

Old Before My Time

- August 15, 2002

By Eileen Beal

On January 14th this year, almost a decade before I'm even eligible to collect Social Security or Medicare, I became "the average older woman," which the US Administration on Aging pretty much describes as: a widowed, divorced, or never-married female, with one or more chronic diseases, illnesses, or debilitating conditions, who lives alone.

Nope, Tinkerbell didn't fly by and dust me with geriatric dust. I "became" elderly when I stepped the wrong way on a crack in the sidewalk in front of my apartment building-while carrying a box of books to the car for a friend-and broke my foot.

My first taste of being old was immediate. I drive a stick shift car, so I had to call a friend to take me to the ER. There the doctor: X-rayed my foot; told me I had two bad breaks in a good place- "Lots of circulation in that area of the foot. You'll heal well," he said; put me in a toes-to-knee cast; and sent me home, with a brochure on how to use them, on crutches.

When I got back to my second floor apartment-helped up the stairs by my friend-I was physically exhausted, and in shock. I live alone. I live on the second floor of an apartment building. "How am I going to survive," I asked myself.

My answer was a long time coming to terms with.

It began with phone calls to family and friends. Most offered help with grocery shopping, meals, laundry, and schlepping me hither and yon. Even strangers, opening doors for me, getting books down from shelves at the library, picking up my purse and its contents when I dropped it one night at the local discount drug store, took care of me.

It was hard to come to terms with being so totally dependent; I was both grateful and angry at being the object of charity and random acts of kindness. "Geeze," I'd think, "I need help so much, but I don't want anyone to see me, to think of me, as helpless."

But I was. And trying not to be helpless exhausted me. Carrying out the normal activities of daily living-cutting up vegetables for a salad, going to the bathroom, working at my computer, going to the library, etc.-took two or three times more time and energy than before. And left me so physically drained at the end of the day that I was accident prone-a menace to myself and all (other) things breakable.

Old Before My Time

And I was scared all the time. Scared of missing work deadlines-death on the bank account if you are a freelance writer-or doctor's appointments. Scared of not making it to the bathroom in time. Scared of falling, and becoming totally incapacitated, especially in the bathroom, as I levered myself into or out of the tub, and on the stairs as I did a three-legged up-and-down hobble. In fact, my first mail trip-three days after I'd broken my foot-was one of the scariest things I have ever done. Standing at the top of the stairs, I broke out in a cold sweat. "How am I going to get down those stairs," I asked myself shakily. "They go all the way to China."

My answer, after a calming breath of two: "Do it slow. Do it careful. Do it now."

Most of my writing is focused on medical and/or senior health care issues, so I'm pretty much immersed in the world of geriatric care, but it wasn't till my second week in my cast/on crutches, while I was standing in line at the grocery store, that I realized that breaking my foot had turned me into the new millennium version of the "when I am an old woman I shall wear purple" woman.

There was a frail, wispy-haired old lady at the cashier's station counting out money to pay for her groceries. With her arthritis-crippled fingers she was having trouble getting tightly folded bills out of her small coin purse. The man in front of me huffed and shuffled. The cashier rolled her eyes.

"Give the woman a break. She's doing the best she can," I thought. "And please God," I added as an afterthought, "I've never acted like these two bozos."

Instantly I realized that I had, and that I wasn't just thinking about the old lady at the cashier's stand, I was thinking about me. And about the fact that I was her-determined to do for myself, yet dependent on the kindness of others; handicapped, yet coping; slow, yet still going strong.

In the weeks following, I had more and more of these ah-ha moments: The day a far-too-solicitous young man jumped in front of a door-almost knocking me off my feet-to open it for me; the afternoon the young African-American cashier at the local health food store asked me, shyly, if I'd like her to carry the basket for me while I did my shopping; the night a friend called and said, "Are you too up for a movie and popcorn? Or I could bring a video and Orville's best over to your house, if you want."

My snazzy blue cast (yes, they come in colors) came off in March and will soon be a dim memory. But walking in the moccasins of the woman I will be at 75 will stay with me forever. Never again will I take the ability to "do" for myself for granted, and never again will I roll my eyes in smug

Old Before My Time

annoyance as an elderly person takes "too long" doing whatever it takes to keep him or her feeling independent.

I haven't just seen my future, I lived and wrestled with it too, and have returned to my fiftysomething world with both an understanding of and appreciation for what it's going to be like when, God willing, I'm a 70- or 80-year-old "single female with one or more chronic diseases, illnesses, or debilitating conditions, who lives alone."

Eileen Beal, MA, is an Ohio-based freelance healthcare writer specializing in geriatric issues.