

## The Winds Howl

As we enter the parking lot I notice the sandwich board sitting on the grassy area by the curb.

*Now Hiring: Registered Practical Nurses, Guest Attendants, Food Service Manager.*

I feel my anxiety level rise. I am already uneasy — this is the second time I have left the house in weeks.

It's a gloomy late March day and I have traveled about half an hour by car to check in on three elderly family members: my dad, who lives in a retirement residence; my mother, who is living in her home alone; and my ex-mother-in-law, also on her own. All are locked down, in quarantine for their own safety.

With me is my darling, steady husband, and our daughter and two-year-old granddaughter whom we have included in our isolation bubble. Having been diagnosed a couple of years ago with a connective tissue disease, our daughter is immunocompromised. She's also a devoted single mom who works from home, so we're doing what we can, helping with shopping and childcare.

With gleeful input from our granddaughter, Ivy, and some fat crayons, we have fashioned three large signs — *We Love You Grandad, Miss You Grandma, and Happy Easter Grandma* — to hold up from a safe distance.

The visits to the grandmas are much the same — dropping groceries on porches, then backing away to sidewalks as tiny women emerge from screened doors; Ivy running circles in their yards while they, eighty-some years her senior, wave furiously from front porches, fighting every urge to throw open their arms to her.

They need to see us, but it's tough to carry on any kind of meaningful conversation from ten feet away. None of them have iPhones or know how to use Skype or Zoom, and they can't learn without us there to teach them. It took a forty-six minute phone call to help my mother send an e-transfer last week.

"Click on *From Chequing*, Mom."

"I told you, I did!"

"Ok, now click on *INTERAC E-transfer*."

"But it says *Add a Payee*."

"Yes, we have to add my email address."

"But I have your email address. So should I send you an email?"

"No, no — hit *SUMBIT*, and you will be able to add my email address under *Contact Method*."

"This is ridiculous."

"Now you see where it says *Security Question? Type in son's name*."

"Whose son?"

I felt like I was in an Abbott and Costello sketch.

“I can’t find the thingy. Hang on,” she said, putting the receiver down. I could hear her huffing and puffing. I bit my tongue and willed myself to be patient. *She’s old. She probably feels embarrassed.*

“Ok, Mom, now type J—a—c—o—b.”

“I can’t find the capital.”

“That’s ok, Mom, just use a small j.”

“I’m smarter than you think I am,” she said, indignant.

“Oh, I think you’re very smart, Mom,” I told her.

“Yes, well **you’re** not as smart as you think you are,” she declared, and I couldn’t contain myself any longer. I burst out laughing, afraid of my mother’s reaction as she can be bullheaded when she feels challenged. But she laughed too, and soon we were both in hysterics. I can’t remember enjoying a conversation with my mom that much in years.

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We arrive at my dad’s residence and approach the front doors, seeing the large red and white signs: STOP! NO VISITORS ALLOWED DURING COVID-19. DESIGNATED ESSENTIAL VISITORS MUST CONTACT THE SITE ADMINISTRATOR OR CHARGE NURSE. My stomach tightens.

We had called ahead and arranged with the nursing staff to wheel my dad to the front lobby window while Ivy holds up her hand-made sign from the vestibule.

I watch as uniformed staff members fitted with gloves, caps, and face masks go about their usual tasks. I have never seen the lobby more packed: residents with walkers, on scooters and in wheelchairs, many wheeling oxygen tanks. *Aching for connection* I think, swallowing hard, my chin trembling.

An unrecognizable attendant, face covered with goggles and transparent shield, wheels my dad toward the window. I hold my breath.

He appears disheveled; his hair unkempt, his nearly blind eyes ringed in red.

*Oh, dad.*

He reaches toward the window, searching for us. We are mere feet away, waving and shouting through the double-paned glass. Then his eyes catch the shape of us and he waves back, before shifting his gaze lower, scanning for Ivy. She presses her pink, mittened hand against the glass and he finds her, holding his shaking, mottled hand against hers. They both laugh while tears stream down my father's face.

Without warning, another visitor arrives carrying a spring planter. We jostle to maintain the required distance in the vestibule, but quickly realize that the visit will have to be cut short.

My husband lifts Ivy into his arms, and he and my daughter make their way out to the parking lot. I knock on the window, waving at my dad.

“We have to go. I love you, Dad,” I shout loudly through the glass, making certain he hears me.  
He is sobbing now.

I turn to leave, tears flooding my face, desperate to wheel him out with me.

“I’m so sorry,” the woman with the planter says.

Back at the car, Ivy cries too, and her mother holds her in the backseat while my husband and I sit in the front, quietly stunned.

As we pass the hiring sign again, I am filled with grief.

*How do I know what kind of care my dad is getting? Is he eating well? Is his room clean?*

Over six hundred nursing and retirement homes in Canada now have Covid-19 outbreaks and are losing staff to illness and fear daily.

*What if he gets sick in there? Who will comfort him? Will I see him again?*

I think about the high death rate of Italy’s elders and the suggestion that its suffering has been largely due to familial culture — young and old living, eating, loving together.

And I think of our seniors, often isolated and living alone, many now locked in fishbowls, also dying because of their way of life. Infected not by family members, but often by underpaid, overworked staff while facility owners continue to profit.

*What have we done?*

I fight the panic, the overwhelming sadness, and breathe.

Ivy falls asleep, and we drive home in silence. The sky is moon grey and the winds howl, causing the trees to sway — pulling and stretching their roots.

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