relatively few cases of frostbite. Irony of ironies, what if the laissez-faire were not only more relaxed, but better off?

In a 2008 resolution that brought hundreds of years of finely-honed anxiety to silence, I made a life-altering pledge to relax. My organic food-consuming, checkbook-balancing, sock-wearing, speed-limit-driving self was about to get a little crazy. I charged lunch on my debit card, and didn't record it in my check register. Afterward, I was drunk with glee.

The relaxed me has emerged gradually, helped along by several bottles of Merlot and a new perspective. My family worried because they valued the people around them and wanted them to be happy. I'm learning not to worry for the same reason. And I'm pleased to report that I'm still healthy and housed.

To the hyper-cautious among us, here's a toast — in 2009, relaxation is the resolution. (You might want to top off that glass.)

