

An Attitude of Gratitude? A Fictitious Short Story

Damn! Why couldn't I ever time it right to get to the chemist? There was just room enough to occupy the last place marked on the floor inside the building. At the counter, a young mum with a fidgeting toddler was being served. The pharmacist was losing his patience trying to explain that the medicine she'd asked for shouldn't be given to children. Why the heck not? 'E'd always had it before...

There was one more customer in between me and the bolshy mum. I noticed him because of the sounds he was making rather than his appearance. He was a rather dishevelled middle-aged man who would hardly have stood out from the background were it not for the grunts that came from behind his mask. The grunts came in little episodes that caused his whole chest to heave upwards with great effort. I felt scared.

At long last, a truce was declared upfront. A card flashed out of the lady's purse. The reader bleeped; a package was passed over, and then she plus her bored young companion waddled out the door. The grunter moved to the front of the queue and handed over a prescription. The lady at the till passed it straight to the pharmacist but then returned to her position behind her screen. She made a point of adjusting her mask to make absolutely sure it fitted tightly all round.

"Excuse me, Sir, we'll have your prescription ready very shortly. But you do seem to have a persistent cough, and you shouldn't really be here in this building. Have you called NHS 111 about it? I'd recommend you take a Covid test."

I could barely make out the man's reply, but it was clear that No, he hadn't rung 111. The lady went backstage again to consult with her boss, clearly aware that someone else had joined the queue inside the building, that two others were waiting outside, and that it had begun to rain. That was when I did a foolish thing. I offered to use my phone to book a test for the grunting gent. The lady at the till asked him to wait under the canopy outside. I followed. Altogether it took the pharmacist ten minutes to get his and my prescription ready,

by which time I'd accessed the NHS website and entered his details. Dennis Jones, aged 53. 17, Wentworth Terrace... A few clicks later I found that, to my amazement, there was a free slot in Illingworth at 12:15. There must have been a cancellation.

“How – er, ackugh- ackugh - ackugh - how'm I gunna get there?” wheezed the man.

“Taxi, I s'pose?” I mumbled, reflecting that it wouldn't be very nice for the cabbie to have germs spread around his car.

Then it dawned on me that he couldn't afford the luxury of waiting for a taxi if he was to meet his appointment. With a grim face I guided Dennis Jones towards my own car. Making sure he sat in the back on the passenger side, and I opened all the windows, set up the Satnav, and off we sped.

About an hour and a half later we returned to Wentworth Terrace. The test centre had been clean, friendly and efficiently organised. Conversation had been sparse; Dennis was a man of few words, and for my part, I didn't want to add to the risks of being infected by encouraging dialogue over the roar of the traffic. However, I did learn that he'd been married, then divorced. He lived alone and was sometimes visited by his 'ex' and by his daughter.

Wentworth Terrace turned out to be one of those streets around church where we don't know a soul. A few houses on the street had gardens but No.17 was a back-to-back house which had a small front yard with a short flagstone path in front of the door. The rest was covered tidily with pea gravel, on which lay four flowerpots containing a few geraniums, marigolds and lobelia, now past their best as Autumn was approaching.

As Dennis shuffled out of the car, the door of No.15 opened, and out walked a younger lady with a little girl in her wake.

“Here, Dennis, someone from the food bank brought this for you,” she said, thrusting a box into his hands. “Now you go and make yourself cosy. You need to keep warm.”

“And make sure you stay indoors until you get your test result,” I added.

Dennis stood in the doorway and turned around. “Thank you. Thank you very much,” he said, and went inside. His voice displayed little emotion. It was his moist eyes that expressed his gratitude.

The woman and I exchanged glances.

“You’ve done a good turn today,” she said.

“Yes. But thank goodness you’re there for him. He needs someone to keep an eye on him,” I replied.

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This morning, two days after meeting Dennis, I received the call I was dreading. I knew as soon as I saw the 0300 number. Two weeks of quarantine now lie ahead. Bang has gone the lovely forest walk I’d planned with my best friend. No more cycling. And as for that trip to Doncaster Zoo that my family has spoken about...forget it.

Stepping outside into the sunshine, I walk up the garden. What a gift it is to enjoy the delicious musty odours of the vegetation as it turns on its final glorious display of browns, purples and oranges! Dennis won’t have enjoyed the berries, the lettuce, cabbage, tomatoes nor the apples that I have here in abundance.

Unlike him, I’ll have no problem affording a generous home delivery package instead of going to the supermarket.

Back indoors, I gaze at my colourful computer screen that brings the outside world straight into my living room. Tonight, I’ll be gazing at the rich mosaic of eight friendly faces that form one of my friendship groups.

I have lots of things that Dennis can’t afford. But there’s something I forgot. SomeOne he probably doesn’t know, to Whom I could introduce him. I think some people at church been praying we could make contact with the folks who live on streets like Wentworth Terrace.

John Hearson