

“Fried Chicken”

By Barry Bortz

What is a Nursing Home? A group of people sharing space, each on a different journey. Some quietly focused on the comfort of a routine which makes each day strangely reassuring. A timeless process bringing them closer to peace. Others getting through each day with the goal of healing and going back home to their individual life and the hope of tomorrow. Both surrounded by others that I will call “partners”, family, friends and the caregivers who share in this journey. Each partner with their own focus and personal perceptions and many times different than the patients. Caregivers strive to serve making every effort to assist each patient challenged by the unknown events of the day. Families and friends unsure of their role and choosing between protector or participant. Helpless or unable to know what to do or just angry about the disruption of their routine. Routine plays such a role in everyone’s life and becomes so important in our attempts to comfort ourselves and those in pain. How do we balance the needs of so many? The driving forces surrounding each patient and their partners. We all feel the power of change whether it originates from outside or inside. Forces try to define, analyze and balance an equation that has a variable summation. In writing this short story about two patients, fictional but based on real experiences, I hope the reader will for a short time get a glimpse of real life in a Nursing Home and not the stereotypical view we see through the eyes of those with their own agenda. Although one might say that this short story is in itself “my own agenda”, it is with 35 plus years of being a caregiver in a Nursing Home that I submit this story with hopes of presenting a real story with an open agenda.

Lucy was an 88 year old woman, had been married for 50 years and her husband had died six months earlier. She had 3 children and 16 grandchildren. One morning she was working in her garden and suddenly felt a “pop” in her hip. Unable to move she tried to call for help but no one seemed to hear her. Minutes turned into hours and she wondered how she would get help. Later that day, Lucy woke up in a hospital with her daughter by her side. She did not remember the ambulance drive and did not really care. Lucy was glad to have her daughter with her and Dr. Bende, a long time friend, to explain the x-rays and the need for hip surgery. Her only thought was to get back home and resume her private and happy life. If she had to have surgery so be it. She looked up at Dr. Bende and simply said, “Save my life Doc. I want to go home.” Days later, Lucy began to get angry. Angry about the pain, blood tests, x-rays and the loss of her modesty. At this point a loose fitting gown was the least of her problems. She could barely walk, she wasn’t eating and just opening a window for some fresh air was out of the question. As Dr. Bende walked in her room with her daughter, his first words were, “Surgery went great. Your new hip is in place and it’s time to get you out of the hospital.” Wow! She was going home! Her daughter took a deep breath and said, “Mom, we’re taking you to a Nursing Home for a couple of weeks to get you stronger and on your feet.” Lucy, who very rarely used bad language, responded, “What the hell are you talking about?” From there the conversation went downhill but always returned to the same question from her daughter, “Who will take care of you? I work and just can’t.” Later on that day, Lucy talked to a hospital social worker, the nurse who had been caring for her and a lady from the Nursing Home who tried to show Lucy pictures and answer any questions she had about the facility. By the end of the day, without a word, Lucy transferred by an ambulance and found herself at the Nursing Home with a roommate 16 years her junior named Jane.

Jane, a 72 year old widow had no children and lived alone for the last 20 years. She came to the Nursing Home 6 months ago because her neighbor could no longer look after her and it had become difficult for her to do simple things like the dishes or dusting. She just didn't have the strength anymore and called her priest for help. To make a long story short, she went to the Nursing Home with only one desire. To be comfortable and pain free with hospice care and someone to help her get through each day. Jane had cancer. She was not terribly brave but had an acceptance of life and a belief that heaven would be pain free. The staff at the Nursing Home loved her and were strengthened by Jane's patience and her sarcastic sense of humor. Jane, like many of the patients, was surrounded by routine and by familiar faces and the comfort that someone was nearby. She had one complaint and only one. Why couldn't John, her favorite nurse, take care of her every day? John was a big guy with a gentle and caring nature. He and Jane got along great. She would tell him to lose weight and get married. He would tell her that he was waiting for her and he had been on a diet for years. Jane knew he was kidding, not only about waiting for her but there was no way he had been on a diet!

It was eight o'clock in the morning and Lucy had her breakfast and was enjoying the cool breeze coming in her window. "Fresh air", she thought and was sure she smelled her favorite lilacs. She was still grumpy and unhappy about being in a Nursing Home but took comfort in just being able to open up her window. Just then, Chris, the Physical Therapist, walked in to evaluate her for therapy. The first words out of his mouth were, "Let's get you strong enough to go home!" She liked him immediately but this was short lived. Therapy was painful and Chris kept pushing her to stand and walk. To her surprise standing and walking was a job. A job she was determined to be successful at. Later that day her daughter stopped by after work for a short visit. Lucy spent the entire visit complaining about the food, how much pain she was in and how

she was ready to go home. Her daughter left crying and angry. She stopped by the nurse's station and complained about the food. The staff tried to sit her down and talk with her but she shook her head and walked out. Later, the staff sent someone up from the kitchen to talk with Lucy and find out what they could do. Dr. Bende had placed her on a low sodium diet. Lucy wanted salt and couldn't believe the doctor had put her on a low sodium diet. "You want to make me happy?" Lucy asked, "Get me some salt!"

Jane, her roommate of 24 hours, sat up in her chair and said, "You know it's not that the food is so bad, it's just not my cooking!" Then she laughed. "I hated to cook actually, and as long as I'm not making it I will eat just about anything. Some of the meals are really not that bad. The fried chicken is my favorite and tomorrow is fried chicken day!"

Lucy said, "I'm not really interested in food anyway, I just want to go home. You would think my daughter could have taken off of work and took care of me at home." Jane thought for awhile about not having a daughter and really no family to talk with. "You know Lucy", she said, "Your daughter is very cute. What does she do for work?" Lucy responded, "Oh, she's a lawyer. She works very hard and has a successful practice." "You must be very proud of her", said Jane. "Yes", said Lucy, "I am!"

The next day Lucy went to therapy and asked Chris about Jane. Chris just said, "She really is a pill, we all love her." He couldn't say anymore, regulations prevented it and Lucy was not family. Lucy worked hard that day and actually walked about 6 feet. She felt her strength coming back and the pain became less important. That night they ate fried chicken. Lucy looked at Jane and said, "I make better fried chicken than this!" Jane laughed, "I am sure you do, Lucy. You look like a great cook." Lucy laughed as well, "Yes, I am! Say Jane, what did

you do for a living?" Jane responded with a chuckle, "I wrote food commentary for the news gazette." Both Jane and Lucy had a good laugh and Lucy never asked if it were true or not. Lucy just enjoyed her sarcastic wit and their occasional exchanges.

Lucy got up out of her chair and with a cane and began to walk down the hallway. Step after step she felt much better. Behind her she heard Chris say, "You're ready to go home Lucy." She turned to him and smiled. "You know Chris, I didn't like you very much these past few weeks, but today you are my favorite person!" Later that day Lucy's daughter came in as she did every day, "Well mom, you did it! The only thing I can't figure out is how you gained ten pounds if the food was so bad?" "It was the fried chicken", Lucy said.

Jane said goodbye to her roommate. Lucy told Jane she would be back to visit as soon as she got settled in at home. Jane smiled and said, "See you then!"

Time passed and Lucy said to her daughter, "Today is great. I am feeling great and my garden is back in shape. Today I think I will take Jane lunch." Her daughter smiled and said "Are you sure Mom? It has only been five weeks. Are you sure you want to go back?" "Absolutely, I can show everyone how strong I am."

Lucy turned the corner and saw "Big John", the nurse coming out of her old room. "Hey John, guess what I have for Jane?" John shook his head and smiled. "Fried chicken", said Jane, "My fried chicken!" John laughed but seemed saddened all in one moment. "Jane isn't doing so good today but I am sure she will be happy to see you." Lucy walked in the room. It was fried chicken day at the Nursing Home and Jane had not touched anything on her plate. Lucy didn't know what to say. "Oh Jane, I forgot that today was Wednesday. Like a dummy I made you my special recipe." Jane tried to sit up and said, "Got a wing in there? I love wings!"

Lucy had a great visit that day but shortly thereafter she got a call from “Big John”.
“Thought you would like to know that Jane passed on today. She had no family and I told her I would call you.” Lucy sighed for a moment and said, “Today is Wednesday isn’t it?” Both John and Lucy smiled, “Yes, today is fried chicken day.”