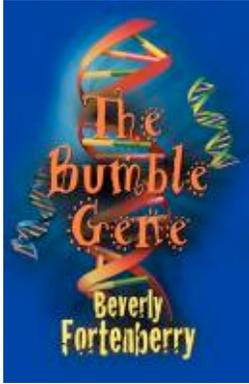


The
Bumble
Gene

Beverly
Fortenberry



*Hasn't every one of us experienced a moment or situation when we have said something or done something that, in thinking back, makes us mentally wince, and wish we could erase it from our memory? Beverly Fortenberry believes some of us make these quirky little missteps because we have a genetic defect. We have a dominant part of our DNA that predisposes us to make these little bumbles. She calls this **The Bumble Gene**.*

The Bumble Gene

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The Bumble Gene

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There are No Bumble Genes in the Navy

I'm not sure about the other services, but the Navy has a lot of protocols that wives need to know in order to avoid trouble. I had not read the protocol book; in fact I didn't know it existed. Once we had settled into married life I wanted to start socializing with the other Navy wives and their husbands. I thought it would be nice to have a cocktail party for Jim's squadron friends in our apartment. Jim agreed with the idea. I picked a Saturday that was two weeks away to give me time to plan.

I picked out some recipes for dips and little stuffed things. I bought all the plates, glasses, and napkins, everything I could think of for a fun party. It was going to have a South Sea theme with Hawaiian leis and tropical drinks.

The Wednesday before the party, Jim came home from the base and told me that we would have to cancel the party because he had to fly on temporary duty to Puerto Rico over the weekend. I was crestfallen. I said, "Couldn't you explain to them that you can't go this weekend because we have a party planned?" Jim patiently explained to me that that is not the way it was done in the Navy.

The next day, I got to thinking about all the effort I had already made to make the party a success. I was sure that if his captain, Captain Vita, understood, he would let Jim go another weekend. So I called the base and asked for Captain Vita.

"Captain Vita, this is Ensign Fortenberry's wife calling. Jim has told me that he is to fly to Puerto Rico this weekend. I wonder if you could change that. You see I have a cocktail party planned for Saturday. Jim could go the next weekend."

"I see. What is your name again?"

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“It’s Beverly Fortenberry; I am Ensign Jim Fortenberry’s wife.”

“Well now, thank you for calling.”

After he hung up, I was sure Jim would be able to stay home for the weekend. I had been very polite and the Captain was very pleasant. All afternoon, I felt really good. That evening, when Jim came home, he quietly asked me, “What did you say to Captain Vita?” I told him about our conversation and ended saying that I felt sure the Captain would let him stay home. Jim in a very even voice said, “The Captain called me in to his office and told me that if the Navy had wanted me to have a wife, they would have issued me one.” Not only did he go to Puerto Rico that weekend, he went every weekend for the next month.

Before I could do any more damage to Jim’s career with Captain Vita in Florida, we were transferred to a base in Brunswick, Georgia so he could go to navigation school. If you have ever been to the Georgia coast, you will know there are a number of islands that have been vacation destinations forever. Brunswick had a turpentine factory in town and unless you had been born there and gotten acclimated to the smell, it left a disagreeable stench on the hot, muggy Georgia air. We decided to search for housing on the islands where the smell was not a problem. What we hadn’t come to terms with was the rent for these vacation cottages. A Navy Ensign’s pay was \$250 a month. That was just about what the rent was on a cottage per week!

Some of the islands were really up-market being where the Rockefellers and their buddies had summer mansions. We opted for St. Simon’s Island, a bit more humble. It had one flashing caution light by the ice cream stand; a couple of stores and that was about it. One of the permanent residents had built a bomb shelter out of cinder blocks a block off the beach in case of

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bombing raids during World War II. They offered it to us for half Jim's pay a month. We took it. Picture this. A concrete bunker half in the ground, painted aqua. It stood in a sea of waist-high grass. No one had ever lived in it. Inside it had two small bedrooms, a bath, a sitting room and a kitchen. Each room was a primary color, yellow, green, blue, pink, and the whole place was floored in black vinyl. There were a few pieces of wooden furniture and two beds, so we were set.

We moved our few possessions in and Jim and I began a thorough cleanup to get rid of the cobwebs and dust. I started in the kitchen, cleaning the shelves and cupboards. There were huge dead spiders in the lower cupboards, and I got to wondering what they had lived on before they died. After I finished the cupboards and before I tackled the kitchen floor, I decided to take a short break and went outside for a bit of fresh air. We had a couple of mossy oaks in the backyard and I thought Jim could hang a clothesline there for me. Coming back into the kitchen, I was shocked to see the entire floor undulating like it was covered with waves of water. I screamed and Jim came running. It turns out that I had disturbed a huge nest of carpenter ants that lived under the kitchen cupboards, that's what those spiders had fed on! Jim and I sprayed can after can of aerosol bug killer on the black devils. He would spray and I would sweep. We had piles of ants which we burned in the backyard.

Once settled, my mother came for a week's visit. She was a very accommodating person, always tried to get along and not cause any fuss. However, the visit was not a great success. It seems that no matter where she sat, what drawer she opened, a silent army of palmetto bugs stalked her. They would skitter across her hand when she turned down the bed or run over her shoe as she sat reading. We would hear her yelps and I would come charging in with a rolled newspaper to flatten the bugs. I

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think she was genuinely glad when her week in the tropics was up.

Jim did put up a clothesline for me between the two oak trees. For several weeks I went out through the high grass and hung my clothes on the line. I usually did this in bare feet because it was hot and the grass was cool. One day our landlady came over and said she was going to send her gardener over to cut down the grass for us. The next day, an old gentleman came ambling into our yard. He looked at the waist-high grass and shook his head.

“Have to use a scythe to cut this mess, lawnmower won’t work.”

That made sense to me. He came back with a scythe and a long pole. I watched him from the back door. He would poke his pole into the grass, stand back for a few minutes and then take a swipe with his scythe. I watched him painstakingly do this for about half an hour and then I got impatient. I went out and said, “Why are you using that pole, at this rate it will take you a couple of days to cut this down.”

He stopped, turned around and looked at me. And in a slow Georgia drawl he said, “I ain’t gonna go in that grass without first seeing where the coral snakes is. You can die from their bites you know.”

Here I had been walking around bare foot in that grass! I never thought about snakes! For the rest of the few months we were there, between snakes and bugs, I was wary of both the outdoors and the indoors.

When Jim completed navigation school, he was assigned to the Naval Base at North Island outside of San Diego, California. We took advantage of the drive and had our long delayed honeymoon. While driving out we stopped at ghost towns, and famous places in the West. The best was the Ahwahnee Lodge in Yosemite Park. The park was fabulous, but the Lodge was

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simply awesome. The main building was of stone and cedar with three story high arched windows in the huge dining room giving the guests wonderful vistas wherever they looked.

We stayed in a cottage at the Lodge. It was down a wooded path and nestled in a stand of pine trees. That first night, we dressed up for dinner in the dining room. The room could accommodate probably 200 tables, each with a lighted candle so that the entire room was bathed in candlelight. It was absolutely beautiful. Once we were seated, I noticed a curious thing. All the candles were the same height. While Jim was looking at the menu, I started examining the candle stick to see how they kept them all at the same height. I noticed a little spring lever on the side of the candle stick. Without thinking, my Bumble gene made me move it. Majestically, that candle launched itself and arched across the dining room, landing in some mashed potatoes on the other side of the room. I remember seeing it arch and Jim looking up in silent disbelief to watch the performance. Quite a few people were looking around to find where the candle came from. Well, it wasn't hard to figure that out, we were the only table without a candle! You know you are in a classy place when the waiter, quietly replaces your candle as if it was an everyday occurrence.

The rest of the trip to California was uneventful and we arrived in San Diego, across the bay from the naval base at North Island ready and eager for our new life. We found a nice apartment in Chula Vista and I got a job teaching in a junior high in San Diego. This meant I would need a car to get to work. Jim and I shopped the used car lots for something serviceable and cheap. We found it at Happy Ken, Gene and Hal's Used Car Lot. It was a pale green Ford with only a small hole in the floorboard and absolutely nooo extras. Jim test drove it and it seemed to be just fine. Of course that was because he is a man and not mechanically challenged. I have had a 'thing'

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with coffee pots, can openers, irons, electric fry pans, anything that requires wattage and an operator. If they are going to break down, they do it on my watch. Anyway, I called the car Pedro and for the first few days, we got along well. Pedro took me up and down the hills of San Diego to my school and home without a gasp, a choke or a sputter. Then, without warning Pedro developed a rare auto-immune disease. He was immune to making left turns. He could only turn right. If I paused to make a left turn, he would cough and die and refuse to be revived for a long time. This was very upsetting. I told Jim about it. He took Pedro on a test drive all the way to Mexico and came back saying he had no problem making left turns! The very next day, Pedro died in the middle of a left turn onto El Cajon Highway. Cars zoomed past me to the left and cars careened around me to the right. I stood next to Pedro and waited for him to come to his senses. I realized then that it was me or the car. I plotted a route to school that required me to make a series of lazy right hand loops through the city. This took me 20 minutes more time, but guaranteed we would get there. And so began the contest between Pedro and me.

Unfortunately, one day I was asked to go to a meeting at the school administration building in downtown San Diego. This was an area I was not familiar with and I had no planned right-hand loops to take. I gritted my teeth and started down Highway One and make a very wide left-hand turn over the series of railroad tracks that crossed the main street into downtown San Diego. I had tried to fake Pedro out with the wide shallow turn, hoping he wouldn't recognize it as a disguised left. But, he did and somewhere in the middle of the railroad tracks he gagged and fell silent. Trains came through there all the time! I was panic stricken! Luckily, a truck was right behind me and the driver helped me push Pedro off the tracks and down a slight hill. I got off the road by rolling into a meat packing plant's

loading dock where I waited for Pedro to calm down. Once on the road again, I was gratified to find that the school administration building was straight down the road on the 'right hand' side.

Jim would be gone from three to nine months when he was on a deployment. The only good thing about those cruises was that I got to 'park' Pedro and drive the Oldsmobile convertible. I had promised Jim I would be extremely careful with the car when he was gone. And I was, except for this one time. My friend, Sandy Adcock's husband was in the same squadron as Jim. Sandy and her husband had been married for a long time and had 6 children. They lived on the rim of one of the canyons that ran through the area. It was Easter weekend and we had planned to go to church together. As I had the convertible, all the kids wanted to ride with me. Sandy said no, but without thinking I said it would be fine. That morning, I put the top down so we all could enjoy the lovely spring day, blue sky and cotton-ball clouds. I pulled up the hill into her driveway and parked. Sandy was rounding everyone up. We had gotten everyone organized when Sandy noticed that four year old David was missing. Everyone began a hunt for him. I decided to look in the front yard and down the road. I came outside in time to see David in the driver's seat of my car playing with the steering wheel and the automatic gear shift! I yelled his name and began running. David had slipped the car out of park and it began rolling down the drive. Their street bisected the canyon with a row of houses on the high side and another row of houses down below. With me yelling and running and the rest of the family close behind we chased David as he gained speed bouncing onto and across the road and down into the lower part of the canyon and finally into the yard of their neighbor, through his hibiscus and into the side of his house, where of course the car came to a stop. David was fine, the car was not.

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Jim and I exchanged several letters about this little incident. I was rather relieved to be demoted to Pedro after that.

You know, naval aviators have to be the best in the world at their craft. Only the best can take off and land on a pitching carrier deck in the middle of the ocean on a dark, rainy night. Back in the 1960's, some pilots flew prop planes, others flew jets, but it didn't matter, miss an arresting wire when landing and a pilot could end up ditching in the ocean and risk getting run over by the carrier or worse still crashing on the deck. Every cruise, some pilots lost their lives.

Strong bonds were made between the pilots. One of Jim's best friends was a fantastic pilot who went on to receive many air medals for his courage and bravery. Rocky Pirofalo and Jim pulled lots of stunts, like flying into and out of volcanoes in Hawaii just for the fun of it.

Rocky bought a PT open cockpit bi-plane for his own flying pleasure. He painted it red and white. It looked like a dragonfly in the air. One day he invited me to go for a flight. I was thrilled. You have to picture how we looked taking off. I sat in the front cockpit, Rocky sat behind me in the back cockpit. I could barely see over the edge of the fuselage. In front of me were the motor and the propeller. I was strapped in and had an old leather helmet on my head. In order to communicate there was a rubber tube with a funnel on each end that connected the two open cockpits. That tube also served as a 'relief' tube.

We took off and once up in the air, Rocky yelled through the tube asking if I wanted to do some aerobatics. I nodded yes, what did I know? Soon we were doing loop-the-loops and barrel rolls over the golden hills of southern California. It was exhilarating stuff, hanging by the seat straps as we flew upside down or went tumbling through the sky with the wind blowing around us. We had been up about half an hour and Rocky had turned us back toward the field, when the plane had a slight

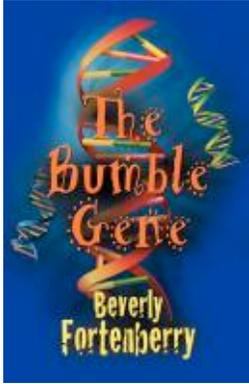
mishap. I saw a part come loose on the engine and all of a sudden, the propeller stopped spinning and the only sound I could hear was the whistling of the wind as we began to gently glide down! I grabbed the speaking tube and yelled to Rocky, as if he hadn't already seen the problem. He smiled and nodded and began to take us on a series of wide, shallow banking turns. Slowly, we were coming down. It was then that I lost control and did the unthinkable. I peed in my pants. All I could think was we were going to crash and I was too young to die!

Well, my ace pilot knew exactly what he was doing and we glided down to a silent landing on the edge of the air field. He was fine; I was embarrassed at having to walk backwards back to the car, so no one would see my pants. All I could think was it was too bad I hadn't been able to use the 'relief' tube.

After 300 aircraft landings, Jim had decided that he may have used up most of his luck and it was time to call it a day and leave the Navy. So before he left on his last cruise, he put together a resume and a cover letter and compiled a list of about 50 companies that he thought might be worth contacting. His plan was to address all the envelopes, sign his cover letter and enclose that with a copy of his resume and mail the letters off and see how many responses he got. He was very organized. While he was gone, I got to thinking how I could help him. I got the addresses for the companies and made out the envelopes. I folded the letters and resumes into each one and mailed them off the week before Jim came home. I figured all the responses would come within the next two weeks or so. I was really excited to tell him how I had helped with his job hunt. When Jim returned, he casually looked over the spare letters and resumes I had left. He asked me, "Did you sign my name to every letter"? I looked at the letter and then at Jim and mumbled something about not having signed them. In a somewhat resigned voice he said, "So all these letters you mailed went out

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with ‘sincerely yours’, but no signature.” “Yes, I said, but not to worry, your resume has your name on it.” As Jim pointed out to me, few people want to hire someone who doesn’t even know to sign their name to a letter. There were few responses. The Bumble Gene had struck again.



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