

A Little Spice: Reflections on a First Visit After the Lockdown

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This poem details my first visit to the nursing home following the long lockdowns associated with COVID-19. I have a long history with long-term care and have served as an activity director, administrator, marketing director, and social worker in assisted living residences and nursing homes. I conducted my dissertation research with younger men who were living in nursing homes. Over time, I became quite close to the participants, who were younger, socially isolated men with limited relationships, and I would occasionally visit them long after my dissertation was completed. One of these men was “Edgar” (a pseudonym), an unmarried African American man of 50 who had lived in the nursing home for over a decade. During his early adulthood, Edgar had lived in the state prison after being convicted of a series of crimes, including theft and distribution. This left him estranged from much of his family, save for a nephew whom Edgar had taken in following the nephew’s multiple arrests.

Edgar was admitted to the nursing home after being beaten with a brick by this nephew during an argument. This incident caused traumatic brain injury and left Edgar blind in one eye and dependent upon others to bathe, dress, and transfer him. He used a wheelchair but was unable to transfer into it or to propel it forward. Physical rehabilitation had not been successful, and it was expected that Edgar would remain in the nursing home for the remainder of his life. Edgar was a primary focus of my dissertation research. I liked him and respected his humor and resilience. I always looked forward to visiting him.

The lockdowns that abruptly began in the spring of 2020 halted my visits and, because I was neither a family member nor a responsible party, I was cut off from these men and remained in a state of worry for over a year. The disabilities of the residents, the lack of staff, and a primary focus on taking care of the immediate needs of residents during COVID-19 limited telephone conversations and virtual connections. Residents were confined to their rooms and often—as in the case with Edgar—to their beds as the nursing home staff triaged their way through shifts, responding first to the most pressing of emergencies. After the COVID restrictions were relaxed in March of 2021, I took the long drive to the nursing home. This poem depicts my visit with Edgar, who became a focus of my dissertation.

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It is 173 steps to the entrance and uphill.
In my left hand, I carry my car keys. In my right, a brown paper gift bag,
My cell phone intertwined with the handles.

“Been a long time,” says the receptionist, who points the laser at my forehead. “98.5. You’re gonna make it.” She smiles as she peels the green sticker with the handwritten record of date, time, and temperature. *Screened*, it reads. I stick the sticker on my left shoulder and turn to walk

412 steps to the room where Edgar lives.

Today is a celebration because they have let me in to walk down the deserted floors. It smells of antiseptic and bleach.

Months ago, before lockdown, Edgar would be waiting for me, sitting in the entry hall, His large frame testing the wheelchair, commenting on people’s shoes.

“You can tell a lot about a person by what they wear on their feet.”

I haven’t seen Edgar for months.

If I were a relative, I would have been relegated to visits through the glass of the front door. But, I’m not, so I couldn’t, so I didn’t.

If he was sick, I never knew. If he was well, I didn’t know that either. Nobody knew. Edgar doesn’t have a family. Not really. He hasn’t seen them in years and People who haven’t seen people in years were kept, sealed behind the locked entrances and closed doors, as the virus swept through the floors of the nursing home, leaving a coating of fear. It still lingers.

I walk along polished tile, 120 steps straight, turn left, 62 steps; turn left again, 12 steps; knock; wait.

“Come on in, girl!” He waves from his bed, The other hand on the metal triangle that he uses to pull himself up.

He has sock monkey slippers on his feet, which tells you a lot about him. I am not used to seeing him in his bed, surrounded by alarms, buzzers, and bells. He looks smaller, grey, frail.

“Lemme see you!” he requests and I step back, until I am against the wall. I notice that he notices my shoes (red, leather, gold buckles). He notices that I notice that he noticed.

Edgar smiles behind the blue paper mask at the present I gift him, A little bottle of hot sauce. Red, smokey, yellow cap.

“Girl, yes! This food’s so... well, you know. Let me just tuck this away.” He shakes his head. “After the year we’ve had, well... We can all use a little spice.”

I am drawn to the narrative of persons' lives. As a gerontologist, a researcher, and a social worker, I intentionally seek out creative opportunities to share the lived experiences of persons who are often living along the margins of society. Art, photography, and poetry can communicate the emotion of experience, connecting persons through an emotional thread of meaning. This poem is an adaptation of a *villanelle*, a 19-line poem that repeats phrases throughout. This interpretation expresses two *villanelles*—a “before the visit” and a “during.” Though words do not repeat, emotions do, and the work is an effort to make meaning in the midst of the liminal space where we find ourselves—before and after—the pandemic.

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