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In the first grade we had guest speakers from the local fire department come in and lecture our class about what to do if we happened to catch fire. While I know crazy and horrific accidents can happen to anyone at any time, I wasn't falling asleep to *The Tonight Show* with a lit cigarette in my mouth. I also wasn't running a barbecue grill, lighting candles, or even allowed to operate the stove by myself. However, after a two hour presentation which included a film, coloring book, and hands on role playing where we took turns demonstrating how each of us could Stop, Drop, and Roll at the front of the class, I was fairly convinced that at any point I might spontaneously go up in flames.

What started out as a public service announcement teaching us about the need for working smoke detectors and fire safety, soon turned into full on disaster scenario preparedness intent on turning us into mini-preppers. The hands on portion of the class involved feeling a door for warmth while a simulated smoke detector went off as we crawled low to the ground looking for an exit. As a homework assignment, we were handed an empty booklet and told to talk to our family and develop a personal evacuation plan complete with stories and illustrations.

I brought my booklet home and immediately went to my parents fearing that if I waited a minute more, our house would be nothing but ashes. Disaster preparedness was in my father's wheelhouse as a general over-reactor. If the weather report so much as hinted at a storm, he was filling the bathtub with emergency water and lining up flashlights like soldiers at the ready in every room. So when I started a discussion about setting up a fire evacuation plan, he sprang into action.

"If that alarm goes off, you get OUT!" he decreed. "You don't go looking for the cat. You don't start packing your stuffed animals. You just save YOU!"

I stared back at him now very much worried about the cat and my stuffed animals, convinced that I should just Stop, Drop, and Roll in the middle of this conversation for good measure.

"We'll use the mailbox across the street as our meeting place," he stated. "If there are flames and smoke, you get out that front window and make it there. We'll find you."

At forty pounds and barely as tall as the kitchen table, my worry about going up in flames was now compounded by the fear that I wouldn't be able to open, let alone jump out of my, albeit first floor, bedroom window. Jumping from any sort of height with my small stature terrified me. At school we would randomly have bus drills, where students would have to

jump out of the back of the school bus to prepare for situations where the bus burst into flames, was crushed from the front, or otherwise rolled off the road and down an embankment in a movie-style disaster.

While the school and my family undoubtedly felt relief for having taught us all what to do in a flaming disaster, I now felt the burden of waiting for one to occur. I developed the habit of falling asleep on my right side, facing the window, not the wall, so that no fiery danger could sneak up on me.

While the majority of us traveled by train at least a few times a year to go to the city, we weren't commuters and we did not have easy access to the third rail. However, that didn't stop it from becoming our next safety unit.

While thankfully we didn't have any live demonstrations related to third rail safety, we did watch and discuss a disturbing movie about kids and people who touched the third rail and were electrocuted or spontaneously combusted as 700 volts of electricity traveled through them. At the time it was the equivalent of watching the face melting scene from *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, without the benefit of having one's parents nearby.

That night, I brought my latest fear home and shared this third rail knowledge with my parents over dinner. My father, a civil engineer with the New York State Department of Transportation, had worked on many train stations and rail adjacent infrastructure projects. This knowledge combined with his aforementioned tendency to overreact resulted in him being eager to supplement my latest learnings with his own personal horror stories and words of wisdom.

"The third rail is NO joke!! You know you see these guys on a job site walking on the third rail, because they have covers on them. I yell 'get the hell off of that!!' And they wave me off thinking I'm overreacting. But you know what, if there is even a small break in one of those covers, one misstep... BOOM!! That's IT! Dead! You don't mess around with that," he said. "You never get down and mess around with the third rail even if your friends are – you understand me?"

My seven year old self stared back in horror. The third rail was located adjacent to the train tracks, which were down in a 5 foot pit below the train platform, which was located several miles from our house. Being under the age of ten and unable to drive, I was way more likely to spontaneously catch fire while sleeping, than actually be in a position to get electrocuted by a third rail. That said, from that point forward the yellow line at the edge of the train platform might as well have been a force field and I would never go near it at all.

By the mid 1980s, losing kids to kidnappings was as common as losing your keys, or at least that's what we were taught to believe. Pictures of kidnapped and missing children stared back at us on milk cartons as we ate morning breakfast cereal. After school television specials and soap opera plotlines revolved around some child being abducted by a stranger with little hope of ever being found. As such, both schools and parents took the idea of not talking to strangers very seriously and jammed into our impressionable heads that the world was simply full of adults looking to steal us and throw us into a van.

If we were lucky enough to not be abducted as a child, by the time we were young teens there was a pretty good chance that we would end up eventually running away from home. I don't know if anyone ever figured out why so many young

people were running away in the 1980s, but the concept made it into the fabric and plotlines of nearly every TV series and music video at the time. When I watched MTV I too would wonder if one day I would be shimmying in artfully dangling rags like Pat Benatar, running away from a pimp in *Love is a Battlefield* or in the good-girl-gone-bad prep school featured in Bon Jovi's *Runaway*.

If MTV glamorized running away, after school specials and other TV shows sought to counteract it. One only had to watch an episode or two of *21 Jump Street* to see what would happen if you made a bad decision after a preteen fight with your parents. Within days you could expect to be hooked on drugs and sold to prostitution with the only hope of being rescued involving a few thirty-something cops going undercover in your gang.

If we managed to survive spontaneous fires, kidnappings, being electrocuted by train tracks and running away by the time we were firmly in our teens, we still weren't out of the woods because we most certainly would end up pregnant. If Madonna's *Papa Don't Preach* video taught us anything, it was that we would actually prefer to spontaneously combust than have to endure telling our parents that we were knocked up. While that made many a young girl lock her knees and Stop, Drop, and Roll away from the boys looking to impregnate her, by the time the bulk of my compatriots finally came of age and were ready to have fun, AIDS came into the picture and added a new fear to the one thing we were finally looking forward to celebrating our survival to young adulthood with.

So whether it be a global pandemic, political incompetency and corruption, social injustice, or whatever other malady appears to hitting at the time, I think one need only turn to a person who grew up in the 80s to help survive it. We've been preparing our whole lives for the world to collapse and kick us when we're down. And while we certainly don't have all the solutions, one thing we are equipped to do is Stop, Drop, and Roll with it.

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