

Be The Noodle:
50 Ways to Be a Compassionate, Courageous, Crazy-Good Caregiver

CHAPTER 28

The wise woman worriers go bananas

The little Cape house on the dead end Cape Cod street was quiet. The television in Bette's room automatically turns off at 10 p.m. She usually falls asleep at 8 p.m. but likes the TV on in the room. Strange company, but, hey, whatever works when you're dying.

I had gone upstairs to the den after Mum settled in after dinner and turned on the other TV, snuggling into the plaid pullout couch and wrapping myself up in the cranberry afghan my grandmother had made years ago.

Ah, eureka! Thursday night and a new episode of "30 Rock," one of life's small pleasures while living at my mother's house while my family was in their own orbit back in Rhode Island.

After "30 Rock" and some inane sitcom it was time for the routine -- a little flossing, brushing the teeth, scrubbing the face and then globbing on that super-thick Wise Woman Goddess night-time face lotion for "mature women."

Maybe at last I'd act mature, like Audrey Hepburn. Elegant. Soft spoken. Manicured. As flawless in beauty and social skills as Audrey's skin.

But wait, is that the phone ringing? No one calls the house at 11 p.m.

"Is this Elizabeth Kelly?"

"No, this is her daughter. May I help you?"

"Well, Mrs. Kelly was here for blood tests earlier today."

“Yes, and...” I quickly replied, clearly losing Audrey’s coolness.

“Well, I’m sorry to disturb you so late but I’m required by law to call because Mrs. Kelly’s potassium level is dangerously low. It’s below 2.5. We’ll also be calling her doctor.”

“So, exactly does this mean. I mean, what should I be doing?” I asked.

“Well,” the lab doctor said, “Call her doctor first thing in the morning. And give her some bananas as soon as you can to get the potassium levels up. The doctor will also likely prescribe medication. Sorry to have to have had to call you so late.”

Geeze, Louise, I thought hanging up. Now what.

I went online and Googled “low potassium.”

Up it came. “When the potassium level drops to less than 2.5mEq/L then the condition is life threatening and in need of emergency medical attention. The effects of low potassium in the body is the formation of a potentially fatal state called “hypokalemia.”

Hypokalemia? Fatal? Jesus, I thought. What if she dies of this instead of the cancer?

I went downstairs and tiptoed into Bette’s bedroom. No sound, no movement. Oh dear God. I walked closer and put my face down close to hers.

Yes! She’s breathing!

Then I went into the kitchen and got two yellowy-green bananas and went back into her bedroom. Medicine time.

I looked at my mother’s face. She looked so restful. Almost young. Could it be possible that you lose all your wrinkles when you have terminal cancer? She was lovely in a way I

had never seen before. Or maybe it was how the streetlight was shining through the peach-colored bedroom curtains.

“Or maybe,” said the wise woman goddess voice in my head, the Audrey Hepburn mature woman, “she’s finally having a good night’s sleep for the first time since the brain surgery. The medicine is making the potassium levels low but the sleep is making her beautiful.”

“You’re right wise woman,” I said, walking back to the kitchen and tossing the bananas on the counter. “Let Bette sleep.”

Back upstairs I went, turning down the thermostat to 63 degrees, climbing into bed while trying to push Bobby McFerrin’s “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” song out of my head.

I was happy that Bette was sleeping soundly. But I worried all night. It’s part of what we caregivers do. You get really good as the nighttime Wise Woman Goddess of Worry, watching over the sick, the unknown, the 2.5 potassium levels.

And that’s why I highly recommend that you stock up on extra jars of the Wise Woman Goddess night cream. Maybe even wear it during the day.

Caregiver lesson #28

Celebrate that you are becoming a wise woman worrier, an honor earned only by caring so selflessly for someone so ill.

