

Hallelujah

By Suzanne Ohlmann

The doctor told me to give her an enema, but I was not her nurse, nor his employee. I was her daughter-in-law, and she had stage IV colon cancer. Everyone called her by her name, Rocky, but to me she was *Mama*. Her abdominal x-ray showed a belly packed with stool, or as the doctor told her, “You’re FOS.”

“Oh, I’ve known that for years,” she smiled as I snorted out a surprised giggle.

Mama and I always laughed at bathroom jokes, a bond we shared like old girlfriends rather than mother- and daughter-in-law. Her cancer had eliminated any past differences, the disease an equalizer that transformed us into our most human selves, and apparently made us more eager to laugh at poop jokes.

Stage IV meant tumors that stretched into her colon, liver, lungs, and spine. Her appetite gone, her energy sapped, her gut inflamed from tumor invasion, she had stopped having bowel movements five days prior. I’d encouraged her to try the regimen the doctor had prescribed, starting with Miralax, then Senakot, then Reglan, all of which she turned down – “makes me gag,” “I don’t like the taste,” “it doesn’t help anyway.” Her belly distended, she sat in the exam chair and took in sips of air as he instructed her on how she needed to participate in her plight, starting with eating, then drinking water, then taking the meds I’d been coaching the week before.

“And you,” he turned to me, “will be doing a milk and molasses enema today.”

I knew the concept, but couldn’t grasp how I’d accomplish this order outside of a hospital.

“Where?” I asked.

“Not here!” he laughed.

We drove to Walgreens for supplies. The package read *Combination Douche, Enema, & Water Bottle System*. It had never occurred to me that an actual *douche bag* existed in the world. Ten years of nursing, and still discoveries to be made.

Here’s the point: no mother-in-law in the world would desire the event that awaited us. The same was true for daughters-in-law, nurses or not.

But Mama needed an enema, I knew how to do it, and had even concocted the milk and molasses tincture in the past, an old southern remedy a liver transplant surgeon had prescribed for patients with stubborn guts when I worked ICU. The mixture produced marked results; “monumental,” I’d once documented.

With Mama comfy in her bed, I positioned large, cloth pads, or *chucks* in nurse jargon, underneath her, and tucked her in to await her “doom,” as she called it. She used funny names for everything. For instance, anytime she needed anything inserted into her “back door,” she called the inserter “the executioner.”

Back in the kitchen, I unpacked the d-bag kit: hot water bottle, tubing, a valve, and then a choice between the *douche* or enema “pipe.”

What kind of sadist would call this a pipe? I thought. My hospital supplies were much superior to this kit, with soft, latex tubing the size of a large spaghetti noodle for insertion and administration.

I hooked up the parts and did a rehearsal in the kitchen. I filled the bag with warm water, hung it from a cupboard door, released the shut-off valve, and watched the contents stream into the sink.

Next, I heated two cups of milk in the microwave to a warm temperature, and whisked in molasses to a rich, caramel color. I filled the bag. The moment had arrived.

Mama lay on her side, her arms hugging pillows as I explained the process, step by step. We chatted as I made my final preparations, including copious amounts of lubrication. Once begun, I talked through each moment of the procedure, appreciative of feedback, which she gave in a calm, sweet voice.

Seconds of silence passed, but for some gas, or in Rock-speak, "bubbles."

"Is that it?" she asked.

"Now we wait," I said. "If you build it, he will come."

"Jeepers -- does this *he* have to come *here*?" she smiled.

"Can you make it to the toilet?" I asked

She nodded.

On the cusp of either disaster or triumph, I helped her up to the edge of the bed. She glanced down at her lack of undergarments, then back at me with wide, owl eyes. *Good question*, I thought, and shifted the chucks underneath her to make a large, Sumo wrestling diaper. I grasped a corner between her legs, joined it with the corner on her left side, and did the same on the right and back.

"Ready?" I asked.

She stood and I guided her, her cachectic legs dancing like an eager, hoppy frog. I held my grip on her diaper and tried not to giggle.

Is it just me, or is she actually enjoying herself? I wondered.

Her joy contagious, I began hopping with her to the bathroom. Safely arrived, I tucked a warm towel over her legs and closed the door for privacy.

As I began to strip the sheets from the bed, I heard her singing Leonard Cohen, her voice muffled behind the door.

"Hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelujah, hallelu-u-u-jah..."

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