



# The Other Side of the Freeway

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**T**he snow blows across the windshield as I make a sharp right turn. Like many other Milwaukee natives, I commute every day from my comfortable suburban home to work in the city. I watch the neighborhood change from extravagant suburban homes to older smaller homes in the city. Growing up in the hot climate of Pakistan, the notion of snow was romantic and distant. Navigating this unexpected spring snowstorm for a geriatrics home visit was stressful. The patient was described by the referring nurse as a “difficult case,” and her neighborhood as “a little rough.”

I notice a child playing on the street while waiting for his school bus. Neighbors chat casually. An elderly couple, grand like peacocks, relax on the patio. Finally at my destination, I park in front of the window, ensuring full view of my car from inside the patient’s house. I notice Dr Abayo, the Sudanese resident doctor, sitting in his car. He calls me on my cell phone.

“Are you sure we can be here? Is it safe?” and he points at the abandoned building next to our patient’s apartment. I try my best to reassure him and carefully avoid his worried eyes. We meet outside the apartment building. The sidewalk has not been shoveled. We are not able to locate the doorbell, and I call the home.

“Is this Mr Robinson? This is Dr Khan.” The grandson answers the

phone. “I called yesterday about visiting your grandmother. Ha? Where’s your mother? Would you please stand outside your apartment building so that we can come in?” I smile at Dr Abayo and do not share with him my fear that Mr Robinson may not have understood my Pakistani accent. He may not come for us. A few minutes later, we see a young well-built African-American individual waving at us.

Our patient, a frail African American woman, sits in the corner; cigarette burns cover her long dress. Oblivious to the deafening noise of traffic, she slowly lifts her gaze to see us. Noting that we are not important, she quickly looks away. The smell of urine and cigarettes linger in the small square apartment. A bold cockroach hurries from the kitchen to the television. I sit on a low sofa covered with a dark bed sheet. The blue carpet is worn out and the stove unused. I smile and introduce myself as a geriatrician.

“What is that?” she asks.

“Geriatric doctors make sure you stay independent, test your memory...” She cannot hear me. The grandson attempts to translate over the noise of traffic.

“Grandma, he is old folks doctor. Tests the memory....”

My patient waves her cane at me angrily. I move away and allow her to converse quietly with Dr Abayo. I play with my pink stethoscope. The

grandson cannot find her medications and does not know about her health.

Dr Abayo and I step outside to discuss her case. The snow falls heavily. Dr Abayo throws his hands up in the air in frustration. Not sure about her health history, we decide to come back in 2 weeks with the referring nurse and daughter. Back in the house, Dr Abayo explains the plan to Mrs Robinson.

“Madam, I want to be sure that I have explained the plan to you correctly. Please let me know what I have told you,” he says.

There is no answer. The grandson is gone, and the patient is asleep. Hopelessly we start to walk away when we hear her daughter. She apologizes for being late, and we listen to her narrative of the medical history.

Outside, the storm has abated, and the snow covers the trees. A thoughtful neighbor has cleared the sidewalk of snow. Our cars are unharmed, covered with a blanket of fresh snow under the rare Milwaukee sun.

Dr Abayo turns toward me, grinning. “Dr Khan, when I moved here from Sudan a mere 2 weeks ago, I did not expect to face social

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challenges taking care of patients in what I always thought of as the most prosperous country in the world. As you probably noticed, I was not completely comfortable in this high-crime neighborhood, and the visit was less than perfect. However, in the clinic setting we might not have been able to help this patient

or get to know her as a person. I got an important reminder today—it is all about the patient and not about me. Thank you for this experience.” To my surprise, he pulls out a notebook and reads a passage that I recognize as an excerpt from Maya Angelou: “We should all know that diversity makes for a rich tapestry,

and we must understand that all the threads of the tapestry are equal in value no matter what their color.”

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