Last Laugh: Impossible Dream

The protease side effect no one's talking about

May 1, 1998 By Rueben Acosta

I've been had. I did what the doctors told me -- took my drug cocktail as prescribed, on schedule, with plenty of water. I complied with my strict dosing regimen, laid off recreational drugs, kept doctor appointments, had blood drawn, no unsafe sex ... all to no avail.

Before taking my cocktail, I had a fairly normal life. But the havoc these drugs are wreaking is too much. Because I had reservations about starting drug therapy, I studied all the package inserts, attended treatment conferences, pored over newsletters, but nowhere, not even in the fine print, was I warned that I'd suffer from this.

I'm scared to leave my house. The other day I was window-shopping in Beverly Hills with my children, when suddenly a six-foot javelin appeared in my hand and I was poised to fire it down Rodeo Drive. The kids took cover. People were terrified -- the last thing they want to see in Beverly Hills is a Mexican with a sharp object.

But there's more.

I was on my way to church, a little draggy but dressed in my Sunday best, when my lover pointed to my shirt and gasped. To our mutual shock, I was wearing a bright-yellow tank top, hiking boots and blue stretch pants I wouldn't be caught dead in. Next thing I know, I'm hanging off Mount Everest with ropes dangling from my waist, as my lover calls out from down below, "Honey, *Oprah*'s on -- time to take your cocktail."

And it's not just me. The guys in my support group who are on the cocktail flash their bright Colgate smiles, as if in a constant photo-op. They do group hugs and high-fives every few minutes. We're like one big bowling league.

The simplest things go wrong and weird. No more walks in the park -- I just end up being chased by dogs. A romantic dinner out concludes with food on the floor because I can't resist flinging my plate like a frisbee. I've gone from couch potato to Olympic gold medalist in two short months -- all without the hassle of joining a gym or the cost of a personal trainer.

Then again, if I were to consider training for the decathlon, the backpack full of meds would slow me down. Plus, the last thing I'd want while freestyling in the Olympic pool is a "protease burst,"

like the ones that keep me climbing on and off toilets, not mountains. And all the hugging and high-fives can be pretty painful when you've got peripheral neuropathy.

So I guess I'll let all those other miracle models of medicine show off their energy, athletic prowess and vibrant smiles. Personally, I'm too pooped.

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