"Shortcuts" by S. Mullikin

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I work in the Infirmary at a Men's prison, caring for the disabled, the sick, and the dying. I'm an inmate as well, new to the job, and still learning the ropes. We do things like clean rooms and fold laundry, help write letters and assist with using the phone. For those who're unable, we help with bathing, going to the bathroom, and we clean up when there are accidents. Often, though, I feel it's our company and companionship that has the greatest impact.

When I first started, there was one man everyone warned me about. He had been a near-quadriplegic in prison for over thirty years. They said he was angry, and mean, and above all, difficult. I decided right away to make a special effort with him, hoping to win him over.

One of my first lessons was that he liked things to be done a certain way. Any failure to follow his explicit instructions was met with a terrible anger. He's yelled at me dozens of times in the few months that I've been working with him. Sometimes they are short barks of correction, and at other times he yells with such force it shakes his whole body. I try to take it all in stride and not let anything he says get to me.

Of all the things I've learned to do for him, its in preparing his meals that I've seemed to have made the best impression. I do everything he says, exactly the way he says to do it, and always where he can watch me.

He's so particular about how the ingredients are handled, measured, added, and mixed. It's like learning a ritual where each step is precisely defined. After nearly eight weeks of cooking for him, I was beginning to feel some confidence.

Then one day while we were in the middle of making a meal, we were interrupted by the nurses. I had already crushed up the ramen really small and added all the other ingredients and spices, just the way he liked it. Thinking I was helping, I continued making the food as I had learned while he was distracted. I added twenty ounces of water and began stirring in wide, sweeping circles, scraping the sides as I went.

When the nurses left he saw that I had continued on without him and began to yell, claiming I had added way too much water. I tried to explain that it was the same amount we always did, but he wouldn't hear any of it. Still yelling and calling me names, he sent me to the microwave out in the hall to heat it up. According to him it was ruined but he couldn't afford to waste it.

I walked out of the room infected by his anger. I knew I had done it right and didn't understand why he was so upset. He often snapped at me, but rarely like this. While the food was warming I tried to imagine what it was I had done and I realized it was because I hadn't waited. In my effort to be efficient and get things done, I had missed the point of the ritual. Allowing him to be in charge, waiting for him to give each instruction, gave

him some sense of control in his life. For more than thirty years he's been locked behind bars, trapped in a broken body, depending on everyone for everything. I try to remember that now. Everytime I'm tempted to just do something in order to get it done, I slow myself down, and give him the benefit of those few minutes.