



Art of Family Medicine

Pretty mighty good

Sarah Fraser MSc MD

Anyone here by the name of Beautiful Betty? One roast beef lunch coming right up.”
“God love your soul, Kevin.”

He sets my tray of food on the stand beside my bed, and then swings the whole contraption around in front of me. I feel around for the fork and give a tap-tap to the potatoes. Boy, are they ever caked down good and hard. Crusty with a yellow tinge, I bet.

Looking to the window, I pretend to take in the view of Citadel Hill, which they say is quite pretty. My head drifts toward her empty bed. If Florence were still here, she would put up a stink about the potatoes. I can hear her now.

“Beggars can’t be choosers now, Florence.”

“Uh, Betty?”

“Oh, dearie me. Did I say that out loud? Sorry, Kevin. It’s just ...”

It’s just that nothing. I feel such a fool at times.

“I miss her too, Betty.” Kevin holds my hand and gives it a solid squeeze. “Are you sure you don’t want to come to the cafeteria today? You haven’t been there since ... There’s even a bingo tournament this afternoon.”

“Not today, but thanks for asking.”

“Tomorrow, maybe?”

“You never know.”

Kevin’s footsteps pitter-patter away, and I wonder whether he misses the foolishness that Florence used to put him up to. Just a few weeks ago she was calling to him, “Kevin, help us pick an outfit for Betty. And get the curlers in too; they’ll need time to set. She has company coming today.”

“That’s right, Florence.” I tried to hide my joy at the thought of getting a visitor. Who wants to be a desperate old biddy? And sure as the sky is blue, I didn’t want to go getting myself all worked up in case my grandniece couldn’t make it. Young people are so busy.

The preparations began with the jewelry. Florence’s bony fingers sifting through metal sounded like a steady rain. Growing up in the country, never a day in my life did I wear jewelry other than a necklace for Sunday service. But Florence loved dressing me up like a doll. What silly shenanigans, getting an old girl so gussied up.

“How about this gray blouse?” Kevin asked.

“Come on now,” Florence said. “Not with this drab weather. We need something cheery.”

They finally settled on a royal-blue sweater with a big pink rose across the front, a pearl necklace with a matching pearl bracelet, and light pink lipstick that Kevin painted on my cracked lips.

“Oh, Betty, you’re beautiful.” Florence was bursting at the seams with pride and joy. It was pretty mighty good to see her so happy. Nothing so nice in the world as to bring a smile to another person.

My grandniece brought the most beautiful roses that day. Everyone was saying how lovely they were. I couldn’t believe how they matched my sweater, and how much they smelled like home.

Ah, I should probably eat this lunch before it freezes. But these salt packets! The darn things won’t open. I should have asked Kevin to do it for me. I used to be quite independent, until I broke my hip that morning last March on the way out to the coop to check for eggs. I hit an icy patch and down I went like a son of a gun. *Whoop*, there she goes! My hip was on fire. I lay there thinking, *Lordie be. This is it. Who on this earth will be the unlucky soul to find me a dead one?* I prayed it wouldn’t be one of the neighbour’s children. They used to come over for tobogganing and hot chocolate. Seeing me would have scarred them for life.

Then I remembered the emergency thingamajig and thought, *I might not kick the bucket after all!* I’d always felt a fool wearing it, but did it ever come in handy. I unzipped my puffy coat and rifled around until I found the plastic button. And didn’t help arrive in a jiffy? The young fellas put me on a stretcher and up into the ambulance I went, sirens blazing all the way to New Glasgow. Pretty mighty good the way it all worked out.

But if I had known while lying on the ground that it was my last day at home, I would have done things differently. I would have taken an extra good look around. Sure, I could barely see, but I would have squinted right hard to catch a shadow of the harbour behind the house. I bet the wild rosebush tips were poking out of the snowbank. I would have heard the chickens clucking and would have taken big breaths of cold fresh country air. Would have kissed the snow until my lips went blue. And probably wouldn’t have been thinking so much about the pain.

It was as if someone really close to you was about to die, only you didn’t know it yet. You say your goodbyes as usual, then they go and get into a horrible accident. I bet you’d be wishing you said all kinds of things, like how much you love them, how special they are, hug them so hard like you never want to let go. Nowadays, I do this every chance I get.

They told me it was a “high-risk surgery,” me being 94 and all; but things turned out pretty mighty good. After the hospital, I moved in with my grandniece in the city. I didn’t put up a fuss when she moved me to the home. I couldn’t very well go on living with her any longer. What

a burden that would be! And what sense does it make for an old girl with a bad hip to live in a 2-storey house in the country all alone? Don't get me wrong; I miss the country something fierce. But if I hadn't moved to the home, I wouldn't have met Florence.

Couldn't have picked a better match. Talk and talk and talk, we did. No matter the topic, we would always have something to say. Like the weatherman, for instance. Boy, did we ever love to joke about him and how his growing arse covered up the South Shore. If you lived in Yarmouth, how would you know if a storm was coming? Ha! That one still makes me laugh.

It was her lungs that failed her in the end. She wasn't answering one morning when I tried to wake her up. I called the nurse who called the doctor who pronounced her dead right in front of me. Kevin wheeled me down the hall and I cried and cried. God only knows where the tears kept coming from, rolling out like a waterfall. My eyes aren't worth a penny for seeing things, but boy, they sure do work for the tears.

These days I try to look on the bright side. I have a place to live. I have my mind. Company still comes to visit now and again, and that's more than a lot of folk have.


On the news the other day they were talking about how long it takes to get into a nursing home. Then they started talking all about India and how the old folk stay with the family. Well, that sounds all well and good but imagine the burden. Young people nowadays work so hard, busy, busy, busy. Flying all over the world like birds. And they have no time.

Time.

It's funny how you'd think I'd be worried I didn't have enough time left. But I've got too much, if you ask me. The days are so long.

Lunch. Must eat this lunch. But Lordie be, what's that now? My head! What an awful ache. Never felt such a pain since the hip. I'm calling for help but my words are coming out all gobbledygook. Kevin's here again, likely on account of my commotion, and his face is all pinched up and wrinkled. Weird and worried-like. "Just squeeze my hand, Betty." But I can't. My right arm's gone limp.

I've seen the commercials and I know very well what's going on. It's a stroke. Why would I go on living like a blind, mindless vegetable? A potato with no eyes—ha! Some people suffer for years before they die. Not me. Stroke of luck, if you ask me. Imagine thinking such a thing before you die. Isn't my life supposed to flash before my eyes?

I close them and stop trying to answer questions with my garbled tongue. The pain in my head floats away. The things I know best come to mind. My country house at the top of its hill. Hens pecking at the lawn on a summer day. The harbour smooth as glass. Florence at the shore, calling my name, telling me how warm the water is, asking me what on earth I am waiting for. Come on for a swim. 

Dr Fraser is a resident at the Northern Ontario School of Medicine and she is based in Sudbury, Ont.

Competing interests
None declared

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