

Love in the Time of Corona

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My mother's face is pale and distorted. She gazes through the window, frowning at her two daughters standing outside in the sun.

"I did not have a good night," she mouths. We cannot hear her words because staff at the nursing home where she has resided for the past half year won't open the sliding glass window. It's because of the virus, they explain, even though no cases have been reported in her small facility.

So we resort to a cellphone call. Sometimes she hears, usually she can't. She has misplaced her hearing aid batteries, or worse, lost a hearing aid in her bed. So we write on a chalkboard. Sometimes she reads. Other times she seems to drift away.

She does not like being here. She wants to be home with us and live in the bedroom we so lovingly prepared for her. But now she is well past 100, and beyond our care-giving abilities. She cannot rise from her chair without constant assistance. She can hardly walk, even with her walker. If she falls, we have great difficulty lifting her, or we must call EMT for assistance. She is slowly losing control of other abilities but her mind remains sharp. That is why she is so very unhappy.

Before the virus changed so many lives we could visit her every day, usually for several hours. We sat on the bed in her small room, applying crayons to outlines in an adult coloring book. Mother is an artist and her gift is apparent in the strokes she applies. Her colored pages look very different from our attempts. She mingles magenta and lilac and teal and burnt orange in the feathers of a bird, giving it shape and form and substance. If it could fly off the page it would brighten her drab and colorless room.

We had been so engaged in such an enterprise on a warm and sunny afternoon when the staff

arrived and told us we would have to leave, and do so immediately.

It's the virus, they explained. The facility is going on lock-down and all visitors, even close family, are no longer permitted. Only in exceptional circumstances, when a patient's condition deteriorates or becomes terminal, will anyone except staff be permitted inside and then only with proper safeguards – mask, gloves, gowns, temperature checks and answered questions: Have you traveled? Have you been near any known cases of the virus? Are you coughing? Do you feel ill?

It seemed a fitting coda to that day, a Friday the Thirteenth, when we were dismissed so abruptly. Only once have we been permitted back inside her room. She developed an infection, accompanied by labored breathing and spiking blood pressure. The staff took pity on us and permitted us each to don gown and gloves and mask and spend ten minutes sitting in her room at least six feet away. We could not touch her, or give her a hug. It was difficult for her to understand our words through the masks we wore.

So now we go every day. We stand outside her window in the sun or rain, waiting for her to wake from a nap, tapping on the glass until she hears us. We work hard to force a smile from her. Sometimes we succeed. Often we leave feeling empty, frustrated and ashamed because we had to put her there, or in tears because we cannot hold her frail form in our arms.

Driving home, trying not to think of the long hours she must wait before someone brings a dinner she probably won't like, we play a CD – something to brighten the mood or lighten the day.

But too often, only an achingly beautiful and melancholy piece such as Mozart's Ave Verum Corpus can match our mood. And so we cry.