

Scrambled Leggs

A Snarky Tale of Hospital Hooey

Sally Franz

©2007

Table of Contents

Prologue

1. A Grinding Halt
 2. Get a Room
 3. Just Read the Chart, Art
 4. In the Nick of Time
 5. Sermon on the Mount
 6. De Plane, De Plane
 7. Panning for Gold
 8. Morphine Magic
 9. To Helen Back Again
 10. Suspended Animation
 11. Temple in the Toilet
 12. Dis-Orientation
 13. Never on a Friday
 14. The Experts
 15. My Father's Head
 16. The Breakfast Club
 17. The Healing "Bomb" of Gilead
 18. I Can't Eat Cha All, I Can't Sleep
 19. Organ Recital in a Minor Key in a Major Way
 20. Scategories
 22. Last One In is a Rotten Egg
 23. Wheeling and Dealing
 24. Zen Garden of Doom
 25. That Sexual Feeling
 26. Sweet Release
 27. Two Kinds of Cured
 28. Social Security is Neither
 29. Someone Vote Me Off This Island
 30. What's It All About Alfie?
 31. After the Aftermath
- Appendix A – Tips on Surviving Pain and
and Chronic Disease
- Appendix B – Rules For Visiting Sick
People

21. Jamal and the Night Visitors

Prologue

“Get off the court, punk.”

I was playing H-O-R-S-E with my friends on our grammar school basketball court; a big black slab of hardtop rolled out in the middle of a field of crabgrass and dirt. The metal chain link baskets were on cold steel poles, way over our heads.

I was attempting a lay-up when I heard the whooping and hollering of a gang of eighth grade boys. They were approaching us fast, on their thin-tire bikes all decked-out with multi-colored handlebar streamers. It was clear they were gunning for us. My girlfriends ran for shelter inside the school building. I stood my ground.

“We were here first.” I held my head high.

“But we’re here now, so get lost, punk.”

“I’ll make a deal with you. The person who can gross-out the other one the most can have the court.”

“Fine!” And with that the biggest eighth grader, Rick, pugnaciously pulled his eyelids back on themselves, revealing the bloody insides of his upper lids. He leaned down to my face. His breath smelled of Bazooka bubble gum.

“Gross enough for you?”

“Ewwwww,” I feigned and turned away to hide my face.

I had been having these contests with my twin brother for years: who could suck back the longest gob of drool, who could make the other one puke with blender drinks made from refrigerator leftovers, who had the nerve to poke around road kill and throw guts on the other

one. (Which is done with a forked stick so you can twirl the guts up like spaghetti. That's in case you don't live where there's road kill.)

“So, you give up or what?” he chortled. The bully stood a full head taller than me, his arms crossed.

Turning back to Rick I removed my pink plaid framed bifocals. I pulled back my eyelids in the same fashion that Rick had done and pushed hard at the side of my nose. Having the fortuitous proclivity to weak nasal capillaries this caused an immediate nose bleed. I tilted my head backwards and let the salty, tepid fluid run down the back of my throat until I had a mouthful.

I slowly turned around, lifted my head so Rick could see my inverted eyelids and proceeded to spit a mouthful of fresh bright red blood at his feet. It spewed into a plate size coagulated mass that splattered across his white US KEDS high top sneakers.

He turned pale, as did his posse and they left shrieking.

I finished my lay-up.

I didn't hear from Rick again until my freshman year of High School when he asked me to the Senior prom. I never will understand boys.

I'm not sure why I was fearless when facing off with older kids. I even faced-off with teachers if I felt a wrong needed to be corrected. As far back as I can remember I have had this sense of super powers, or maybe it was a superiority complex. I still feel I can stand my ground with anyone, especially anyone bigger than I am (which is just about anyone since I am only 5'2"). Maybe my mother shouldn't have read me the story about David going up against Goliath – and winning.

I became spiritual at an earlier age. Perhaps it was the ‘thrill of the underdog’ that attracted me to the Old Testament battles in the first place and that led to the New Testament martyrs, and before I was in High School I had converted to Christianity to the sheer bewilderment of my agnostic family. And while I do not apologize for my faith any more than one would ask a Muslim, Hindu, Jew, Scientologist or a member of Church of the Nectarine to soft pedal their beliefs, I must define the term “Christian” as I use it.

I am a socialist leaning democrat, anti-war pacifist who is quite sure most conspiracy theories have a grain of truth. I like to envision myself a mixture of Anna Quinlan, Annie LaMotte with a heaping pile of Bill Bryson’s sense of irony thrown in.

I am certainly not a right-wing ‘born again’ type like some cosmic refried bean dip requiring first a lobotomy and then an extra dollop of ‘self-righteous salsa’.

Nor am I a ‘new-age-feminist-Goddess-Mary-worshipper’ which requires an even heavier scoop of ‘revisionist history’. (FYI: I’ve seen women everywhere I travel: Stonehenge, Easter Island, Machu Picchu, Athens, the Mayan ruins. The antiquities are crawling with them; ensconced sun-worshipping gargoyles poised on ledges, crossed legs (preferably unshaven ones), new age music streaming into ear buds, arms raised in worship of mother-earth-goddess. Hello? The ‘goddesses’ in the temples were sex slaves not princesses. The vibes you are picking up are cries of innocent blood from women and children who were raped, abused and then murdered at the whim of a few vicious leaders.)

Okay, have I alienated everyone? (Great way to start off a healing book, huh?)

Wait. Maybe I can do better than that. Try this.

I am quite simply the ‘best’ Christian I know, based solely on the fact that I am the ‘worst’ Christian I know. I cuss*, I whine, I question God’s wisdom and timing constantly. I

vacillate between thinking I am God and then acting as if there is no God. I regularly ignore, rationalize and/or deny any far reaching consequences of my actions. I have sworn oaths of allegiance to God as often as a kid says the pledge to the flag in grammar school, and just as often I have mouthed the words and skipped over some.

The only hope in any of this is that it appears I am in excellent company. In the Old and New Testaments people were called 'righteous', not because they were sinless, but because when they were busted for their crimes they admitted they were wrong. (That much I can do and must do often.)

Take for instance Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: all liars and betrayers. David (after the Goliath thing) was an adulterer and then had his lover's husband murdered. Saint Paul condoned murderers, having supervised the persecution of early Christians. Don't see that in the ol' stained glass windows in church do you?

Peter betrayed Jesus big time; that's right Pope numero uno 'upon-whom-I-shall-build-my-church', that Peter. Did I mention Rahab the harlot and the Samaritan woman at the well (I'll-see-your-five-husbands-and-raise-ya-two)? Seems Jesus did, and still does, reach out to losers, screw-ups, rebels and the incurably ill. Talk about a match made in heaven!

So let me begin my tale of woe with the understanding that I am an in-your-face stand-up comic (more recently sit-down) who has little patience for hypocrisy, (except my own, duh?) and less time for platitudes. Three graces have served me well and I commend them to you: Faith, Curiosity, and Sarcasm, but above all Sarcasm.

Maybe my sister was right. I probably was dropped off at the doorstep by a band of bikers and my mother only took me in to stop my incessant whining.

Looks like *that* plan was a bust, Mom.

*While I am proficient in swearing in several languages I will refrain from putting such gems into print here for two reasons. First of all, I said I cuss, I did not say I was thrilled to be so uncreative in my pejorative speech. Secondly, I rather hope some of my church youth group will read this and I don't want to be accused of corrupting minors (most of whom have been well equipped by their parents to do the job themselves--given iPods and internet access).

LESSON: "Three graces have served me well and I commend them to you: Faith, Curiosity, and Sarcasm, but above all Sarcasm."

On the subject of living with excruciating pain (enough to be on 800 mgs of neurotin four times a day plus vicodon) this is what I came up with after several weeks in hospital rooms with the treat of imminent death looming over my head:

Faith: The choice of believing something is possible before it happens and with little proof it is possible. This is the chief ability of innovators and inventors and lackluster survivors such as moi.

Curiosity: This is the ability to step back and be willing to see a bigger picture and not assume that what is visible on the surface is all there is. This is the chief ability of archeologists and biologist and little kids who eat stuff they find in dryer vents.

Sarcasm: If you have a healthy distain for the status quo and are willing to go beyond the bitterness to seek a solution you will see how sarcasm is the door to freedom. This is the age old discipline of skeptics and court jesters and mothers from New Jersey.

I. A Grinding Halt

I'd never been known for being graceful. Today was to be no exception.

There were no clouds in the sky at all. I remember that. And I remember thinking I hadn't seen blue that intense since scuba diving Cozumel's 90 foot wall of coral.

Of course back then, what with a week's worth of Margaritas coursing in my veins and the 'blood-gas-nitrogen-exchange-thing' that far below sea level, I was pretty trashed. You could all but hear a small blue fish singing somewhere in the deep, "Keep on swimming, keep on swimming. Oooooo it's so beautiful down here."

What else do I remember about that day on the snowy Sierra slopes?

The edges of the sky. Everywhere the blue touched, it popped against the silhouette of green pine needles. The rugged mountain peaks were spackled with white sequins. And under my skis, dear Lord in heaven, under my skis there was this delicious compacting and squeaking of perfect snow. Not one granule of ice, just powder.

Picture this: double black diamond trails, thick with new snow...no tracks but mine...cold sharp air kissing my face so hard I looked like I had been making-out at a drive-in movie the entire previous night (a proficiency I honed in High School).

I took a deep breath, inhaling pure joy. What a great week-end for a church retreat. After all the whack-a-doodle boyfriends and bosses over the last seventeen years, I'd made it through. I had recently remarried, having left a Madison Avenue marketing career. I was now a respected 'Family Minister' at my California Lutheran Church. There was money in the bank, and I was in

tip-top 'buff' shape. Hey, even both my grown kids were talking to me. I sighed, "If this is the last day I ever ski in my entire life, I will be a happy camper."

You remember stuff like that.

Then on my second run with my "church kids" I felt a tingling in my left toes.

"Must be the new boots, I should have broken them in." By the fourth run there was numbness up to my left knee. I reached into my ski pants and rolled the elastic waist band of my pantyhose down about 6 inches below my gut. That felt better.

By the time I was at the top of the next lift, the pins and needles sensation had returned and reached up to my left hip. I pushed my way over to our group.

"I'm going to catch up to you guys at lunch. I think I've pulled something. I'll go get some ice and take care of this. Not as young as I used to be, ha."

"Great timing," I muttered, "the day before my 54th birthday. But of course, the warranty must be out on all my working parts. Why didn't I get the extension warranty?" I headed toward the base lodge annoyed at the interruption.

Out of nowhere I fell. It was about 10 a.m. Okay, that may not mean much to you, but I don't fall, not unless I'm jumping a half-pipe and then it's a full out 'yard sale' with equipment scatter o'r hill and yon. But simply falling had not happened in the last twenty years. And being that early in the day, it was not even possible.

Then things got completely weird. I tried to get up on my downhill left ski but my leg was having a private mutiny. It had not just gone to sleep, it had slipped into a coma.

And while I could not feel my muscles, there was a strange sensation on the surface of my leg. It was like bee stings on top of a 'wicked-bad' sunburn. Yet strangely, I couldn't sense the coldness of the snow under me.

Then an 'out-of-body-third-person-slow-mo-trauma-drama' started taking over. I could hear my pulse pounding in my head as if my eardrums were being pummeled by the entire cast of "Stomp".

Hel-lo crisis mode.

Self-diagnosis ensued. At last, all those hours in front of General Hospital would be of use. Sprain? No. Shin splints? No. Gangrene? Not yet.

Soon my internal 'Shame Gang' commenced to spew. My mind was a swamp of self-ridicule.

"Way-to-go, lard butt."

"Told you ya shoulda eased up on the Christmas butter cookies, but nooo."

The entire left leg was definitely DOA. I ignored the voices and flailed around to my right side.

But the voices only got louder:

"It's those new fancy-schmancy way too expensive boots. Ya know people are starving all over the world."

"It's arthritis. Whadda you expect at your age?"

"It's frostbite, high altitude, heartburn, the heartbreak of psoriasis."

I hoisted my weight securing the poles under my armpits, slapped my good ski over the ski with the bum leg, and snowplowed wide sweeping turns using only one leg. Not an easy task, but life has a way of preparing one for the future.

I thought back to 1968...

I had learned how to ski on 'one leg at a time' back in High School. Every week for winter gym class we got to take a bus to Vernon Valley Great Gorge Ski Resort after school. Then we would ski under the lights. You got to be pretty good at responding to bumps *after* you hit them because the lighting was a bit spotty at best. We skied with a partner, just like swimming at camp when we used the buddy system to make sure someone would notice if you slipped out of view. (In this case, off the mountain, into the dark. Falling into crevices and streams happened on a regular basis.)

But we were kids; we thought it was funny. That is until one kid had to have his leg amputated after he took a toboggan down a slope in pitch black shadows and slammed into a tree, crushing his leg. Snow went from friend to killer in an instant.

It was the end of my dreams of becoming an Olympic racer. I became a total chicken on icy slopes after that. My senior year in High School I opted for the ballet classes on skis over racing. Nice and slow and pretty. One leg on the snow, the other one out behind you like a figure skater (albeit with a 70 inch long flat foot). Those were the days. Who woulda thunk I'd ever need those random skills again?

I snapped back to the present just as someone tried to cut me off. I made larger snowplow turns. Being "Joe Cool Skier" had dropped off my priority list. I wailed to anyone within earshot, "Gangway! Injured skier here!"

No, I never asked for help to get down the hill. I've skied since I was two years old. And as any veteran skier knows, you only go down on a first-aid toboggan if you're unconscious. If you have ever heard one go by, you know why. It is nothing but wooden slats chattering on ice; a pure case of adding insult to injury.

My Mother's voice joined the 'infernal' dialogue between my very frozen ears.

"You just need to eat some protein, dear. How about a nice peanut butter sandwich?"

The ski condo we were staying at was coming up on my left. I had to decide in the next three seconds if I would go eat or look for help. I cut through the woods toward the peanut butter.

An electrical spark, much like jumper cables slapping together, shot through my left hip. I screamed loudly, to no one but the trees, the only Dorothy Parker quote I knew, "What fresh hell is this?"

I doubled back to the lodge. At the bottom I careened into a stall of skis which exploded like a toothpick factory. Releasing my Dynastars, I threw my poles behind me. I was aware I was clunking toward the doorway doing an excellent impression of Chester from "Gunsmoke". I left my brand new ski gear splayed across the snow, but I *really* didn't care.

I heard my mother's voice reverberated through my mind.

"That is no way to treat expensive equipment, why if your father were alive..."

"Not now, Mom!" Several people took note that there was no one behind me as I spoke and I wasn't wearing an ear piece. I sat down and called over to the lady who was cleaning up the trays.

"Where's the first aid room?"

"No hablo ingles."

"Fine." Then in my best Spanglish, "Donde esta rojo xeis?"

Nada.

“Yo quiero el Ski Patrolo.” She nodded and left, probably to laugh where I couldn’t hear her. (I could see that month at the Costa Rican language school was time and money well spent.)

In a half an hour, or maybe a decade, a man appeared. He carried a royal blue backpack embossed with a red cross made of duct tape. The tape was peeling and the glue side was covered with lint of all different colors.

“You okay?”

Why do people always ask that when you are clearly not okay?

“No, I am not okay!”

“What seems to be the problem?”

“I can’t feel my left leg.”

“Did you fall or run into something?” He took off my boots and looked at my ankles. Thankfully I have great ankles, nasty big bubbly thighs, but great ankles.

“No. I was just skiing and then zap. My leg fell out from under me and it’s paralyzed. And the stinging is excruciating. I think I’m in real trouble here.”

“Well, maybe if you warm up in the lodge, you know, drink some cocoa.” He winked.

This is the part of a harrowing episode when you start hearing sounds come out of someone’s mouth, but they are so bizarre, so inappropriate to your pain, that you can’t believe you just heard them...so you keep looking, hoping that whatever they did say will reorganize in thin air and make a smattering of sense and re-enter your ears as something sane. I waited. Nothing.

“Cocoa, sure, whatever.”

I was still hoping the numb leg thing would be a great story around the fireplace by sunset. ‘Skippy Ski Patroler’ went off to fetch some cocoa. I knew my body was in serious trouble but I was powerless to communicate what was wrong. And the expert? He was going to apply chocolate. It was like a bad PMS joke.

That’s when the tingling sensation started up my other leg. I slipped to the floor (picture, if you will, a candle left in the sun to melt). I placed my boots around my head so perchance the family next to me with fourteen ice-coolers and as many children would notice when they kicked me with their massive swinging boots. I quietly re-lived clammy palms and sweat running down my forehead upon my first reading of “The Pit and the Pendulum”. Back and forth, closer and closer.

The tingling continued up toward my ribcage heading for my lungs and heart. All the self-talk stopped abruptly, except for one clear voice, “*Oh, my God. God, Lord, Jesus, not good.*” (I and no, I am not sure if that was a prayer or cursing, but it’s the best I had to offer at the moment.)

The Good Humor man returned with that delicacy ski lodges are famous for, a cup of steamy whipped-non-dairy-topping afloat boiling chocolate flavored water. I looked up from the floor. There he was all smiles. His silky-smooth red jacket billowed above a snug band of red ribbed knit at his thin waist. The jacket’s zipper was as thick as an HO-gauge train track. He loomed on matchstick legs coated in black spandex. (Cue, “March of the Toy Soldiers”.)

I was now grasping reality in bite size pieces, like a slide show in my head. Here is the beautiful mountain (look at that clear sky); here’s the ski patrol dude, and this is the place where my legs became paralyzed. Oh well, the kid sitting next to me will probably kick me in

the temple before too long and my life will come to a grinding halt. At least it will happen before I have to deal with being a paraplegic.

“Should I call for an ambulance?” Skippy asked tentatively.

Ya think? Or maybe you could just roll me outside and I could be lawn ornament.

I bit my lip. After all, I was on the floor and he owned the walkie-talkie. I nodded sweetly, which was as much sarcasm as I could muster given the circumstances of being paralyzed and all.

Somewhere between a half hour and a century later the ambulance arrived. Several extras from Baywatch ran into the lodge and lifted me onto a stretcher, my butt was the hardest to lift, sagging down like an old army cot. So much for grace, and my hopes of dancing with the stars wasn't looking up. They wadded my puffy ski jacket under my head, strapped me down straightjacket tight and carried me out into the light. The snowdrift along the path was a shimmering iridescent-pink catching the alpine glow of the afternoon. The sky was deep blue against the emergency teams' crimson jackets and white ski hats. You remember things like that when you think you are going to die.

LESSON: “I sighed, ‘if this is the last day I ever ski in my entire life, I will be a happy camper’.”

Later, *knowing* I will never ski again, I thought, ‘ok, what else makes me happy?’ I made a list of very simple things I love (fresh linen, flowers, birds, cheesecake, prisms). I choose to have ONE of these items (at least) in my life every day. I've observed that if someone has a long list of improbable, expensive things (new car, win at Lotto) ALL of which MUST happen on one day

to be happy, then likely they will die of sorrow. Or worse yet, they may be a carrier and make those around them suffer.

2. Get a Room

A ski resort...a small town hospital...a holiday weekend...an emergency...MY emergency: a bad idea.

After a ride over every pot hole in northern California, including I suspect, Crater Lake, the doors to the ambulance flung open. The welcoming committee slid me out and down. A hodgepodge of voices exploded in the air like confetti. Nothing made sense. I forced a faux smile, the one a mother uses when trying to make sense out of her kindergartener's finger-painting.

Inside, I was expunged from the ambulance bed and heaved onto a hospital gurney with all the care a KP cook gives the 103rd sack of potatoes he has to unload from a truck. I hurt everywhere that touched a surface of fabric. Movement hurt. Noise hurt. *But it didn't matter to anyone but me. Apparently they had outsourced compassion. Geez, I hope they gave it to someone in India who has studied with Gandhi.*

Slam, crash, bam! It was orientation week at Morphine High and I had been entered into the Mattress Race. I was wheeled feet-first, spun, and then careened head-first down a series of hallways. No one asked how I was, who I was or what I wanted. I was a delivery and the driver worked for UPS.

These must be the fine folks who train young mothers to cross traffic by leading with the stroller, their infant fastened in front. I could now see why psychology majors in college will always have work. This is the stuff that suppressed trauma is made of.

When the Tilt-a-Whirl stopped, I was pushed up against an algae-green wall and lined up head to toe with all my ‘classmates’.

Another barrage of voices undulated in echoes down the hallway; metal doors smacked against walls in the distance. Beds piled up in the hall like a bad episode of MASH. Hoisting my torso up on my elbows and twisting my head a half a turn, I saw the hall was awash with expensive ski wear from which protruded gnarly limbs jutting in every possible direction except for the one for which they were intended. I hadn’t heard that much dull moaning since Homecoming Weekend in my Freshman dorm.

For the record, here is the number of children I have: two. This is the number of times I have stayed overnight in a hospital: two. Needless to say, this leg ‘dealy’ seemed like a terrible misunderstanding which I was sure would be cleared up in a ‘jif’ as soon as I could talk to someone with a smidge of authority. After all, as an erstwhile motivational speaker I was trained in negotiating, conflict resolution, and I went through EST...the Advanced Course. I was ‘complete’ and this was California. Couldn’t a metro-spiritual gal get a break? All I needed to do was get someone to talk to me. Someone to stop, look me in the eyes, and listen to me. Someone, anyone...Buehler? Ferris? Howser? Doogie? Lassie?

But no one was talking to me; instead they addressed a clipboard stuffed under my paralyzed legs.

“What have we got here?” the wanna-be-doctor-boy spluttered as he picked up my chart. “Okay, roll her out, I’ve got a slot on 2B.”

Thus, I was parked in hallway 2B (or not to be) long enough to watch Methuselah age. I whittled away the time by amusing myself in my usual way. I encouraged my inner stand-up comic to make up snide comments about anything and everything that passed me by or ticked me off. My hospital experience gave me a whole new list of things to rant about. I was in curmudgeon heaven.

Perhaps I was in shock, but instead of being afraid, or angry with God, or whatever *normal* people do, I was looking for the next punch line (that's what growing up in New Jersey with five kids in your family will do to you). And what with the ludicrous situation and the adrenalin rush, one-liners were coming at me strung together like sausage at a Polish Festival. Whee-doggies, pass the mustard.

And while I was disoriented, let me mention that I was not so far gone that I had not sized up the situation. I was paralyzed and those people in scrubs had weapons of mass destruction: syringes, poisonous drugs, pillows that smother and let's not forget about the lucrative organ donor sales out the backdoor. I watch SVU, CSI, Without a Trace. I know how the disgruntled union workers and minimum wage earners control the floors at night. So, like any good 'inmate', I shut up and put up, biding my time; but I was taking notes. Shawshank Redemption meets Rosie O'Donnell. I waited in silence. But in my head I was having a full out snarky rebuttal. My rants made Dennis Miller sound like Yanni on 78 RPMs.

Now believe me, I have NEVER prayed for patience, I know what a bug-a-boo that little ditty can conjure up. So since I don't value patience as a virtue, I do not apologize for having not even enough to fill a gnat's navel worth of the stuff as you shall see. And yet I waited for four l-o-n-g years to tell my side of this ordeal.

As they say, payback is a you-know-what! And now it is payback time – woof, woof. By the way, never make an East Coaster, A-Personality, Extrovert wait years to speak, because when she finally does it won't be pretty. Vitriolic, acidic and, oh yes, it will be “burn-baby-burn” THE TRUTH! (Ur, um, as I see it...I add humbly, if not begrudgingly, to appease my attorney.)

The gems I collected during my forced silence began to pile up like the wealth in Ali Baba's cave. And as tempting as it was to spill my guts, mum was the word. I knew I had to pick my battles from there on in. I was down, but I wasn't out.

This would be a whole different strategy. My natural impulse was to just leave. Okay, first slap a few people silly for aggravating the snot out of me, then leave. For instance, to every nurse who tried to shame me for not being able to pee on her schedule I say this, ‘believe me if I could have peed on demand, I would have peed in all kinds of interesting places.’ (That being the only time I wish I were a man. More on that later.)

Side bar: Some of my best friends are nurses and doctors. They are wonderful human beings. In fact, some of the worst horror stories I've heard about the healthcare system comes from them. Yes, there are honorable people in the healing world. That concession aside, let's talk about what happens when your good friends aren't running the candy store.

This book, based on years of first hand research, is all about the people in the hospitals who were NOT emotionally available, NOT intellectually on all six cylinders, who were being paid to be present, but had checked their brains and hearts elsewhere.

P.S. Did ya think because I was quietly smiling or speaking all sugary sweet and high pitched like Shirley-Freaking-Temple that you had won? Did it make sense to you that a woman over fifty who has been around the world and owned her own successful company was enjoying

ringing a bell to tell you never mind with the bedpan she asked for 15 minutes ago, just bring a change of sheets? Knock, knock, knock, hello, anybody in there? I was fried, fricasseed and frazzled, but I was forming a plan.

FYI: Did ya think I was buying into your domination-farting-around-on-the-job- crapola? That would be a NO. And here's a HOT TIP. No one else in your care is enamored by your Old School treatment either. If you listen carefully you can hear the clanking of bedpans banging on hospital headboards across the nation: "Attica, Attica." (But I digress.)

PEOPLE OF THE WORLD: IMPORTANT HISTORY LESSON!

THERE IS NO "WIN-LOSE." THERE IS "WIN AND I'LL GET YOU LATER, SUCKER!"

That time is now, dude. For every nurse who wrote on my chart: "uncooperative", or "irritable", this story is MY CHART ON YOU! This is a record of your flimsy excuse of professional performance. You're lucky I was so doped up I couldn't remember your names. Because instead of a book this would be a class action lawsuit, which would be a whole lot more money in my pocket than royalties, you betcha!

Okay, I'm going to breathe deeply, let it flow out of me. Anger, poison, rage, unkind thoughts...I visualize sun and flowers. Breathe. I let it all go from my finger tips... and onto the paper. "ON GUARD!"

Meanwhile, back on hallway 2-B, I was determined to talk to someone.

"Is there anyone I can talk to about my situation?" I grabbed a passerby wearing a ski jacket over his suit.

"I'll see if I can find anyone." He did not return. Perhaps he was a pharmaceutical salesman on a working holiday. I tried the people in scrubs. Ziltch. Perchance the people

walking about the halls in those multi-colored cotton get-ups were just there modeling next year's uniforms: Dalmatians, Minnie Mouse, Scuby, Nemo, so cute, gag-a-rama.

The internal rants increased.

How hard can this be, people? A cortisone shot, a few muscle relaxing pills, a power nap and 'ala-kazam' up, good as new. Because, frankly, I'm checking, checking and no...I do not have 'go to hospital' on my Day Planner. So get a move on there, Marcus Welby, the snow is melting as I speak, (I noted, to myself).

Being left to my own devices is never a good thing. 'Paranoia strikes deep' as the song goes. Rising up in my sub-conscious was the very real possibility that, jokes aside, I might die if I didn't get help soon.

Facing your own mortality is always surreal. There is just plain never enough time to absorb what it means to cease. Nor enough time to barter favors from God; give me another month, more money to take care of my kids, one date with Johnny Depp, whatever.

What choked me up wasn't worrying if God would let me into heaven. He will because he is good, and I admit I am not...that's pretty much all it takes if I read the part about the thief on the cross next to Jesus correctly. But what overwhelmed me was the heartbreaking thought of never holding my children again, at least not in this life. I know they are now both six inches taller than I am and in their thirties (fear of loss doesn't have to make logical sense, in fact it rarely does). It was more than I could take in at once. It felt as if someone was digging at my heart with an apple corer. I had to do something!

A young man in coral pink PJs and a legal size clipboard began to ask me all the questions I had just answered in the ambulance, the entryway and the hallway.

Through clenched teeth I replied as if I was making a 'take' for a radio

commercial with lots of space between words for editing...(in fact my hospital transcript says: "Speaks with measured speech.") Heart racing I began,

"LISTEN TO ME! (inhale) Write this down: To my husband, (inhale) I love you. My papers are in my (inhale) desk top drawer; call my daughters, (inhale) then my sisters and brother."

Then I gave him my husband's cell phone number.

"Miss Franz, how did you fall?"

"Write down what I am telling you!"

"How did you fall?"

"Write this down, and if I live past that, I'll give you the rest, okay?"

He wrote on his pad. Later I found out he wrote, 'having anxiety attack.'

He continued, "How did you fall?"

Don't you people share information? Or is this a test to see if I answer all the same questions with the exact same answers I gave the last two guys. 'Farging-Icehole, Johnny Dangerously', buy a clue. I know, maybe one of my children was out stomping around on sidewalk cracks and SNAPAROO! "La-la-la, oops...did I step on a crack? Ha...oh well! Tra la la la la, broke my mother's back."

"I didn't fall," is of course what I did say, not understanding how little the truth had to do with getting medical attention. He ignored me. This, I was soon to learn, was the M.O. of most of the hospital staff.

"Name, address, phone number?"

"Listen to me," I continued in low tones with full enunciation, the way you would to a child who was standing on a high ledge that you were trying to lure away from

danger. “I can’t move my legs, I can’t feel my toes, and my skin feels like it is on fire.”

He scribbled something (no doubt a reminder to buy dog food the next time he was at the Mega Store) and *shoved* the clipboard back under my legs (yes, that hurt!).

He disappeared and returned with what I hoped was a high-tech hermetically sealed all recycled-paper brown bag for me to breathe into. However, I swear, I did detect a whiff of mayonnaise and pumpernickel.

He left me breathing into the bag. As soon as he disappeared I deep-sixed the bag and fumbled through my fanny-pack and found my cell phone. I looked feverishly for the laminated emergency cell phone list of all the church leaders on our trip. It was nowhere. I’d left mine back at the ski house. After all, I was the one everyone else was going to call first in case of an emergency. I was the leader; leaders don’t have emergencies (it’s in the bylaws—similar to the bylaws for mothers). I searched my cell’s inbox and found one of the parent’s numbers. I hit send.

“Hello, hello, Carol?”

“Sally is that...?” Dead line.

I hit redial.

“Hello, Carol, it’s Sally, I’m at the hospital. I have a small problem.”

“Where? Can’t hear you. Meet me at the lodge for lunch. You’re breaking up.”

Click. I looked at my phone. Ha, ha breaking up! Great après-ski-irony.

Redial.

“Sally! Hospital! Come!” I looked at my phone. It had a half of a bar of battery. The re-charger was back in my suitcase next to the peanut butter.

I looked up. A lady with a stethoscope was heading my way.

What is this place, Camp Pain? The joint is swarming with nurse-y counselors taking campers to the next activity...archery, crafts, MRI? But I must be having rest hour, because I am being completely ignored.

I tried to calm down, pray, think, and come up with a plan to get help.

“Water, water every where but not a drop to drink.” Why in tar-nation do people always rush you to a hospital all sirens and lights flashing sashaying down the road like a house afire when you are injured? Apparently, not to help you any time too soon.

I latched onto the next white starched arm that went by. The tingling that had gone up my legs was now high up into my ribs! “The paralysis is moving toward my heart.”

The nurse looked at the clipboard at the foot of my cot. “You’re just having a panic attack, you’ll be fine.” She picked up the brown bag.

“Keep breathing in this.”

I did not let go of my grip. “I am an expert skier, I was shushing black diamonds at 10:00 a.m. and by 10:30 a.m. I am a paraplegic. How would you feel?”

“Ma’am, when was your last anxiety attack?”

“My last break-up.”

She laughed and then recovered, as if she’d never spoken with me.

I was either reclining in Wonder Woman’s invisible jet, or I had cooties. I am sure it was the former.

In what was probably a half an hour, or a millennium, Carol appeared. I sent her to ask a nurse when I could get into a room and see a doctor. She was told that I was probably just a little dizzy from high altitude and they couldn’t spare a room for minor injuries.

I had an epiphany. Quiet, obedient patients get the same reward good little girls get...they get left out and ignored. That's it, time for Mr. T in tights!

I was trying to think of a way to get some action when Carol said she had to go outside to get cell reception. "Tell all the kids the best way they can help is to ski every inch of the mountain for me." I waved to Carol as she passed through the double doors

Time to make my move, I was about to upgrade *my* emergency into *their* emergency! I let out a skirl that dogs could hear in Sydney. I continued with maniacal cat-wallerling and yelping. I was about to launch into a Carol Burnett 'Tarzan-Call' when a nurse came up all hush-hushing me.

"You can't make that kind of ruckus in here, it will upset all the other patients in the hall. You keep that up and you're going to get a sleeping pill and put in a room."

Perfect (whatever you do don't throw me into the briar-patch). I screamed twice as loud and thrashed my arms around a bit. I considered the ol' bloody gob on the white nurse shoe routine, but in the end plain old garden variety drool did the trick. All things being fair in love and war (me-love vs. the healthcare system-war), it was a nice touch.

LESSON: "No one asked how I was, who I was or what I wanted. I was a delivery."

There is really nothing I can think of more excruciating than physical pain unless it is being ignored. The lesson I learned is this: Always acknowledge and really see any and all of the people around you. Be it the postman, the meter reader, the check-out girl, or my neighbors, before they were all a blur which I passed by in my whirlwind existence. That was of course, BEFORE God gave me the 'gift' of sitting still.

2. Just Read the Chart, Art

Sequestered in what was surely the farthest corner from the nurse's station, without actually being in the parking lot, I surveyed my new digs. The wall to my left was high gloss white, the wall behind me, high gloss blue and the wall to the right was a puckered sheer curtain on a pitted aluminum frame. The fourth wall was, as in theater, privy to an audience, albeit moving. Had I a modicum of modesty I would have been outraged. However, being the consummate buffoon I was delighted. That is until I realized no one was listening to me rant. It was worse than having the last slot at an open mic gig at comedy club in Lower Cupcake, Idaho on a Monday night.

I heard someone talking to the patient in the next room. They mentioned the name of the pastor of a church in my home town; he was in with a thumb injury. I knew him. I asked the orderly to tell the pastor in the next berth to start praying for me.

Good, you have nine fingers to fold in prayer. I'll pray for your thumb if you pray for my legs, lungs, heart and life. And if that doesn't work, let me have all your deep burning theological questions, I'll be sure to ask Jesus when I see him, which may be, "Soon and very soon," as the hymn goes.

At last a 'central casting' Dr. Kildare (ooh-baby-ooh baby) arrived at the foot of my bed. He smiled. This was good. He opened his mouth.

"Can you tell me about your ski accident?"

This was bad.

Doesn't anyone in the hospital talk to each other? Read the ever-loving-blooming chart, Art. No, ya know what? Ignore the chart, why should you be any different.

Let's start over. I was in a horrible collision with a tree. I am sure I heard bones crunch. Does that help? This way you can treat me for things you know about. How very inconsiderate of me to have come in with a problem you can't fix with Plaster of Paris (Ah, Par-ree, a place that no doubt has a lot of broken bones and/or school projects.)

A set of X-rays were ordered by doctor cutie-pie. Immediately, two aides tumbled out from behind the doctor like Russian stacking dolls. They waltzed me at break-neck speed (pun is intended) through the crowded halls. Spinning, one two three, one two three.

More emergency patients cluttered the hallways like lepers shrouded in L.L. Bean and Patagonia. They rolled their eyes at me. 'Alms, have pity.' I wanted to tell them to all my secret, but not until my doctors found out what was the matter with me. Maybe if all this cleared up by nightfall I'd tell the huddled masses how to get a room: "Go to the window, open it up, stick your head out and shout, I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore!" Or just spew blood or saliva in their general direction.

We continued down the maze of hallways. I gazed at the fluorescent panels above my head. X-rays, hmm? That file in my brain did not contain fun graphics...

The first time I ever saw an X-ray machine I was about six years old. I had fallen out of a tree and they thought my arm or shoulder was broken. I had this really cool bright red bandana for a sling. My mom took me to the outpatient clinic. We walked into a room where they were about to have me put my arm on a cold metal table when we were interrupted.

"First, let's check this out," quipped a doctor who dashed behind a screen.

Without warning a gi-normous cobalt blue arc of electricity jumped back and forth across the metal table like the lightning-making machine at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia. This spectacle took place exactly where my arm would have been.

I was dragged into the next X-ray room shrieking. My mother tried to bribe me with promises of ice cream, new shoes, and pony rides. I would have none of it. At last, through sobs, I declared I would only go near the table-of-death if she promised to buy me a life size Dancing Darleen Doll. As I recall, it was about the same cost as a mid-sized car. I was quite sure when I made my offer my Mother would give up and take me home.

But instead, she agreed. And to Mother's credit that Christmas I received the opulent four-foot doll. I promptly whacked all of her lavish blond acrylic locks which floated to the floor like cat hair. I looked at the scalp covered with what appeared to be hair plugs and never played with Darlene again. I think the last time I saw her she was on her way to the Doll Hospital.

Do you think doll hospitals are inter-connected with people hospitals? Dang maybe Darlene knew Chucky and this is all a voodoo revenge thing?

My second experience with an X-Ray machine was when I was in labor with my second child. The baby was footling breach. But just to make sure my little toe-tapping ballerina was not in the correct place for regular childbirth, they brought me to the X-ray room.

I was asked to lie on my side on an autopsy-cold metal slab, and then the nurse poked a ruler in my behind. Everyone who had been attending me stepped out of the room. Did I mention I was in labor? A nasty contraction started. As I convulsed the ill-tempered technician was screaming at me from behind a thick curtain, a la the Great and Powerful Wizard of Oz, "Don't move or I will have to start all over."

The ruler apparently had little to do with measuring my pain. I should have asked him to demonstrate stillness and composure with a ruler up his who-ha, torso unfolded across a block of ice, while I smacked him in the gut with a baseball bat.

But I 'regress'.

Now as I gazed at the X-ray table before me the only improvement that had been made in thirty years was that someone figured out they could put a lamp over the metal slab to melt off the frost. And of course this time it was relatively easy not to move, being paralyzed and all.

After my date with the stainless steel alter, I was brought back to my cubby and left to smolder. Three ice ages and two global ark-sized floods later Dr. Cutie-pie arrived and told me with sheer glee in his voice that he knew what was wrong with me.

And I quote:

“You are FOS or FOP. Full-of-Poop!” he snickered at his own, dare I say, lame joke.

Then his voice dropped. “Here’s the X-ray, see all that stuff in your large intestine? That’s blocking your spine. When was your last bowel movement?” This was delivered in the same monotone voice that I.T. support staff use when asking the caller if they have plugged in the computer and hit the power on button.

On my mother’s Bible I swear, the next time I anywhere I will be wearing a sweater with the most recent dates and times of my intestinal movements knit into the pattern, so you don’t have to keep bringing me out of my pain induced coma for everyone with a clipboard!

How many years of schooling do these doctors have to go to? Don’t we all feel sorry for them; hours as interns, nights without sleep as residents? Maybe the sleep deprivation thing is

compromising their learning ability. Maybe we should make rules that hospitals let them get more sleep so they can actually learn things, such as paralysis causes constipation...not the other way around.

Call me an upstart, I mean it's clear that anyone who knows me would tell you I'm full of 'it'. But I've been constipated before and it never actually paralyzed me. And I've never heard this coming up on any medical shows. But don't take my word for it. Let's take a poll, does anyone know anyone who has been paralyzed by being constipated? Moody, yeah, but a card carrying paraplegic?

"I 'went' last night." I said with my now signature "measured speech".

I refuse to use the hospital term BM. It sounds violent, like ammunition. 'Bowel Movement' at least sounds like it could be a passage of a brooding Germanic symphony.

"So, doc, let's get going with an enema or colonic, or whatever you can do to get me out of this pain."

Turns out, when you are sick enough to need an enema, they consider keeping you overnight. Either that or my medical insurance card finally cleared. Immediately I was wheeled into a new pale blue abode. It was a spacious semi-private room.

Semi-private is also the description of the gown you wear. It offers semi coverage and reveals your privates to any and all onlookers. By this time I looked like an extra in "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest", a crumbled gown, hair asunder, my face smeared with melted lipstick (ladies you know that barcode look where the color runs up the cracks on your upper lip).

This next room had puke-proof walls behind me and to the right. A thick rubberized fluid-proof curtain on the left concealed me from the other bed. At the end of the room was a

complete panoramic painting of the Ski Mountain I had just left. I was told it was created by a local artist.

*Did ya think this through, Rembrandt? Where do you suppose is the last place I want to visualize myself?
How about, on the dang mountain rehearsing the terror of the tingling climbing up my torso?*

If I could even have so much as crawled I would've inched over there and in scarlet nail polish written: "You were here" and then put all kinds of crosses for the people who 'kissed' trees that year.

What is very clear is that most of the staff were ski-bums with medical training and *they* would all rather be on the mountain. *Well, well, I am so glad we are decorating the hospital so they feel better. Now if 'their feeling better' was as contagious as pink eye or staph infection...I could have high tailed it outta there!*

Oh, and before you fault me for being negative, not appreciating art and such...let's remember I was in excruciating pain surrounded by people who had no clue on how to improve my condition. Who, in fact, still held to the notion that I was a whiner with a tad bit of frostbite. The artwork was fine, but how about a Tahitian Sunrise next time? (The painting or the cocktail.)

The night shift nurse came in. "What have we here? I see you are my Full-of-Poop patient. Poop-boop be-doop! Ha, ha!"

Okay, Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to leave the humor to the professionals. You stick to, well, sticking me.

"The doctor said I should get an enema, so let's do that!" I fibbed with determination.

“Oh, let’s not rush into anything. Let’s try a suppository and a little Milk of Magnesia first.”

Yo, Flo (Nightingale), you been hitting the Milk of Amnesia? If I have enough impacted poop-boop-be-doop to make me paralyzed, let’s not be tippy-toeing around here. I have a youth retreat to lead! Not to mention my predilection for being a bi-ped.

“I think I am okay with the enema.”

“I know, let’s compromise, we’ll start off my way and work up to an enema.”

How in the name of Peter, Paul and Mary is that a compromise (other than I am in a compromising position and you can ‘trip’ and pull my IV out of my arm and tell the next shift to let me sleep)?

“Here, take this Milk of Magnesia and then when you feel ‘the urge’ just hop off your bed and sit on the commode.” In her hand was a large cup of a grey potion the texture of aged oatmeal.

First of all why don’t you call it a toilet like the rest of the civilized world? And here’s a news flash for you: if I could “hop” off the bed and make it to the TOILET, I would first jump up, whop you upside the head with this IV pole, next I’d use the TOILET and then I’d be truckin’ down the hall toward the exit sign whilst whistling “Zippidy-do-da,” savvy?

“Hopping may not be an option given my condition,” I mustered through gritted teeth.

Did you read the chart? Or did Patch Adams write it in evaporating ink? I am paralyzed from the 7th thoracic all the way down to my little bitty tootsies!. That would include my--legs. Ah, but perhaps we screwed our way through RN school?

“Say,” I tried to sound cheery, “before you go, why not just leave a bedpan?” She headed out the door.

“I’ll be back shortly,” she promised.

Which is true if by ‘shortly’ she meant by the time she returned I would be shorter, much shorter...say worn down to nothing but a nightie and a few fillings atop of a three-inch high pile of hundred year old dust.

The next shift nurse arrived eons later.

“I really need some pain killers. The surface of my skin on my legs has sharp stabbing pains. Can I get something to put me to sleep as well?”

“Absolutely, as soon as we get a blood and urine analysis on you, we can give you medication.”

“Great, take all the blood and urine you want.”

“We have the blood, but we need the urine from you. So, if you would just hop off the bed and void into the commode....”

Is this one of those cruel Japanese Candid Camera shows? Maybe a cross between a Reality Show and Firesign Theater, “You have the plague...agh...”

I actually can’t move, seems that’s a side effect of being PARALYZED. And get this, my urinary tract is paralyzed too, go figure.

“I haven’t been able to urinate on my own, so maybe you could catheterize me and just take as much urine as you need.”

“Oh, we don’t like to do that. What if you got a bladder infection?”

Let’s see. Can’t move anything below my waist, I have excruciating surface pain everywhere, can’t sleep, on the verge of a coma versus feeling better and having to drink cranberry juice for a week for a mild bladder infection? Dear Lord, please keep all sharp instruments out of my reach! (I look so very bad in orange denim jumpsuits and metal ankle cuffs.)

“I think it is time NOW for pain drugs don’t you? It’s been twelve hours.”

Several lifetimes later she reappeared with the necessary paraphernalia to secure a urine sample.

“You might feel a stab and some stinging as this goes in.”

Or not, since I am, what class? Let’s say our new vocabulary word together. Or as the cartoon Pinky Dinky Doo says, “Doo, doo, doo, doo, dadoo!” The special word for the day is ‘paralyzed’. Let’s use it in a sentence, shall we? “Sally is paralyzed; she can’t move anything below her 7th thoracic on the spine.” You remember that name from Bones 101. That’s right and thoracic rhymes with Jurassic, all the fun of a movie but without the buttered popcorn. You get an ‘A’ for effort!”

The tests came back and some sweet angel in scrubs that were adorned with at least half of the aforementioned “101 Dalmatians” pushed drugs into my IV. And somewhere in my new found and adored stupor I requested that one of the dads from our ski trip, an anesthesiologist, come to the hospital and talk “Doctor” to the shift that first saw me.

A few hours after he arrived and much Latin later, there was a decision to call a neurologist who had a ski house on the mountain. Seems the attending physicians finally admitted, “We’re pretty much just bone-setters here.”

As the cartoon hero Rocket J. Squirrel would say, “Gee-willikers, it’s been fun. But looks like Captain Wrongway Peter Peachfuzz and the medics from Frostbite Falls are throwing in the towel. Hokie Smokes Bullwinkle, guess all those enemas for high altitude misdiagnosis were just a perk--if your name is Kenny ‘King-of-Colonic’s Loggins.”

On a positive note, at least they were able to admit when they were beat. That, and my doctor-dad friend must have mentioned that they didn’t really have any idea what

my symptoms added up to since both high altitude and constipation, not to mention frostbite usually clear up in a few hours.

I was put on morphine until the cavalry arrived. Ah, La La land. “You can check out any time you like, but you can never leave!” I am sure the strength of the drug was to ease the pain...of the staff, so they didn’t have to listen to me kvetch. That and a foot of powder was forecasted which meant this shift got to ski, and the next shift would be seeing a new group of emergencies who would need the attention I was getting.

I fell back onto the foam pillows, my head gently bobbing up and down like a coconut on a trampoline. The drugs crept around the corners of my brain.

To think of all the drugs I said no to: grass, coke, acid. No, no, no. It’s illegal; it will screw up your brain. It will hook you and send you to prison or the grave. Fifty-four years of drug free living (give or a take a weekend on Nantucket), fifty-four years of never inhaling and now look at me. I had more intravenous drugs coursing my veins than a gaffer on a rock reunion tour. And it was legal, paid for by a third party. I was living every junkie’s dream. So don’t mind me, I have a golden elephant to catch so we can ride the along the rippling iridescent chartreuse and magenta tide looking for sand dollars. My brain is melting, melting...

LESSON: “I think it is time NOW for pain drugs don’t you?”

I had always been a nut about not taking any over the counter drugs. I very rarely got sick. As the saying goes, “He was in perfect health until the day he died.” I came from strong English, Scottish, German stock, or so I was told. Stiff upper lip, shoulder to the grind stone. Holy Moley, I went out for a jog or did several hours of hard gardening to work monthly cramps out. I had my

first child without pain medication. So when I say, I think it's time for drugs, I mean it is LONG past time for drugs. As a friend from Scotland said when they asked him for the tenth time if he thought it was time for his pain medication, "Aye then, if I weren't on the first floor of 'yur' hospital I'd have jumped out of the window by now."

I finally learned to say: I am in pain. I have a need. I want something. Can you help me.

Oh, by the way. It was hard enough to be needy, but what I was not prepared for is that many people ignored me when I finally screwed up the courage to ask for what I needed. But I say, ask away! And GET what you need, by hook or by crook. (*Which is a reference to what, sheepherding? Meat packing? Pirating?*)

4. In the Nick of Time

There are people who are simply in the right place at the right time and there are people that no matter where they go it becomes the right time. I'm in the first group; the neurologist that arrived was in the second group. Dr. Nick Mills approached my bed after reading my chart. I liked this guy already. He was prepared; he was eager to help. He could read. He even looked at me when he talked. (And not like he was sizing me up to figure out how many payments on his Jaguar I was worth.)

Next he brought out a stainless steel tuning fork and checked my ability to feel vibrations (all Beach Boys references aside). He looked into my eyes with that red light gizmo and then he carefully unwrapped a extremely large safety pin.

“They issue you those diaper pins in medical school?”

He smiled. Then he proceeded to poke me like a baked potato getting ready for the microwave.

“Can you feel this? This? This?”

“No.”

He touched my face, “And this?”

“Yes.”

“And this?” He brushed by my left cheek.

“No I can't feel that.”

He frowned. I was enjoying the game, but decided to cut him a break.

“I can't feel anything there because I had a facelift four years ago and it's still numb.” I could all but see the beads of sweat on his forehead retract back into his skin.

“Well,” he said in less than five minutes, “you are my first patient up here at the Ski Resort because I have just retired (from a world famous Neurology Center where he was the Chief Potentate). I have never seen a case of this directly, but I am going to test for Acute Transverse Myelitis. It’s a one in a million condition.

“Let’s get an MRI on your spine, about where your sensation stops and see what we can find.” (And here is another plus mark for Dr. Nick Mills, he didn’t ask me to “hop” off the mattress to go get the MRI.) You notice things like that when you are paralyzed, powerless and presumably mute and invisible!

By that time it was nightfall on Sunday and the orderlies, who were no doubt vying for the cover of a Hospital Hotties Calendar, came to get me. The ‘kids’ transferred me to a wheelchair and we headed off. Suddenly they pushed open the exit doors and I was thrust into what can only be described as a Tim Burton meets the Sugar Plum Fairy experience.

The MRI machine was in a semi-trailer in the farthest corner of the hospital parking lot, for no apparent reason. The staff had chopped away a covering of ice the thickness of Lake Superior in January, to clear the path. Snow drifts loomed on either side above the path. The night air was crisp, the stars bright. I inhaled; something was different. Oh yeah, no urine-puke-alcohol-latex glove smell. I sucked in as much good air as I could. But before I could hyperventilate, the chair did a gentle glissade down the narrow path gaining the momentum of an Olympic bobsled.

Dudes, I’ll pass on the ol’ Mel Brooks wheelchair-down-the-stairs-and-across-the-parking-lot-into-oncoming-traffic-schtick! “Somebody STOP me, PLEASE!!”(apologies to Jim Carey in “The Mask”).

The MRI workers who were sequestered in the semi-truck opened a side door four feet above my head. With a wisp of a hand on a computerized remote they sent a flat steel lift careening down toward street level. The orderlies caught up with me just before I became road kill, or parking lot kill, anyway. The heavy metal (no, not Nine Inch Nails, more like Totally Screwed) 2 inch thick platform slammed to earth hurling ice chunks into my hair.

I was freaked-out which triggered a 'private vacation to the Bahamas' (AKA Hot flash). Undaunted the orderlies grabbed my chair and tipped it up and over the ledge which, did I mention, had landed the width of a dragonfly wing's distance from my toes. Someone motioned a 'thumbs up'. We ascended the four feet at the same rate that Jell-o congeals. And every wiggling, jiggling movement stung more than bare-hugging a cactus trimmed with fiberglass. And it was cold. How cold was it? Ice cream could get freezer burn.

STAR TREK, STAR DATE: Add wheelchairs on icy surfaces to the list of things never to take rides in, along with: Ski Patrol with toboggans, car with drunk friends, and Ferris wheels after a jumbo hot dog mit sauerkraut with a cotton candy chaser.

It was very crowded inside the trailer. There was one boy (and I do mean boy) behind my head and one facing me. On my right was the MRI table.

"Can you move from the chair onto the table, ma'am?"

The chart, pretty please, read the fricking-rats-a-frats chart.

And whoa...aftershave smelling of a musty giant redwood forest ran up my nostrils just as cornflower blue eyes framed in the black eye lashes the length of butterfly wings batted near my cheek! Mercy me, if you lean any closer I'll be in the cardiac unit.

Land 'o Goshen, you are sweeter than apricot jam on buttered cinnamon toast. Did I mention that my mouth is watering just pretending I am two decades within your age range?

“No, I can’t use my legs at all. I can hang on with my arms, though.”

“Okay, then here’s what I will do. Let me lean down to you and embrace you completely.”

And then the rest is kinda fuzzy, but it sorta went like this:

“With my hand on the small of your back, let me pull you towards my chest.

Put your head on my shoulder, I’m strong, I’m trained, I’m ready.

I’ll do all the rest.

It will be safe, ma’am. All you have to do is hang on tight.

Once I have you against my body, I am going pick you up and lay you down,

Is that all right?”

Dang, if those aren’t lyrics for a Country Western Song, I’ll eat my (4X Beaver Stetson) hat! Is that all right? Nah, let’s go get a guy from the Grease-o-rama trucker bar with peanut shell breath and a Grand Canyon butt crack. He can throw me fireman’s style over his shoulder and slam me onto that cold chunk of stainless steel...or we could do it your way.

“Yeah, that’s fine,” I went for a Mona Lisa smile, desperately trying to keep my lips from snapping up like window shades into a monkey grin. He leaned toward me smelling of musky pine and all I could hear was the Disney Princesses humming in three-part harmony, “Some Day My Prince Will Come”.

Mesmerized by what were the biggest biceps and the hardest six-pack since somebody left the Coors out in the snow, I was transported from my wheelchair to Nirvana and eventually to the MRI table.

“You’re okay, now. You’re safe and sound. Okay! You can let go of my neck... NOW.” And as fast as you can say ‘let’s get married,’ he disappeared.

I blinked and was staring into the bland face of a middle-aged nurse who was clearly counting the number of days she had to work before retirement. She droned the instructions in a nasal whine; think of Roz’s voice in “Monsters, Inc.”.

“We have to roll you into a tube. You must stay very still. Is that clear?”

Okay, once more, if I could kick, squirm or as much as wiggle a toe hair, i.e. NOT STAY STILL, this MRI would be a moot point, would it not? In fact, it would be a mute point since we wouldn’t be having this discussion. That is if anyone cared to, for a whimsical fancy, read the blankey, blankey, blankey (fill in your own blanks if are an adult or a minor who has already been corrupted) chart.

“We will be talking to you through an intercom. If you feel yourself panic, just talk to us.”

Then the bed I was resting on was sucked backwards into the open tube, like the tongue of a giant man-eating plant, “Seymour I’m hungry”.

The first thing you realize is that you can hear the MRI folks give you orders and asking if you are okay, but you can’t really hear them talk to each other. You know, like when you are at the hairdresser and she’s cutting your hair and she say, “oops!” and you know you’re about to get a much shorter hair cut than you had planned for. But in the MRI, I couldn’t hear bubkis. There was no bantering about such as, “Holy Moly that’s not good,” or “We better get the doc on the

phone pronto,” or “Come here, what do you figure that black spot is?” Even a simple, “I’ve done this for forty-seven years and I’ve never seen that before.” But no, you’re shot into a tube of utter silence. Until...

ZAP, ZIPPY, TING, TING, TING.

An MRI machine can only be explained as a Sci-fi space ship transporter tube, granted, probably the garbage chute. The diameter was not much bigger than I was. Not a lot of room to, say, move a pinky – if you could. I mean to tell you, I was 110 pounds, 5’2’ and there was barely enough room to pass through, pass gas or pass out. (Yes, I do understand that ‘I am 110 pounds’ *only* on a planet from another solar system with different gravity.) The point is it’s a solo and lonely activity and not much is ‘that alone’ in these days of over population.

Yet, as soon as they shut me up in there I realized how happy it made me (even though I couldn’t get out and the nurse was probably lying about taking me out if I panicked). The joy of being in the tube was that there was no one to interrupt my thoughts, hard as they were to string together on drugs. I closed my eyes and could sense the scanner thing going over my whole body. ZING, TIDDLY, ZING. PAT, PAT, ZONG, PONG. Ah, silence, alone with my thoughts.

And just what were those altruistic, lofty thoughts? How to feed the world, end wars, bring salvation to the lost, cure cancer? Close.

Oh boy, oh boy...The next time it passes over me, I get to become a new person, quick who do I want to be? (It was like the opening to the Jetson’s where Jane gets to pick a new hairstyle or Groundhog Day without the character ever evolving.)

First pass, I could play the piano and sing. Next pass, I could add numbers in my head and do crossword puzzles.

BIDDY BING...men desired me, women wanted to be me. CLICK CLACK...Suzy Cheerleader from Ridgewood High School apologized to me and asked for my key to success. (Did I mention my five best sellers and a Grammy for my hit song?) Pong-Bang-a-Bong.

I passed on the 'bigger-boobs' wish, just in case I got stuck in the tube. ZING. No crow's feet, my smile lines stopped above my nostrils, just baby butt smoothness everywhere. ZIPY ZAP, TIPPY TAP, no inner thighs.

"Are you all right in there?"

Leave me alone. I am experimenting with Dr. Frankenschteen. Igore, push the nurse out into the cold and slam the dadgumit door!

"Fine , it's all good, bye-bye." I whispered assuredly.

"I've never seen anyone so relaxed for their first MRI. It's hard to be in there all alone."

I decided not to tell her how many people I can fit into my MRI cocoon. All my-new-selfs were having so much fun I was disappointed when it was over.

Back in the "blue" room with the 2-D mountain scene I awaited Dr. Mills.

"Just as we suspected, there is a line clear across your spinal column where the immune system attacked. Your body reacted to the attack with swelling of the myelin sheath to protect itself. Then the swelling bruised and pinched the nerves in your spine. The myelin is close in DNA to a virus. This is why you can't walk."

So what you're saying is that I have Rocky Stallone leading my immune cells on a mission to kill and destroy viruses. But he's wearing glasses as thick as Mr. Magoo's.

I can hear it now:

“Yo, you guys see that?”

“Whadda ya think it is Rocky?”

“Dunno. Maybe a virus, hard to tell from here.”

“Let’s blast it. Can we, huh, can we, Rocky?”

“Hey, whaz da worst dat can happen?”

“KaBoom!”

“Oops!”

“Let’s clear outta here guys.”

Dr. Mills ordered steroids for my IV.

(I have since learned that the inflammation that ‘whacked’ my nerves could have been an inside job, a migraine of the spinal fluid. I am not sure that is more comforting than the picture of a Stallone outside attack. It’s a bit of a toss up: surveillance cameras in the parking lot versus the employee locker room. Is it the guy wearing the ski mask, or the guy selling the ski mask. Hey cheer up, maybe it’s both, let’s not rule out a sting...pun intended.)

The night nurse arrived with two more enemas. When it rains it pours.

“What are those for? I can’t feel anything, so I can’t push.”

“Oh, just because.” She did a Texas two-step out the door (quick, quick, slow, slow, slow).

Just because? Yeah, just because you can charge thirty-five bucks a piece and you had extras in the supply room? I don’t care if I’ve had more opiates than a Marrakech hookah salesman, “Just because” is right up there

with “because I said so.” I swear if I could kick, I’d so tai-bo your tailbone. But you know that, don’t you? I can tell the way you say things just out of my reach.

As predicted, the enemas did nothing. I was soon to understand why people in wheelchairs have so many medical problems. It turns out that when you can’t walk, it isn’t just your legs that don’t work. All the major organs in your body cavity are in trouble if not just outright on strike.

I can see the report card on this.

Sally is barely passing GI Track 101:

Her grades are slipping in muscle response.

She is not working to her full capacity.

None of her parts play well with the other bits.

By the next morning I had enough brain cells to remember that my husband would be expecting me in the church parking lot along with the other skiers the next day. I had erroneously trusted the first intern I’d spoken with to send my urgent message to my hubby. The fact that I had not heard from my spouse was, I assumed, because I didn’t have a working cell phone and because my room had been moved several times. (Or that I had talked to him for hours but couldn’t quite recall it.)

I borrowed a cell phone from Carol when she came to see me the next morning. I called to update my husband on the crisis and to alert him to the fact that I would be a smidge delayed. I wasn’t sure how to break it to him that his other-half was now his other one-quarter or less.

“Sweetie, did you get my message that I had a small problem on the ski hill and the hospital kept me overnight for observation?”

“Well, you’re one tough cookie. It’s probably just a sprain.”

You know when you have sugar coated something way past a dusting of confectioners sugar right over to rock-candy when people can’t pick-up on your clues. It was time to fish, the ‘cut bait’ window was closed.

“Okay, sit down. I am paralyzed from the waist down. I can only be moved if I have three medics with me at all times.”

“I’m on my way.”

“It will take you eight hours and they want to discharge me in four.”

“What can I do?”

“Call our doctor and see if he can admit me to our local hospital.” I didn’t think it wise to explain how dense the staff was at my present location

On cue, Dr. Mills cleared his throat from the hallway and entered. “Your case is too complex for the doctors here. You need specific help.” The doctors from the local staff were all nodding behind him. Hands folded. I suppressed a smirk. The scene looked like a Kung Fu movie when the men in robes and long braids all nod and agree with the head warlord. If they stood in any tighter of a formation I could’ve bowled them over with my bedpan.

“Okay, how bad is it?”

“That depends.”

Ooo, not good.

LESSON: “Ah, silence, alone with my thoughts.”

As shallow as my thoughts were on drugs and in the MRI tube, on reflection I had to admit that I don’t spend much time with myself so I’m out of practice. Strange, because I use to spend hours

alone as a child 'in the moment' of discovery. Whether eating wild blackberries or wading in the brook, I was alone and experiencing the world. I loved it then, so I am going to try more of it. I say, why not have a playdate with yourself doing what you loved to do when you were little: fishing, skipping stones, coloring, or building stuff?

5. Sermon on the Mount

By Monday morning I began to perk up. Or at least I thought I was alert. Carol and our 'doctor-dad' showed up with a piece of my Birthday cake from my party (which had been held in my honor the night before at the ski house). They also brought a photograph of all the youth group kids posing on the mountain.

For pity-sakes, I sure do know how to celebrate a birthday. Way to go, from 54 to 84 physically in a half an hour. The first half of my life I crammed in one-hundred lives. No regrets, well except that I messed up my life and everyone else's I knew.

So maybe this is my last year of life. I can deal with that. I am beginning to make up a music play-list in my head for my funeral: Amazing Grace, A Mighty Fortress is Our God, Mustang Sally, Life in the Fast Lane, Why walk when you can fly, Lay Down Sally.

All of a sudden I had enough brain synapses to break through the drug haze and realize that the entire Youth Ski Retreat had come and gone without me. The kids all got home each night off the slopes. The dads took over and led the Bible study, and the moms kept enough

order in the kitchen that no one starved. It's nice to know I had a group of parents so competent that I was dispensable. God bless these Lutherans! I was proud of them all. And when they were preparing to leave, I was just feeling clear-headed enough to start talking to God about all this.

“God, apparently you either just wanted to get my attention, or you are really playing hardball. Good thing I don't believe in a God that punishes people or karma or superstitions, because we both know about my less than stellar track record. And I am quite sure my twenty bucks a week in the old collection plate could not bribe my way out of the first level of Dante's Inferno. So to be clear, (in between the buzz in my head and throbbing on my skin), I am asking for grace and mercy knowing you owe me nothing.

But seriously, Lord, now that we're talking...do you have an intern up there handling overload cases because this doesn't make any sense whatsoever? Come on, I've finally gotten my life on some kind of moral even keel, and it's NOW you strike me down?

Not before? When I dated a man who thought he had been abducted twenty-three times by aliens. Not when I squandered my time with the animation artist who had Scotch on his breakfast cornflakes with a sprinkling of coke. I even 'expected' to die when I broke up with the misogynist Mafioso (the one who said that all women wanted were baubles, as if I was an easily mollified magpie. Thank you, Mary Jo Butt-afucco). God, you didn't even strike me down when I gave up the ministry for mini-skirts and Godiva chocolate martinis under the dubious banner of 'flirt and convert.

I don't get this. It is clear you don't punish sin; but to reward faithfulness with pain? Was there some small print I missed in the contract? Please advise, AMEN.”

One thing I was sure of is that even though I was in pain, God had not abandoned me. For instance, the fact that the doctor-dad from our ski group got through to the hospital staff,

who in turn called the neurologist Dr. Mills, who in turn showed up and saved my life with the correct 5 minute diagnosis. That is pretty amazing.

So I laid back on my pillow and waited to see what else would unfold (of course waiting implies patience, which does not portend well).

Two days into my ordeal I prayed again.

“Okay Lord, I’ve done that waiting ‘thingy’, you can change everything back now. No really, I get the message. I was stressed and edgy. I’ll be loving and kind and put 40 bucks in the plate a week. And I’ll stop swearing in traffic. And whatever else you want, just give me back control over my body and my life. I am no good to you here, right?”

Hello? Hola? Bon journo? Half-dead person here – waiting for an instant miracle. I could go on all the talk shows and tell them that God still does miracles. Whadda ya think, hmm? Before and after glossy shots, you get the bigger letters in the headline, of course. Top-billing for the Big Guy. Work with me here. How ‘bout it?”

And God said, “No.”

“Okay, Lord, what is plan B?”

Carol called and said the kids were ready to pile into the SUVs and head home but first they all wanted to see me. So in groups of three, the kids came to my room to talk. I felt the sorriest for the kids who were guests of our regulars. They knew nothing about me, about God and probably hadn’t even been in a hospital except for stitches. I was sure it was weirding them out.

I told them what I thought they needed to hear, what might have been one big purpose of this whole thing happening to me.

“Guys, we have been playing at God-lite. You know like Pepsi-lite? God loves you, God has a wonderful plan for your life; good start. But there is more. And the part I didn’t get to, the part I may have left out is this, when you turn your life over to God he owns it, lock, stock and barrel.”

Which is what? Either a reference for a gun or wine cellar? Nice turn of a phrase. This is your Youth Director...this is your Youth Director on drugs.

And if you don’t give your life to God, you are still not the owner of your life. As that great theologian of the 60’s Bob Dylan said, “You got to serve somebody, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you got to serve somebody.” I got up on my elbows and leaned forward and ‘revved-up’ for my ‘Sermon on the Mount’ (albeit on pillows).

“So, (which is the new ‘lo’) this is everything I’ve been thinking about God now that he has made me sit still, *really* still!

1. Don’t wait until you are in the emergency room to call out to God.

But if you do wait, he is still listening and not like your mother who says stuff like, ‘What, you couldn’t call before this? Were all your fingers and toes broken?’ God’s more like a friend you went to school with but he moved away and you meet up again at a surf camp and he is *totally* glad to hang out with you.

2. Job said, ‘The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, Praise be the Name of the Lord.’

Job was from the Old Testament. But you could probably tell that from the way he spoke. And for the record Job was richer, nicer and had better looking hair than ‘The Donald’

(Duck or Trump). Job was willing to give up his sense of entitlement. God does not owe us money, family, education, or even health. A grateful person is fun to be around because they never demand blessings and yet they see them everywhere. Be thankful for life, simple and plain.

3. Life is an adventure. You can plan all you want, but sometimes life just takes you where you don't want to go. You can scream and yell and stomp your feet (okay, I can't actually stomp my feet), but you get the gist. At the end of that proverbial day, it's all about using what you have left and getting back in the game.

4. After you wear yourself out resisting your journey, GET CURIOUS*.

FYI: Curiosity didn't kill the cat. Your Aunt just said that to you when you were four because little kids always ask why?, why?, why? until an otherwise reasonable adult blurts out something that gives a kid nightmares and puts the little tyke into therapy when he is thirty. * (See three graces at the beginning of book)

5. It is time for us to share all that we have.

I mean share the good stuff, nobody wants to hear your whining or catch head lice. If we have any cool stuff at all (homes, electronics, pet iguanas), remember to hold it in the open palm of your hand (especially the lizard)...we are borrowing everything and God has the right to take it back.

It's like when you let your kid brother borrows your mountain bike. When you go to get it back he may scream, "No fair!" But that's silly, right? It's yours in the first place. Resisting

giving it back is pretty rude and on top of it he might give you a red belly. (God is the big brother, here...we are the stinky little brat brother.)

“So here I am, on a bus ride. God is the driver and I get to ask only one question. Not, ‘why me?’, or ‘why not someone else?’ I can’t even shout, ‘No Fair!’ There is only one question, and that is ‘Where are we going?’ Remember, I am on a bus and God is the driver.”

“Yeah, the little short bus!” one of the boys yells out.

Yes! Another sarcastic comic is born. Tell me there is a green room in heaven! For the record I am convinced Jesus must have been funny. After all, he got invited to all the parties.

“That’s it. Talk to God. Don’t get mad, get curious! Word! (Which is the new, um, ‘word’ – of God).”

Sermon over. I see six pairs of eyes gawking at me.

Okie dokie smokie, guess you were expecting Jonah and the Whale meets Davy and Goliath.

“Look, sometimes God puts his people in hospitals, burn wards, wars, terrorist attacks, abductions and prisons. The job of Jesus’ followers, (Mr. Phelps, if you accept this mission), is to bring peace and love to people in pain. And sometimes we don’t get to pick where we want to serve.”

They didn’t move. Where were the marshmallows and campfires? Where was the tennis tournament for Jesus? No one was singing ‘Praise Songs’. Whoa, what a bummer dude.

Holy Mole, guacamole! I wonder where these guys were when I was teaching the parable of the vineyard? Come on guys, remember Jesus says, I am the vine you are the branches. And if the Father loves you he will PRUNE you...

I remember the first weekend I lived in California I went to a wine tasting at a vineyard. There were miles and miles of lush green vines. At harvest time one branch can be twenty feet long, maybe more, each laden with heavy clusters, and the leaves and curly tendrils wind aimlessly on long rows of wire.

The next time I drove past the fields it was a very different scene. Every branch had been cut back down to about a fourteen inch stub of stringy bark. (No wonder when people heard Jesus teach about human pruning they said, 'Whoa, we have no idea what you're talking about.')

Pruned grape vines are so pathetic out of season. In fact, my husband once uprooted the one vine I had planted. When I asked him why he did it, he said, "It looked completely dead to me."

That's when I explained to him what people from the northeast snow country know that Californians with year-round-perfect-growing-weather do not know: The difference between dead and dormant. Dormant is like Sleeping Beauty; with the right conditions life will burst forth with joy and singing. Dead is what happened to evil-step mothers.

To some of the older kids I expanded my bedside sermon to include a few pruning tips:

"I guess if you thought about what it would mean to have 99% of your life cut away so that you could 'flourish' sometime later, you'd probably start shopping for a new religion. I'm thinking about that all perceiving pontificator, Janis Joplin, who once sang, "Lord please give me a Mercedes Benz, my friends all have Porsches, I will make amends." Now there's a religion that shouts AMERICA. Ah, materialism; the love child of Shallow Hal and Britney Spears. So to what do aspire?

Paris Hilton was once rumored to have said, “everyone wants to be me.” Really? I saw her on Letterman promoting a line of canned champagne she owns. Canned champagne? Is that so if you fall in the gutter drunk you won’t cut your face on a glass bottle? Or is it so you can crush your beverage container on your forehead when the caviar runs out?

Ooo, Ooo ME! Pick me to be just like you. Did you know that ~~Pottymouth-Prison-Bait-Princess~~ Hilton is a High School drop-out? See how important it is to stay in school and reach your potential? Money or family legacy can’t make you a ‘real’ person and often having a sense of entitlement keeps you from flourishing. Stuff kills joy.

To be a ‘real’ boy (or girl) Pinocchio you’ll need to get ready to be pruned. And it will happen. But then get ready to find your potential, purpose and calling and deep joy. The way of true faith is a bit screwball. God often directs our lives by throwing up road blocks and ‘cutting off’ what we think is a perfectly fine avenue of success and happiness. It’s okay, just hang on and ride the bus.”

“But where do you find your joy and faith?” One girl looked down at me with troubled eyes.

“I don’t have a whole lot of woo-woo-whoopie-doo-type joy all the time. But, I have a sense of humor and that gives me hope. And faith, as far as I’ve been able to figure out, is doing what you think you’re supposed to do with little or no evidence that it will work out.”

Speaking as a prunee, it stinks. Pruning reminds me of when I was a kid and I slipped on ice and hit a wall of frozen slush that knocked the wind out of me. Getting pruned is like choking on your own spit or sitting down, but missing the chair. Did you ever wet your pants in grade school? You feel like an idiot and everyone laughs at you. That’s pruning. And sometimes the pruning season takes up the rest of your life.

Believing God during the pruning season is like swimming upstream through concrete in winter. I still have to will my eyes open every morning because I the pain rises before I do. When the sharp stabbing sensations wake me up then I know it was not a bad dream, but my life has indeed become a living endless nightmare (not to put too fine a point on it).

Being pruned hurts physically and emotionally. It's humiliating and embarrassing. It's that dream where you're in school but you forgot your clothes or in Junior High when you are perpetually going up the down staircase. My life is like my childhood reoccurring nightmare where the bad guys have me tackled me and I can't get away. And when I wake up, I still can't move. Bummer.

The kids in my church youth group were in High School—the wolf was at their door. Somebody had to let them know life wasn't going to be a snowboard half-pipe dream forever just because they lived in California with (cue the music) 'Summertime and the living's easy...your Daddy's rich and your Mama's good-looking.'

Great! I was the unlucky messenger everyone wanted to shoot. I got to tell them life can be excruciating and I was supposed to do it with poise. *Me? I am the one who fell down the stairs of the church at my first wedding. I was the one who was so clumsy the ballet school tried to demote me a week before the recital.*

My job, as Youth Director, was to make God look good and to tell them the truth too. Welcome to Orthodox-Oxymoron-Land. I was in pain. I was on drugs, and I had no way of knowing if I would live. I didn't want to scare them. But I owed them the truth. And the truth

was, God loves me and I have NO idea what his plan for my life is. (Apologies to Bill Bright's memory, but my life's plan may not be *wonderful* at least not until later, like when I'm long dead.)

All I can say is stay on the bus God gives you. Jumping out means you will get run over by someone else's bus. Wait, no, that was the movie with Albert Brooks and Meryl Streep in heaven. The one where her life was on videotape showing her saving her cat from a fire. Earning your way to heaven one cat at a time? YISH! That is "categorically" wrong on so many levels, especially if your cat has nine lives and you only have one. I'll stick with grace and the free gift of forgiveness from Jesus.

Anyway, stay on the bus God gives you and look out the window. Memorize the way home. No that's Hansel and Gretel. This is your Youth Director short circuiting on morphine.

LESSON: "Pruned grape vines are so pathetic out of season."

Not to beat a dead horse, but I really learned what it meant to be pruned back and reigned in. And I did not like it. I still don't like it. But whether in life or death, we are not far from God. Therefore if God is near there is not much to fear. Okay, HOW I die is a bit off putting. How LONG that takes is terrifying. But the idea of death, physical death and to be in the presence of God and light, and beauty, that's worth contemplating. What's the lesson? You will be pruned. God didn't fail you, you are in training for joyful living.

6. De Plane, De Plane

It was clear that I had to leave the confines of the resort hospital and ‘get thee to a nunnery’ or at least to a neurology center. Being the good xenophobe that I am, I was thinking I should go home to Southern California where they have the best doctors in the world—or at least the ones smart enough to work where they can have a boat slip.

As I was working on a plan to get home a nurse I didn’t recognize appeared in my room. “Here, I printed these out from a medical website, it’s all about Acute Transverse Myelitis. I hope this helps.” Then she was gone.

“Well, God Bless your little white cotton socks!” I called down the hall.

Clearly she is not going to make it as a nurse, way too involved with her patients. Way too respectful of individuals to get anything done. In fact, if I hadn’t found the papers hours later under a water jug, I would have dismissed it as a drug related hallucination. A nurse who cares, go figure. Talk about a dying breed.

Dr. Mills arrived in my room ordering more tests. Apparently it was not time to pack up and go home just yet. I was taken to yet another sterile room so someone wearing latex gloves could take spinal fluid. I was told I would be rolled on my side, a needle would be slid between my vertebrae, puncturing my spinal column. Then they would extract spinal fluid for testing.

Ooh, doesn't that sound painful? One advantage of having no feeling is, yeah, I couldn't feel it. But I made a note to save that description for a sympathy pitch to pull out as needed...

I thought back to the first spinal-thingy I had during my first child birthing. The technician warned me, "don't move or it could paralyze you." I was petrified; ergo they got their desired result. Given the current situation, what would the threat be, 'don't move or you will be 'more paralyzed-ed'?

"Don't move," the nurse called out.

Does anyone think before they speak?

Back in my room someone named Dr. Billings came in to discuss my test results.

Dr. Billings, what next, Nurse Invoice?

As a kid I had a healthy fear of doctors. My doctor's name was Killborn. Dang, glad he wasn't my OB. Next was Dr. Pyle, before I even knew what getting piles meant.

My kids once had a pediatrician named Horowitz. My eldest now thirty-five still recalls passing out in his office when he tried to take blood from her. She refers to the episode as: that time when I was a small child and you let that doctor 'horrify me out of my wits'!

I think we should have a contest. Send the REAL name of a doctor you have had to my web page (www.BabyBoomerTalkRadio.Com), names that instill fear get extra points. Names including: blood, gore, pins, cut, sew, drill, etc., win double points.

Dr. Mills and several doctors whom I had seen in the ER stood at the foot of my bed. (Or on the TV show ER? The world of stethoscopes is blurring into one long episode.) Surrounded now by a plethora of doctors, I had to ask, to what in the blue blazes do I owe this honor? The look on Dr. Mills face was dour. It was clearly worse for him than me. I had already decided I might be a cripple for life and I may not see New Year's Eve '06.

“Okay, boys, out with it. MS? MD? The dreaded Hunta Virus?”

“Well, we really have to get you to a neurology center to be sure.”

Translation: We don't want to get sued for misdiagnosis. Not to be confused with making me blow into a paper bag for two days and giving me enough enemas to jet propel me to Mars.

Dr. Mills finally had the guts to step forward and say, “although we see the Acute Transverse Myelitis damage, we are still checking for MS. I think we can rule out Guillain-Barre.” YIKES, anytime you hear a disease named after someone, it's bad: Lou Gehrig, Dr. Alzheimer, Dr. Parkinson, flood the mind.

Then the fun started – where to send her? The doctors began ‘hemming and hawing’ (*which means what, sewing with donkeys?*). I had become invisible. Like a bad Capital One commercial the suggestions started.

“How about we fly you to Reno?”

“ReNO.” I drooled.

“Fresno?”

“FresNO!” Eyes rolling for emphasis.

No, no, no, a thousand times NO!

“I want to go home; family, friends, the whole shebang, the entire enchilada. I want to be right there, next to the ocean and guess what there are several great hospitals to boot.”

“We can arrange an ambulance.”

Bad plan Stan. I throw up in cars when I'm sitting up! And in case you didn't read the newspapers there was a landslide between home and here last week. The trip home would be fifteen hours.

“What about an airplane home?” I chimed in.

A nurse in the room gasped, “Oh, planes are very expensive.”

My bad. I forgot, I am in which hospital, Montifiore in the South Bronx, where the median income is less than welfare? Oh, or am I in a hospital in a town where ba-zillionaires fly their private jets in to ski every weekend?

Thanks for trying to spare me, but if I have enough money to ski here, I think I can, for once in my tortured misguided life, choose ME. It is ‘Princess For A Day’ and ‘WE’ want to go home ASAP! So spin the prop, pull the wheel chucks and yell CLEAR!

“You know, I appreciate that so much, but my husband is in real estate. I will just ask him to sell another house, that should cover it.”

“Well, we still don’t have approval from your local hospital. They say they are denying you entrance. The only hope is if you come in as a transfer patient from your own doctor, but it doesn’t look promising.”

Oh, I know, since I am in such keen mental state on all these drugs and it is so easy for me to sit up and dial. I will do all the necessary phoning and paperwork, don't worry your little head over it. Why don't ya'll just take an extra fifteen minute break?

I called my husband, who was looking for something to do with his bundle of anxiety. I told him to tell the doctor I needed approval as a transfer patient *immediately*, if not sooner!

That done, I made a note to myself: The next time a Ball or an Auction or so much as a Charity Flea Circus for that local hospital comes up, DO NOT send a contribution.

Deny Princess Sally entrance? We think not!

At last, the word was given that my hometown hospital had accepted me. Woo-woo!

I'm in third grade again, the jocks are choosing up sides for dodge ball. Pick me, pick me, I promise I won't drop the ball. Ooooo ME! Pretty please, with ice cream and a cherry on top! Pick me Mr. Hospital...so I can pay you \$4,000 a day to be poked, jabbed and ignored.

At last the plane was ordered and I was ready to 'blow this pop stand' and 'skedaddle out of this one horse town'. (They should really list propensity to use worn out clichés as a side effect to morphine) As they wheeled me down the hall all the hospital medics, interns and doctors lined the hall to say good-bye. I had either won the award for the patient who stayed the longest or they were coming around to make sure I was really gone. I hoisted myself on my elbows and thanked them and then told them they looked like they should all be on a reality show, Hospital Hunks. I am pretty sure that was borderline sexual harassment, but hey, I was on drugs. I began to understand the lure of drugs. This euphoria and total lack of respect for others must be the first step to becoming a junkie! (Or at least the first step to a healthy bout of narcissism.)

The doors flew open into the daylight. Ice crystals immediately formed in my nostrils. It was minus 5 degrees outside, and that's being generous. I was jostled up

to the awaiting ambulance. Straight above me, the sky just as blue as the last day I was skiing. You remember stuff like that.

Did you know that when you travel by private plane you are driven right across the runway to the airplane stairway? Awesome! They strapped me papoose tight onto a scantily padded wooden board and lifted me up the stairs feet first, blood rushing to my head. (It was a good reminder why 'never going down on a ski patrol toboggan' will always be on that top ten list of ways never to be transported). They wrestled me up into the small plane and snapped the board into the wall.

And I betcha didn't know this, when you pay \$15,000 for an hour's flight they give you all five window seats AND you don't have to put your seat back upright or stow your tray table? How neat is that?

Of course if sitting upright really does add to your safety, maybe allowing me to lay flat means they didn't think I was going to make it anyway. The small plane cabin was covered with machines, wires, and pipelines all attached to my body throughout the duration of the trip. It looked like a low-budget Matrix movie. Bad news! Unless I'm in a lip lock scene with Keanu Reeves.

The pilot asked everyone to buckle up. Snap, snap, snap the three Medivac nurses secured themselves. I was already hog-tied to within an inch of my thighs as we took off. I could see puffy clouds. Lulled by the sensation of lift-off I was almost dozing when I heard the technician at my head loudly scream over the small engines, "Do you have any vitals?"

I shot my head back and in a low, but firm voice, said, “How about if the next time you ask if she can give you a ‘reading’ of my vitals. It would so very much help my morale if I was assured that I was still alive.” Then I smiled. He didn’t acknowledge me.

Which means what? I am either “knock, knock, knocking on heaven’s door”, or I shouldn’t give up my day job.

I gave up on the small talk until I heard the Captain call the tower. I got the attention of the woman EMS worker at my feet. I motioned for her to come closer. “Tell the Captain that Oprah should move her plane over so we have room to land.”

No reaction.

“It’s cool. The Big ‘O’ and I are tight. We hang in LA. I would have been up the coast to the Bacara Resort for her Influential Women’s Gala, but my invitation got lost in the mail.”

Zilch reaction. Talk about dying!

The pilot set that puppy down like cream cheese on a bagel. He cruised over to a side gate where an ambulance was waiting. It wasn’t a limo, but the service was wonderful. The EMS flight team lowered my bed, exchanged clipboards, signed documents and hustled back to their plane. I felt like a pedigreed dog being handed over to a new owner.

LESSON: “I want to go home.”

I once heard that under 20 we struggle to leave home and after that we struggle to get back. The truth is home is where you feel love. And there is nothing more healing than laughter with friends. But it takes work. Do one thing today that will make your physical dwelling a place of healing and laughter...a home. (Hint: food and music help.)