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—Beverly Golberg



No Prescription Needed

Sometimes the medicine you need doesn't fit in a pill bottle.

It had been a month of loss and tears for me. My husband's Alzheimer's had progressed to the point that I had to place him in a nursing home. But even as the sympathy flowers began to wilt on my dining room table, I had begun to see that, compared to the struggles of other people, I had it pretty good. I was healthy, I had devoted friends, and as I set off to run errands and do a little shopping, I had some extra cash in my pocket.

People seemed to be having trouble everywhere I went that day. The postal clerk was alone and overworked. She apologized for taking so long. "That's okay," I said.

The checker at the department store could not get the computer to print the correct sale price for

my new jacket. As people lined up behind me, she called over the loudspeaker for another checker. No one came. Then, when the computer complied, it charged me twice for the jacket, so she had to call a manager to straighten things out. When no one responded to her first call, she called again.

"I hope that sounded irritated enough but not too much," she said with a wicked grin.

"Just right," I replied, smiling back.

She thanked me for my patience.

"That's okay," I said.

When I left the store with my bag of treasures, all on sale, all purchased with birthday gift money, the sun was finally out after days of rain, hail, thunder, and even some snow. As I walked across the parking lot, I noticed a car of the variety I'm plotting to buy. With no salesman to bother me, I walked around it, studying the seats, the upholstery, the storage areas. Just the thought of driving a brand new vehicle made me smile.

Then, after dumping my bags in the trunk of my old car, I walked across the street toward the pharmacy behind a couple of giggling teenagers running to Taco Bell. They were out-of-towners who came to the coast for spring break. When the stoplight button spoke in a male voice that said, "Wait," they burst out laughing. "It talks!" said the one with the orange T-shirt.

The pharmacy is not such a happy place. Too few workers, too many customers. At least half the time, people coming to pick up pills are told they will have to wait another hour or another day. I have seen senior citizens give back the medication they need when the clerk tells them the price, and no, their insurance does not cover it, or that the co-pay is more than they can afford to pay. I have sat and waited, feeling sick and miserable, watching the minutes tick away. But I was reasonably confident that my thyroid pills would be there. I had learned the secret: call the pharmacy and tell them you want the pills that day, then show up two or three days later. Of course, that doesn't work if you've just come from the doctor with a new prescription.

An angular octogenarian from my church sat frowning on a bench to my left. A young woman in a green army jacket stood at the counter gesturing wildly as she discussed her missing prescription with the pony-tailed clerk. Off to the right, where three chairs sit around a TV screen that runs perpetual pharmacy ads, a white-haired man with swollen ankles groused about how he spent all his time waiting these days. An hour in one doctor's office, another hour in the other doctor's office, and now an hour here at the pharmacy. He was sick of it. The woman next to him, pressing her hand against her

belly as if it hurt badly, nodded, trying to be polite. She was waiting for medicine so that her doctor could give her an injection, she said.

The old man noticed me listening and addressed his comments my way. I nodded sympathetically, hoping a stranger would do the same for my father back in California; he spent plenty of time waiting for doctors and prescriptions, too.

The stylishly dressed woman in front of me, whose white hair showed a few last remnants of blonde, turned to comment on the wait. I was surprised to see an oxygen tube stuck in her nose. Yes, it was going to be a while, I agreed. No, it shouldn't be that way. Oh, I was lucky to be feeling better, even if this stupid long wait had taken the bounce out of my getaway day.

Suddenly, the store manager came up to the woman holding her stomach and whispered something in her ear. She covered her eyes and burst into tears. First, I thought they couldn't provide her medicine. But then, when she exclaimed, "God bless him! He was such a nice man," I was certain someone had died.

Aware that everyone was watching, she explained. A stranger, whom she had been telling how much she would love to have a massage chair like the one she was sitting in, had bought one for

her. "I don't even know his name. I can't believe it," she kept saying, gazing in wonder at the big box the store manager had set beside her.

The gloom of the pharmacy lifted. The old man smiled. Even the lady from church looked almost happy.

I thought about the many things people had done for me lately, including home repairs for which they refused payment, gifts of daffodils and rosemary, and calls from women I barely knew, asking how I was.

The woman with the oxygen tank made it to the counter. She had ordered three prescriptions for "Harry." They had only one ready.

"That's okay. I'll come back in a couple of days," she said.

My thyroid pills were there. Did I need to talk to the pharmacist about my medication? No, I'd been taking them forever. I smiled. The clerk smiled back.

I wished the old man and the young woman good luck and walked out into the sun, swinging my little white pharmacy bag, marveling at the blessings of good health, good friends, and the generosity of strangers.

—Sue Fagalde Lick