

65 Roses

In 1965, Mary Weiss volunteered to work for the Cystic Fibrosis Trust after learning that her three children suffered from the disease. Cystic fibrosis (CF) is a chronic illness that affects the respiratory, digestive and reproductive systems. It clogs the lungs with thick, sticky mucus and impairs the functioning of the pancreas. The result is a life of relentless physiotherapy, nebulisers, antibiotics and hospital admissions of varying severity. While treatments are improving and evolving, it kills most sufferers in their youth or in their prime.

When Richard was diagnosed, Mary Weiss moved the family from Montreal to Palm Beach in Florida on the advice of her doctor, who had told Mary that her children would be likely to die before they were 10 years old and the sea air would give them a better quality of life in what little time they had left.

One day, Mary's four-year-old son Richard said to her:

– I know who you're working for.

Mary was horrified. At the time, Richard confessed his knowledge of his mother's work, her eldest child, Arthur, was seven and the youngest, Anthony, was 16 months old, so she had not told any of them they suffered from cystic fibrosis or that they would be likely to die young. Her relentless phone calls aimed at raising money for the Trust were often done from home and now, confronted by her son,

she feared the worst. He must have heard her use the words ‘cystic fibrosis’ many times and perhaps he had learned what it was and that he had it.

– What am I working for, sweetheart? she asked, nervously.

– You’re working for 65 roses.

Mary burst into tears when she realised that when she said cystic fibrosis, her son heard 65 roses.

Time treated the family harshly. Arthur, the eldest child, died young and Richard also lost his battle with cystic fibrosis, while Mary continued to battle for a cure until her death at the age of 77 in April 2016.

One of Mary’s many legacies is that children who suffer from CF still refer to the illness as 65 roses. As a sufferer myself, I’m touched by this story of how an ugly genetic illness came to be associated with the scented beauty of roses.

This ambiguity defines for me the delicate balance between life and death, success and failure. As with all such stories, luck plays a pivotal role. To get CF, both parents have to be carriers of the relevant genetic mutations, which means the odds of the disease being passed to me were 25%. As an entrepreneur, the odds of me creating a global brand and becoming a millionaire were vanishingly small. Yet, when the dice rolled, I got the illness and the global brand.

Would I prefer the dice to have behaved as the odds predicted, making my health good and my bank balance empty? I never ask myself questions like that. We get the life we are given and all we can do is make the most of it, and that is what makes writing this book such a difficult task. Is it a book about battling terminal illness? Or is it a book about a product I designed while at university that changed the

way children travel? Or is it perhaps about what it takes to start with nothing, be ridiculed by experts and go on to prove everyone wrong?

In fact, it is a book about all these things. Regardless of whether we are born with a genetic disorder that is likely to kill us in our youth, we will all, at some point in our lives, have to fight illness and misfortune. If we start our own businesses, we will all have to fight for the cash to keep our dreams alive. Most businesses will perform modestly and many will go bust. The rich and successful entrepreneur is the exception that proves the rule.

In sickness and in health, through success and failure, the course our lives take is often random and unpredictable, but how we deal with the randomness is not. That small slither of opportunity where we can manage the unpredictability that envelops us on all sides is what we can control. Fighting for your life or making your first million requires the same skills of courage, emotional discipline and a capacity to deal with unfairness and adversity without becoming a victim of either. This book is about those skills, what they are and how you can learn them. They are tools for life and I will do my best to teach them by telling my story about what it means to defy the odds in life and business.