Jackie O Contraire

It’s Kiki’s first hospital stay -- be warned

February 1, 1996 By Kiki Mason

And so I found myself on a beautiful October afternoon lying in bed gasping for air. I had just gotten back from a vacation, the worst trip to hell I’ve ever had, where it became painfully obvious that I had developed a nasty case of PCP. I knew that I was in trouble when I got off the plane, huffing from the walk up the jetway. Marisa took one look at me and turned to Robert. “You’d better get a wheelchair,” she said quietly.

I tried not to deal with what was happening as I was wheeled through the airport. This couldn’t be my life. It must have been somebody else who worked himself into the ground and forgot to take his Bactrim. My doctor, Joe Sonnabend, called me wanting to know why I wasn’t in his office.

“I can’t move,” I told him, panting.

“I’ll come to you.” When he arrived, Joe told me that I would have to be treated in a hospital. Despite my pathetic state, I began to wail and thrash. You see, I’d never stayed in a hospital -- ever. My grandmother instilled a healthy hatred and distrust of such places in me at an early age, and Grandma had it going on. Finally Joe called my “society” doctor at New York Hospital, Cathy Hart, who insisted that I check in *now*. I just didn’t want to leave my bed, even if I stopped breathing.

But some will to live moved me, or maybe it was just plain old fear. I called David and asked him to come over and help me pack. Marisa agreed to meet us at the emergency room and my restaurateur friend Mark Strausman offered to drive us in his van. What does one pack for Le Hospital? I really had no idea, so I just threw in whatever looked comfortable, toiletries and a bottle of Valium.

Of course it had to be the night of New York City’s big 50th anniversary U.N. dinner, so traffic was a mess. Mark drove like a lunatic, cursing and weaving his way uptown. At 66th Street, he tried to get a cop to open up the Central Park transverse for us. “Roll down your window and look sick,” he commanded. This wasn’t hard, but we still had to go to 86th Street. I checked in to the emergency room at 6:30 p.m.

The glamour quotient quickly picked up; about 10 minutes after I was actually put in a room in the ER, at 9:00 p.m., former President Gerald Ford was wheeled in and the place went crazy. It seems

that bumbling Jerry had been at the big U.N. dinner when he experienced a “back spasm.” Sounded like gas to me. Everyone else in the ER was neglected while a bevy of doctors and nurses followed Jerry up and down the hallway, telling him to “walk it out.” Marisa, who had come back with me, gave me constant updates. “Jerry Ford is walking up and down the hallway with his butt hanging out of a hospital gown, followed by ten Secret Service agents and a Secret Service dyke, plus a valet who is clutching his evening clothes. I just overheard two of the doctors fighting over who would call Betty.”

By this time I had chills so bad that I was rocking the gurney, and no nurse was in sight. “Do you think it would help if I started screaming?” Marisa laughed and said to go ahead. I started to scream, as horribly as I could manage, while Marisa was outside doubled over as a wall of doctors descended on my room. A very officious young intern chastised me. “This is not appropriate behavior,” she said sternly, “and it won’t get you treated any faster.”

Her attitude really pissed me off. “Oh yeah?” I snarled. “Well, I think it’s inappropriate to leave me for two hours because some fascist ex-President can’t fart.” She harrumphed her way out of the room, but two minutes later a nurse was back in.

It turned out my room in Baker 17 (Baker being the AIDS floor) was well worth the wait. Because I was technically a contagion case, I had a huge, glamorous private room. I felt like Jackie O. That night, my hospital room began to fill up with visitors and flowers, flowers, flowers. I was a bit surprised, since I hadn’t called anyone. At midnight a nurse walked in with my friend Vincent, the biggest, blackest, most beautiful queen in America, his arms full of flowers. “I heard that you were sick,” he said, “and I just had to come. I hope it’s not too late.”

I led a rather charmed life in the hospital. Aside from the constant poking and prodding, and being woken up much too early, it was kind of great to actually be able to collapse. Mark sent food from the restaurant every day, so I only had to eat hospital food for breakfast. Friends brought care packages, with columnist Frank DiGiacomo winning the prize. He brought me a Barbie makeup kit, two really fabu kinds of bubble bath, a sponge and some expensive moisturizer. Amazing for a straight man.

Now I suppose you all think that I must have been a difficult patient. *Au contraire.* I was a model of cooperation, doing whatever I was asked to do. I soon had the nursing staff eating out of the palm of my hand. The night nurse walked in while my masseuse was on top of me, kneading away at my naked body. She walked out without a word. The phone rang and rang. I started getting calls from LA. I never realized what a grapevine I’m on.

On Friday I was moved out of my Jackie O suite. I started to get mad, but then I saw the guy waiting for my room. He looked really bad and I realized how good I had it. They tried to put me in a room with this older queen who obviously didn’t want anyone with him. He started saying things to me like, “You’d better get some earplugs, because I keep the TV on all night.” I went out in the hall and found my day nurse, Susanne. “This isn’t gonna work,” I told her. “I can smell a bitter queen from a mile away and this one is like burnt toast.” She found me a new room with a

sweeping view of the East River. Much better. But the weekend started to wear my nerves thin. My IV kept infiltrating, and I was on my sixth line. There was no cable TV in the hospital, a real deprivation for a veteran channel surfer like me. I mean, when you find yourself watching *Ben Hur* all the way through, things are kind of desperate. I missed my own bed more than anything.

I woke up Monday morning to find a bevy of doctors at my bedside. I frowned. “What’s wrong?” they asked. “I want to get out of here today,” I said through clenched teeth. “Find my doctor now.” And so, in a matter of hours, I was free. I crawled into my bed at home and turned on the channel surfer, in pig heaven.

I’m not glad that I went through this, but I did find out some things. I never knew how much people love me. I realized how strong I actually am. Things that seemed awfully important have slipped away. I have a new sense of priorities.

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