

# Becky Speaks . . .

## THE LIGHTER SIDE OF CAREGIVING

### Fear of Falling

When we have small children, we have conflicting emotions about them progressing from crawling to walking. On one hand, we can't wait for them to assert their independence a bit, and for them to feel accomplished at their new found skill. They are so cute when they wobble from side to side and take tiny steps toward their future. On the other hand, we know all too well what is lurking around the corner. It is the skinned knees, and split lips, and stitched brows among numerous other injuries that accompany that independence that makes us worry so much about as parents from day one.

We do our best to hold their hands, shield them from harm, and we safety proof our homes as best we can from potential hazards so they do not trip and catch an 'edge' somewhere. Inevitably though, they fall more than we can count, and we keep J&J in business with first aid creams, sprays and band-aids. Often times we find ourselves in the Emergency Room trying to be strong and brave as our hearts are breaking for our children, and we feel pangs of guilt for not being able to protect them at the moment they needed us.

That vicious cycle perpetuates with every child, every generation, and we continue into our middle-ages worried about our grand children for the same reasons.

Then some of us will hit a point in our lives when we worry about our parent's safety., i.e. their driving ability; their nutrition; their memories; their medications; their steadiness on their feet, etc. At some point many of us will be worrying about our children, our grandchildren, as well as our parents simultaneously ... thus the term **"Sandwich Generation"**. (*I'll take jelly with my peanut butter please!*)

I learned a very important lesson last evening. Do not bite off more than you can chew, it'll choke you! Even if it is only a sandwich!

When you get to a certain age (and it may differ for each of us) you suddenly begin to realize that your ability to maintain your balance is regressing. Your strength and dexterity is also regressing. Your bones become brittle, and your muscles lose their strength and tone unless you continue to work the different muscle groups regularly. That is when you begin to fear your own falling.

All of the "what-ifs" creep into your routine thoughts... *What if I slip on the ice? What if I trip on these twigs? What if I slip on wet leaves? What if I can't climb that step ladder? What if I slip in the tub? What if I slip going down the front steps? What if I trip going up the stairs? What if I break a bone? What if I break my hip?*

These "What-ifs" are as debilitating as the potential injury if not worse. We can prevent ourselves from taking the next step and enjoying life. We can disable ourselves from taking the control and the power back and strengthening our muscles a little bit each day. We can give in to the fear, and let the "What-if bully" paralyze us.

I have decided that I would much rather take control of my mind and body, and work within my own ability to help retain my courage and ensure my own safety to a reasonable degree. I will not dwell on the worst case scenario, so that I can say "I told you so" if a mishap were to occur.

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Yesterday was Election Day in New Jersey, so I had volunteered to take my Mom and my Aunt to the polls to exercise their free will and perform their civic duty. It was also a good excuse for me to get the "Netters" together for conversation. It was a scene.

Some scenes are better off left on the cutting room floor!

In the interim of making that 'date' with the Netters, my daughter Vicki had received a telephone call from someone that she needed to attend a 'viewing' for someone who had been terminally ill and died this weekend. The situation called for both Vicki and her husband Kevin to go to the wake, or she would be going alone if Kevin couldn't get home in time. In either case, they needed someone to watch Sean for a few hours.

I jumped at the chance to spend time with him, and knew that he would be a diversion for the Netters as well. Perhaps he could charm them so that they didn't bicker so much.

Normally, my mother wants to sit in the front seat of the car on outings, but tonight she walked from the front porch to the rear door of the car and stood there. I knew it was because Sean would be back there in his car seat once we picked him up at home. It didn't matter to me either way, so I opened the rear door lock for her to get in.

Next I had to get Sean from his house so that Vicki could leave on time. We drove the mile to their house and pulled into the driveway. The garage door was open for me as Vicki sometime does for me to enter into the kitchen. This time though, she was standing in the garage with Sean's jacket and back pack in hand trying to coax him out from the back seat of their SUV. He was hiding on me. Usually he hides whenever I go for visits, and I have to fuss about finding him to make him laugh. Unfortunately, time being of the essence, and moods being what they were, he was a little disappointed that we couldn't play his game tonight.

You see, he is now tall enough to open doors by himself. He is quite assertive at times, and wants what he wants. When we tried to explain that Mom was going one place and we were going another, he was OK for a moment until he saw the interior light on inside my car, and could see his great-grandmother's white hair. For some reason unknown to us, he has not really warmed up to her. There are days that he is more tolerant than others, but he doesn't really enjoy being around her, and won't kiss her hello or good-bye even when prompted to do so... it is a mystery, but kids are kids.

Finally his mom had to bodily place him into my car seat under protest, and strap him in. He mumbled something about (not wanting to look at her.. and not wanting to ride in the car with her.) We ignored it, and I thought...*Oh boy, you just secured yourself a stint in the GG rag bag!*) She will be ragging on about this for months now.

Next stop for the Granny Wagon: Aunt Maddie's house. Walking in there some days is like stepping through a mine field. Make one wrong move, and BAM! You never know when it will hit you!

She hasn't been out very much lately and it is her choice. She is content to stay home and feels safe and secure there, albeit lonely. I had told her over the weekend that since we were going to vote after I finished work, I would take the sisters out to dinner someplace locally so we didn't have to rush eating at home beforehand. I felt that would ease her loneliness as well as Mom's and it was a convenient night to spend some time with them together.

I had called when I left work, and gave her the plan of action. Drive home; pick up Mom; pick up Sean; pick Aunt Maddie up; Vote; dinner... seemed simple. I also called from the mobile phone when we were leaving Vicki's house to give her the 2 minute warning so that she could get it together.

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When I walked in her door at 5:45 pm Mom and Sean were waiting in the car. She said, “Who *all* is in the car? I saw heads!” [*Verbatim, I am not correcting her grammar!*] So I told her “Mom and Sean.” Then she said with an attitude... “What all got screwed up?” and I looked at her and said, “Nothing. What do you think is screwed up?” She said, “You’re late. It’s almost 6:00 pm and I thought you were coming earlier.” I said, “Look, I called you when I left work, and you KNEW what I had to do... how could I have been any earlier than this?” Her answer, “Nevermind. Forget it. I am getting hungry, and didn’t think we would be going out this late.”

I couldn’t even comment it was so ridiculous. I would have to be “Bewitched” to have done it any faster!

She carried her jacket, picked up her aluminum cane, and handed me her purse which weighed about 6 lbs. I teased her as I usually do about it... “What do you have in here your card kitty?” She just laughed a little and said, “No, my just-in-case drawers!”

By then it was getting dark outside, so I escorted her to the door and helped her get situated inside. She said a *little* “Hello” to both Mom and Sean who was still pouting a bit, and hiding his head behind his back pack.

*And we’re off!*

Within a minute we were at the Club House in the Village and I parked close to the building. Sean remembered when we went there last summer to swim with Larry. It is amazing. He wasn’t even 3 years old yet, but remembers it vividly. He also remembered going there with Mommy and Daddy to get some papers signed. (I had forgotten that!) As we were chatting together and walking a tiny bit ahead of the sisters, I heard them complaining... about what I neither know nor care exactly but the jest of it was that I spoil him. By WHAT.... TALKING TO HIM?! [*Two dumb asses.*]

He went inside with us to the Vote Here sign-in table and in a very short time we were in line to wait for the polling machine. He stood beside me and watched me place my ‘x’ where I wanted to, and then I let him press the red button which submitted my votes. There were several senior citizens there and they were looking at him and talking to him. He was very social at that point, and I was a proud Granny.

Mom went into the booth, followed by Aunt Maddie, and we were done in record time. Now we had to walk back to the car. Normally, I wouldn’t even think about it if I were alone. It is sort of a mechanical thing that we do to get from here... to there. But with my trusty companions this evening, it seemed like it took much longer. In time we were all buckled up and on our way to Taverna Della Pizza.

I had let Sean pick where we were having dinner earlier on the way from his house to pick up Aunt Maddie. He liked Vito he said. Vito helps him make pizza too. I knew that neither of them would care either way, except that Mom probably would like to go someplace where she could have a cocktail, but I was not into a long drawn out dinner tonight. When I pulled up in front, I told them I would let them out there and go park the car with Sean. I specifically asked them to “Be Careful and Watch Your Step, we will meet you inside.”

One loop around the parking lot and I found a parking space that was closer than one of the Handicapped spots. After Sean and I unbelted we walked hand-in-hand across the lot into the back room of the pizzeria. He was telling me all about his missing car. “It might be under the couch where I found the bendable Wiggles.” Doesn’t seem newsworthy, but to Sean it is an important event, so we were discussing it. His mood had lightened entirely, and we were talking about school, new movies, and other things as I sat and read the menu. His selection was simple: Pizza and water with lemon, while I had to decide pasta or a sandwich.

Mom interrupted me several times with trivia about who was who at the polling place. *[whose sister lives where, and who knows who, and what this one said to that one]*. I just smiled and nodded. Aunt Maddie was vying for attention also, and kept asking me “what is good here”, and was she “ever here before?” I could not answer either question. I said, “I don’t really know” to both of them and meanwhile Sean was still talking to me.

Mom said to her sister in a near whisper “He never shuts up.” For a change, her sister didn’t say “What?” She actually heard the remark and laughed. I chose to ignore them both. Then they were rude to the waitress who was new. She looked about 16 and was adorable, but didn’t know the menu by heart, and couldn’t answer their questions off the top of her head. I became embarrassed, and started answering their questions for her.

*[Just order for cryin’ out loud! This is not a five star restaurant! You will eat crap tomorrow anyway!]* Mom was the worst. I ordered for Sean and me, then Aunt Maddie made her selection, Mom was still reading out loud to herself and answering “no.” for each selection. I coached her into ordering linguini with tomato sauce. *Like that is a no-brainer she has survived on pasta for the past 25 years.*

I found myself handing out extra napkins, and wiping the chins of both Sean and Mom. It was so ridiculous.

Sean was well behaved, and we both giggled as we played tic-tac-toe on the back of some extra place mats that I had requested. I let him tell me where to go. He obviously knows the strategy well, because he never let me win one game. Aunt Maddie and Mom were talking to each other about how they would never let kids win, because it doesn’t teach them anything about losing. *[Personally, I think they are both sore losers, and that’s why they would rather beat a child at a silly game than to allow them to feel victorious.]*

Dinner was over, and we ordered coffee and asked for the check. I was getting tired of their nonsense, and Sean and I wanted to go home to play for awhile.

I had to help put three jackets on. I held the left-over bag until we got through the front of the restaurant and then Mom wanted it back. *(Oh God, just get me the hell out of here.)* I could hear the clicking of the aluminum cane behind me, so I knew Auntie Dear wasn’t far behind.

Sean was clutching his 5 matchbox cars in his hands so I asked him to wait until we all walked out through the front lobby together. He stayed right near me. When we got outside and were all gathered on the sidewalk, I pointed toward the direction of the car and asked if they “wanted to walk over since i was so close?” They both were agreeable to that.

Sean and I stepped off the curb, and I was holding his right shoulder with my left hand. I had my car clicker in my right hand. I figured I would get a little head start with him since I had to put him into the car seat. In a few seconds I observed that there was a car down at the end of the aisle, and it was moving slowly. There were other pedestrians crossing back and forth from curb to cars and vice-versa, and there was a car double parked down the row waiting for a spot. It was pretty quiet traffic wise. Mom and Aunt Maddie were just behind me off my right shoulder.

It felt a little weird not holding onto either of them, but they made it in there by themselves, and they knew that I had to take care of Sean. After we took three or four steps, I heard a “THUD” and a collective “gasp!” of on lookers at the same time Mom screamed, “Oh my God, Maddie, Get UP!” I spun around and saw Mom bent over, and Aunt Maddie all twisted on the ground just in front of the curb.

My heart and head pounded in an instant. I was in shock and disbelief of the sight before me. I grabbed Sean by the shoulder and said, “Hurry up; we need to get over there!” and I picked him up in my arms and ran back

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a few feet. When I put him down, the poor kid was in shock too. He was talking to himself softly, and it took awhile for me to understand what he said. It didn't sink in for a long time.

He was standing by my side and I was trying to grab Aunt Maddie under her right arm to lift her but she wouldn't budge. Mom was holding onto her arm. She was moaning. "help me up,... help me up... Oh God. Oh God!" Sean was staring intently at her, and he looked so worried. I made Mom back up and let go of her. I was afraid she would wind up in a heap with her.

She was sitting partially, and her left leg was twisted under her. She couldn't get her feet out from under her. I kept asking her if she hit her head, and finally she said "No." Two men and a lady and I all together, finally got her standing straight up. She was very shaken up, and trembling.

I made her stand there a few seconds to compose herself and take physical inventory of what hurt. Another lady brought over an empty shopping cart for her to hold onto to steady herself. Mom picked up the cane. I grabbed her purse and Sean. He was still mumbling, but looked relieved that she was standing and OK.

Mom walked on one side of the shopping cart, Aunt Maddie had the handle, and another woman we recognized from the bank was guiding it toward the car a few feet away. I held Sean tightly and told him that everything was fine and that it was just a little trip off the curb.

I was trying to make light of the situation for all of them, meanwhile I was destroyed inside. Sean said, "I wish I didn't have to see that. I don't want her to fall down again." So I answered, "Me too. Granny has only two hands, and can't manage the three of you!" I hugged him and thanked him for being so good, as I snapped him into his car seat.

Mom held the front car door open for Aunt Maddie until I got around that side, and I helped her get into the car. Then I had to help Mom get into the car. This was physically and mentally exhausting at this point. As I walked back around to the driver's side, I realized that I was shaking terribly. I took a few deep breaths. My cell phone beeped indicating that there was a new voice mail. I sat in the parking spot for a few minutes stalling for time trying to collect myself. I called the voice mail, snapped my own seat belt, and drove out of the parking lot very slowly.

I asked several times, "What happened? I only turned my back for a second." Neither of them knew how it happened. Aunt Maddie said, "From now on if you have him with you, forget about me! I am not going. I need you to hold onto me."

I answered emphatically... "No problem here. I can't handle the three of you at once and that is obvious now."

Then she looked at Mom and said "See, this is what I am always afraid of... falling and breaking something. This is why I don't want to leave the house!" Even Mom didn't argue at that point because we were all shook up.

Sean volunteered from the back seat... "When we walk Maddie to her house, I'll walk behind her, and you and GG walk next to her." The little man. He could see with wise eyes. He knows that when babies learn to walk they need support, and he was offering the little bit that he could right now.

There was a message on the cell from Kevin that he was home from work and I could either bring Sean home now, or call and he would pick him up. Since we were already in the car and the poor kid had been traumatized enough, I called Kevin and told him we were on the way. When we arrived at his driveway and I unbuckled

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him from his car seat, he was talking up a storm about his matchbox cars again as if nothing else had happened, so I felt relieved. Once we saw Kevin inside the house he asked how Sean was and I said “He is never the problem...” and Kevin smiled as he read between the lines. I gave him a quiet quick briefing as Sean was looking for the orange car under the couch, and asking Daddy to play with him. I kissed each of them good-bye, wishing I could stay there, and apologizing to Sean for not being able to come back to Granny’s House to play for awhile.

He told Kevin, he didn’t want Maddie to fall again in the middle of the street.

I was still shaking when I got back into the car to take the Netters home. I didn’t know if they had spoken much, because there was an icy silence when I started the engine. When we pulled up in front of my aunt’s house, Mom didn’t appear to be moving out of the car. I was not about to drop Aunt Maddie off and leave immediately. I wanted to check her out first and make sure she was calm and OK. I also wanted to make sure she took some Tylenol for the next-day aches that I was sure she would feel.

When I was walking around the car toward their side of the car, I was getting flashbacks: *[What if she had pulled mom down also and one of them hit their head? What if a car had been coming and she fell in front of it?]* The thoughts sent shivers up my spine. Mom got the hint that I was staying awhile, so she got out of the car and assisted from the other side to help Aunt Maddie get her bearings. She had her cane but was really weak. The steps were a challenge for her. She had trouble lifting her feet high enough to clear the steps comfortably. She was in discomfort, and I just was happy that her hips and legs and feet worked properly.

We got into the house and if you could call it a ‘mad dash’... *I guess that was what it was...* she headed straight for the bathroom. *Surprised? Not! (At snail speed)* That was when Mom told me then that she almost came and got me while I was dropping off Sean for the 2 minutes that I was inside. Maddie kept saying, “Oh I hope she is coming right out. I hope she doesn’t stay in there too long. You don’t think she will forget us out here, do you?” to Mom. Mom said, “Relax, she will be right out.” The reply from the front seat was, “Well she better hurry up or I will crap in my pants.” *[It wouldn’t be her first time!]* Mom was opening the car door as I walked back outside unaware that this was the situation.

I got the Tylenol out of the kitchen cabinet for her to take with some water. When she emerged victorious from the bathroom I told her to sit down in the kitchen so I could check her out. She had a swollen right thumb and her nail was chipped and black and blue. (She thinks she put that hand out to save herself.) She had a skinned left knee with blood forming, but luckily it had not torn her nice slacks. Mom went into the bathroom looking for band-aids which did not exist, and brought out what she could find under the sink for first aid. I put some Neosporin on her knee, and we covered it with gauze and tape to keep the ointment off of her pants. I had her move her head and neck for me. She indicated that it hurt. She went down on her left side but twisted back to the right. Ouch!

After a little while of talking, I was fairly convinced that she was fine. I asked if she wanted an Ice Pack for anywhere... and she declined.

Mom and I left and came home. Once we got inside the events must have hit me, and when I went into my room to change my clothes I got extremely nauseous, and threw up my dinner. *Oh well, I thought... I definitely bit off more than I could chew tonight! Never again.*

I needed to talk to someone. I called my brother’s home number. Instinct I guess... I don’t know what I would have done if there were no answer, but there was, and after a few minutes of unloading to Carol, I felt a little bit calmer.

I put my pajamas on, and took two Tylenol PM and said good night to Mom as quickly as possible, and went to bed. *Tomorrow I will take baby steps in taking care of myself so that I don't wind up that immobilized.* I do not want to be afraid of falling.

Epilogue:

I spoke with Vicki at 7:30 am the next morning. Apparently Sean had woken them up at 6:30 am and asked for a cell phone. Kevin asked why he wanted it. Sean said "Because there is only **one Granny**, and she only **has two hands**, and she can't take care of me and GG and Aunt Maddie, so if it ever happens again, I can call Daddy to come and get me."

He felt *abandoned in the street* when we were trying to lift Aunt Maddie up off of the pavement. Oh my God. That poor kid is as traumatized as I am! This will be burnt into our minds forever!

What a nasty image to share. I guess we all got a few bruises tonight!