My Year in Solitary Confinement

“You must get out!” It was the voice of my son, who had for days been calling and suggesting I leave my retirement home because of what he had been hearing of the coronavirus pandemic spreading in nursing homes in Washington State. The alarm in his voice triggered a reaction from me, and I called my sister’s son to ask permission to stay in their isolated farmhouse built just before the Civil War in far eastern North Carolina. My sister’s family used it as a hunting lodge for family and friends during duck season. It was March 11, 2020, so the house was vacant. He graciously gave me permission, and I began to think about leaving the next day.

I hardly slept that night, just thinking about packing and driving 199 miles. I was up early and trying to think of everything I might need and getting it packed and to the car. I had to leave a forwarding address for mail, so I called the post office in the country and rented a post office box, as there was no mailbox at the house. I pulled out around the middle of the day and arrived at “The Hunting House” in late afternoon to find my nephew’s wife cleaning the house. I stayed outside because neither of us owned a mask. She took care of the mousetraps and finished cleaning. Then she the 84 miles back to her home and I unpacked the car and settled in just as the sun was setting. I was back “in the Briar Patch” within two miles of my childhood home! Just after dark, a pickup truck pulled into the yard. It was my 90-year-old cousin welcoming me to “Paradise”.

“Paradise” was farmland with a nearby lake in a sparsely populated county and 8 miles from the waters of the sound. The people made a living by farming, fishing, or crabbing. So much had changed since I grew up there. The farming was no longer done with one plow and a mule. The corn and cotton were no longer picked by hand. The equipment used for farming was huge, and one man could take care of the work in short order.

 The “Hunting House” had been modernized after WWII when my uncle put in a bathroom with running water and electricity. Friends and family who stayed there later had enlarged the bathroom and added a kitchen (also known as an observatory for geese and ducks). My sister and her family had put in central heat and air, a stacked washer and dryer, new refrigerator, stove, and dishwasher. I had seven rooms all to myself! When I moved in, there were no cases of Covid in the county.

I knew one person from my retirement home who had just been hospitalized with covid. This person had attended the same performance I had in the theater before I left. Two days later I learned that I had been exposed to Covid at church by a member of the church staff who caught the virus at a meeting he attended in Philadelphia. I was beginning to feel that I must have a fever. I had not thought to bring my thermometer. I phoned my sister, who had confined herself with her husband just two miles down the road in our family home. I am sure she must have thought, “What kind of neurotic have we taken on?” She called a neighbor who had small children and an extra modern thermometer. It was unlike any that I had seen. I took my temperature and got in touch with my son because the thermometer reading was 105 degrees. He assured me that it could not be correct so luckily my brother- in-law was back at their primary residence and brought me the old timey mercury thermometer they had used years ago when their children were small. I knew that one! I did not have a fever and my anxiety subsided.

Food would be an issue. The closest grocery store was 36 miles away. I did not want to go inside the store. I would have to learn to order online. The house did not have television. It did have an Internet connection that was not always reliable. I had brought my MacBook Air and my cell phone. It took most of a day for me to learn how to order my groceries online. I drove the 36 miles to the store and popped open the trunk of the car. The attendant placed in the bags and slammed the trunk closed. I drove the 36 miles back feeling so proud of myself for having been so smart. I took the bags inside and opened the first one: five pounds of onions, the second one, five pounds of onions, the third, fourth and fifth bags, the same! Thankfully, the sixth bag contained my needed groceries. I was furious. How could they have made this mistake? As my blood pressure rose, I called the store to complain. The attendant who filled my order answered the phone. She said very calmly, “That was what you ordered.” It took me half the afternoon to learn how to find my order. Sure enough, I had put a 5 under that picture of the five- pound bag of onions! I now know that if a mistake can made, I will make it!

I decided to take a walk down the field path to the woods to calm my nerves. As I went outside, I noticed the pretty little yellow airplane circling above. “Isn’t that nice,” I thought, “they are out sightseeing on this beautiful afternoon.” It was not long before that pretty, little yellow plane swooped down, fiercely blowing out chemicals, and heading straight for me! I ran as fast as my 87- year- old legs would carry me for the woods to wait until the spraying of the field was over.

After that day, I was happy to crawl into bed and turn out the light. After a few minutes, I noticed a sweet, strangely unpleasant odor. I thought it must be coming from the air conditioner. Then I felt something crawling in my hair. I gave a mighty swish with my hand and heard something hit the floor. I turned on the light and found a stunned green bug with what looked like a shield on its back. I later learned that it was a soybean stink bug. Wasps were in the house, but for some reason they were sluggish, and I could kill them with the fly swatter that I had left in my car trunk for a year after my move into the retirement home.

It was the third day there. My glasses started to fall off my face. (I put on my glasses when I get up in the morning and do not take them off until I go to bed at night. I have astigmatism so my only pair of glasses was essential.) I looked down. There on the floor was one arm of my glasses! I called my nephew again. He is so kind, answers pronto, and never says, “Why call me, you old fool?” I call him because he always has a solution - - and he did! “There are extra reading glasses in the cabinet.” A quick call to my optometrist, a fourteen- mile ride to the post office to mail the glasses and the broken arm -- the problem is luckily solved. I say luckily because the optometrist office was closing the very next day because of the pandemic. Another day I dropped my sunglasses somewhere on the field path. I walked five miles on those field paths before I found them.

I had been warned by messages from Apple that I needed to upgrade my computer to the next level, Big Sur. I had put it off for months because I knew it would be difficult, as I did not have enough space. I would have to get rid of some things. That process took several days and more than one call to Apple. I was also running out of checks. The closest bank was 36 miles away - in the opposite direction from the grocery store. I would be forced to learn to do my banking online also. (I am not of the generation that can handle computers automatically and I had no grandchildren with me.) Besides my lack of technical knowledge, the Internet was not always reliable. My son was able to get an extender from my phone provider, and that improved the connection of both the phone and the internet. After many agonizing long waits on the telephone to speak to an agent for help, I was finally able to go paperless!

I had not been there only three weeks when we had five inches of rain in a very short time. I was lying down and reading when I heard something hit my pillow. I thought it must be another soybean stink bug, so I hopped up and noticed something jumping up and down under the pillowcase. I put my hand down, and it was wet. As each drop of water hit the satin pillowcase it pounced up. No bug this time - - the roof had started to leak! I moved the bed, put on boots and a raincoat from the camouflaged supply in the closet, and headed to the barn for buckets. I was lucky again, as the rain was just ending. My brother-in-law knew a roofer as well as a repair man to call.

 My closest neighbor was a half mile away. I was alone but never afraid. One night I was a little unsettled when I got up at midnight and noticed a car coming very slowly down the road. On closer observation, I saw a man walking in front of the car, bending down to pick up something, then motioning for the car to move forward. Another man came along with a bucket, and the first man put whatever he had picked up into the bucket. I watched until the car had gone way past the house. I was very curious as to what they could have been doing. I arose early the next morning to look for an answer. I found the road was covered with crawdads that had been run over during the night. Later in the day, I saw something black crawling slowly with a up and down motion going through the grass in the back yard. I went outside and found it to be a crawdad. It never made it to where it was headed. Later in the afternoon the crawdad was upside down and still in the front yard. I had lived in this area, played in the woods near the canals, and I never saw a crawdad in those 23 years. Were they migrating from the ditches to the lake to spawn, or had the rain caused them to move in mass?

I walked the field paths until I was warned to stay away from the woods because of the bears. After that, I walked at sunrise down the highway. I saw more animals killed by cars than I ever saw on the field paths or at the edge of the woods. I saw dead beavers, coyotes, foxes, owls, deer, raccoons, opossums, buzzards, otters, and snakes. Once a bear came out of the woods, stopped in the middle of the road, and looked at me. I stood very still. Then he turned and walked straight ahead for several yards and headed into the cornfield for his breakfast. I scurried on by. Another time, a truck passed me and stopped. A man got out, looked me up and down and asked for the location of the nearest grocery store. I gave him the information and thankfully, he got back in his truck and traveled on. The road seemed more dangerous than the field paths to me.

Hurricane season began. I was still confined. We had a tornado warning. There was one closet in the house. It was under the stairway and seemed the safest place, so I put some quilts on the floor and added a few pillows, a flashlight, and a book. Fortunately, we did not have a tornado or a hurricane.

The house where I was staying had a very steep roof. It was known as the house with the roof that could split a raindrop. There were two bedrooms upstairs: one smaller and one larger with a fireplace lined with set mousetraps. The stairs were unlike any I have seen. They went straight up. Each step was twice as high as a normal step and twice as narrow. The railing went halfway up the steps. After it ended, you had to place your hands on the walls on either side for security. One day I heard a loud beeping from upstairs. I carefully climbed the stairs and opened the door to the small bedroom, from which the beeping noise came. There, sitting on the cedar chest, was an instrument about three feet high, and round with gauges placed at different intervals around it. My thought was: it is too hot in here, and this thing is going to explode! So, I picked the thing up and carried it to the bigger room and the noise quieted down. I thought the safest thing to do would be to take it outside and put it in the yard - if I could make it down the stairs. It was harrowing, but I managed. I put “the thing” on the grass, and all was quiet. Good. Problem solved. I walked back into the house; the beeping was still going on! Up those treacherous steps again and into the little bedroom. I looked up and saw the smoke alarm. It needed a new battery. I did not have a battery nor a ladder, so I called my nephew who was 87 miles away. Big mistake! He called my sister and her husband who came right away. My sister is 85 and her husband is 89 and has had unreliable knees for some time. Nothing could dissuade them from climbing those stairs. Then my sister’s husband called for a chair to stand on! My heart was in my throat, but he was able to stand on the chair and remove the battery. I did not breathe again until we were all safely on the first floor. I still had to carry that “thing” back up the steps. At that point my sister educated me. The “thing” was a telescope.

I had grown up in the country, so I knew about mice. I was just not prepared for the number that wanted to live in the house with me when the cold weather arrived. There were plenty of mousetraps by the fireplace upstairs. I had caught several mice up there. I did not know they would come downstairs also. I smelled something in the kitchen that stank like dead mouse. Each day the smell was worse. I searched everywhere! When I pulled out the stove out from the wall, I noticed a tail hanging out from the back of the bottom drawer. The offending mouse had gotten stuck in a hole. I must have pulled out the bottom drawer and then closed it on him. He had been caught! I added traps in the kitchen. I had brought my corn bags with me and had them on the empty bed in my bedroom, which I used as a closet. I picked up one to heat in the microwave. The corn fell out of a tiny, chewed hole. I added a trap to the downstairs bedroom and started storing my corn bags in an ice chest.

It turned out to be a wonderful year. I was able to enjoy nature, to take long walks by myself and with my sister. We would drive separate cars to a destination and stroll on opposite sides of the road or paths. I could see for miles and watch the sun rise and set. There was time for reading books, and devotionals. My church offered centering prayer on Zoom. The art teacher from the retirement home gave his art classes on Zoom and there was lots of time for learning and drawing. My cousin brought the family genealogy of my grandmother’s family. I did not have a copier, so I typed it and printed copies for the family on the printer my nephew and his wife had loaned me. I also typed and copied folklife stories of the people who had made crab pots, trapped, crabbed, guided hunters, and picked geese and ducks in years gone by.

My sister and I went kayaking on the lake and in the canals. We tried fishing from the kayak. We did not catch anything. I had the pleasure of watching family and friends gather at the barns and cook breakfast out there after a hunt. I watched my brother-in-law build a blind. I photographed the tractor taking it to the field. Two swans and some geese were killed from that blind. The last two weeks of the duck season finally brought the ducks. I watched the hunters gather before they went out to hunt and then return happily with their ducks. I watched as they added a shed to the barn.

Old friends and family telephoned, and there was time for long conversations. I had my computer as well as a radio on loan from the family for news. My sister dug a garden plot at the back steps. I planted grape tomatoes, lettuce, radishes, and Mexican sunflowers that brought many butterflies and an occasional hummingbird. On different occasions she brought me: fresh asparagus and tomatoes from her garden, a fried shrimp dinner, a quail dinner, the best blueberry pie I ever tasted. Her homemade crust was even better than the filling. I would have been happy with just that crust! I was given goose breasts and duck breasts and a recipe that started with a hot iron frying pan and a hot oven. The kitchen was filled with smoke, but the house did not catch on fire andhe results were delicious! My cousin brought softshell crab and trout.

In January of 2021, the Health Department offered the Moderna vaccine. I had planned to return to the retirement home for my Covid vaccinations, but our health department offered them first. By March the residents had finally been able to get their vaccines, and it seemed like a safe time to return to the big city. I had thought I would be away for several weeks. I was gone for a year and two days stay in “Paradise”.