

The Yellow House

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The muggy humidity of a late New England summer enveloped us as we stepped onto the driveway of a bright yellow house. Until that moment, we had always been trained with patients coming to us for care. Suddenly, the roles were reversed. The bells of our stethoscopes tapped against our chests as we walked toward the porch, punctuating the vivace tempo of our nervous pulses.

R.'s wife of nearly 70 years, P., greeted us at the screen door and ushered us into their dining room. This was a space that had once borne witness to countless meals of fried clams and pasta. Today, it would serve as our makeshift exam room. P. hollered down the hall, summoning a tired appearing man who tottered into view with a friendly wave. His walker click-clacked over the tiles, depositing him into a chair as a deep groan escaped his lips. A history and physical was completed in quick order, and our note pads filled with furious scribbles. We reassured the couple that we would call with a plan after conferring with our attending. They nodded in response.

As we began packing our supplies, a wayward glance at the glimmering pool in the couple's backyard stopped us in our tracks. P. noticed our hushed exclamations and, with a smile, began telling a story of a bygone summer filled with grandchildren and barbecues.

We were fascinated.

Before we knew it, P. was pointing us toward a quaint sunroom with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Down two carpeted steps was an annex that contained worn recliners covered by a thin layer of dust. Sunlight streamed through tall windows onto walls plastered with photographs of smiling family members. We wondered aloud when railings might be installed. "Hopefully by the fall," R. shouted from the dining room. How wonderful that would be, we agreed. Back at the table, we peeked at a blister pack stuffed with a medley of pills, answering questions to the best of our ability. P.'s penciled scrawl across an accompanying informational sheet proclaimed: "TAKE HALF OF WHITE TABLET." Managing all of that must be confusing, we mused.

"Has the visiting nurse come by? She can teach you about your medications too."

"She was supposed to last week, but we didn't hear anything."

Our notepads gained yet another entry for follow-up.

We listened as R. told us about his love of the Red Sox and NASCAR. We commiserated with him on losing his driver's license and, by extension, his independence after a stroke earlier that year. When he later shared with us how a newfound fear of dying was keeping him up at night, we sat with him in somber empathy, providing validation for his emotions. Ideas swirled in our heads on ways to help. By the time P. hugged us goodbye and we had stepped back onto the driveway, an amber sunset was just dipping below the horizon. Time had slipped away from us, unnoticed.

Nowadays, the incessant cacophony of bumper-to-bumper traffic on tired commutes home from our clerkships elicits a new sentiment in our hearts.

Would we, too, miss this one day?

AUTHOR NOTE:

Richard Wu and Colette Fritsche are co-first authors and contributed equally to this essay.