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Walking with Dementia

by Doug Dauphinee

The silver elevator doors opened. Nurse Claire stretched her neck out over the top of the brown counter at the nursing station. "Oh good, Doug, room 310, their call bell isn't working," she said. I nodded and headed down the crowded hall.

It was a few minutes before five, the halls of the Pines at Bristol Nursing Center filled with residents eager to go to the dining room. Wheelchairs lined the hall; residents who could walk occupied the few chairs available. They waited for the first resident to enter the dining room, then in a chaotic crawl, the others followed.

Before I made it to room 310, after avoiding a few wheelchairs like an obstacle course, I was stopped by one of the residents. She didn't have to speak; it was the huge grin on her face as she saw me walking toward her that halted me. I smiled at her. I looked into her gray eyes and wondered if today there was someone behind them. "Where do I go?" she asked, the smile never left her face.

"It's time to eat Mary," I said, "Why don't you head to the dining room?"

"You got it."

"All right enjoy your meal."

"Where do I go?" She asked me, with the same tone and smile as the first inquiry.

Mary, small and fragile, sat in her wheelchair, one leg crossed over the knee. She had white hair with gray roots and wrinkly pale skin. She wore a teal blouse, brown sweater, matching brown slacks, and black shoes. We talked – always returning to the original question: "Where do I go?" We were trapped, both of us caught in the limitations of her short term memory. Even though I struggle with this engrained rule of listening to my elders, I walked away and wondered if our conversation was the highlight of her day. More than likely, she forgot our conversation and maybe even me only minutes after I left her. She probably asked the next person to pass her in the hallway: "Where do I go?"

Mary suffers from dementia. Dementia is the impairment of one's intellect that disables the ability to function normally. There are many forms of dementia; Alzheimer's being the most common. The disease is caused by plaques and tangles that smother the brain and restrict the ability of the neurons to fire properly which inhibits messages to be received and delivered by the brain. Strokes, alcoholism, brain injury, and neurological disease also can cause dementia.

I entered room 310 and fixed the broken call bell. After six years on the job, the repairs have become repetitious. I walked to the dining room, to see if Mary had made it there. The third floor walls were painted green, a color that reminds me of nausea. The hall was clear, except for a woman who lay in a Geri recliner. She swatted at the air and mumbled to herself. Her mind had betrayed her, trapping her in a dream world. My stomach tightened because even after working six years

in the nursing home, I feared that someday I too would lose control of my mind and body, that I too would be lost, that I too would ask, over and over, "Where do I go?"

The symptoms of dementia vary by the individual and also by the form of dementia. The early signs of the disease are forgetting routes that are frequently traveled, forgetting personal events that happened in the recent past, and having difficulty doing activities that once came easily, just to name a few. But the difficult part in diagnosing dementia is that forgetfulness *is* a normal part of aging. The difference is when this loss of memory alters the individuals daily routines and lifestyle, dementia may be to blame.

The dining room was full of residents who ate their meals and conversed with each other, the ones who *could* talk at least. At the table to the left of the room, which is known as the "feed table", an aid sat in-between two residents. The two elderly ladies had their eyes closed and sat motionless. I stood in the doorway for a moment, as I tend to do, and watched. The spoon hit their lips, their mouths opened and the puréed food slid down their throats. It was like watching a baby being fed, except this baby was much larger with wrinkled skin and white hair. A few years before, they could have been feeding themselves. Now their disease ridden brains can't send the messages through their body directing them to do a primitive task such as eating.

Mary was nowhere to be found.

Most forms of dementia are non-reversible or degenerative. There are many ways to go about treating dementia such as drugs like Aricept, which does not stop the disease but slows it down and helps control the symptoms. Many studies show that mental exercises, like word games and puzzles, can improve cognitive function and help strengthen the healthy parts of the brain, which can slow down the dementia onset. Exercise is also important, because it strengthens the flow of blood to the brain allowing the brain to function more efficiently. Anything that can be done to limit the episodes of confusion can positively impact the individual with dementia.

I turned away from the dining room and back towards the green hall. I heard the faint sound of a piano. Following the sound, I reached the lounge door which was a few yards down. The almond cream colored door was slightly ajar, so I slid my fingers in the crack and slowly pushed it open. There was Mary, sitting in her wheelchair with one leg crossed over the knee, playing *You Are My Sunshine* on the piano with one hand. She didn't notice I had entered the room. I walked over to her slowly, amazed that someone as forgetful as her could be playing this. It wasn't a Beethoven piece or anything like that, but it was beautiful.

She had control over her body and mind for that moment. Her grace faded my fear of losing control, of forgetting who I am. I am young and have become informed about dementia. I have control over my mind, and know how to do everything possible to prevent it.

It is unpreventable.

I watched her for a moment, until she felt my presence and looked over at me. "You are my sunshine," she said, her familiar grin making it impossible for me not to return the smile.

“No, you are my sunshine,” I replied.

“You got it.”

“It’s time for dinner, Mary.”

“Where do I go?”

Doug Dauphinee, senior at Central Connecticut State University, is working on his degree in criminology. In his free time, Doug enjoys writing both fiction/non-fiction, reading, working out, and playing softball. He lives in Bristol, CT, with his parents and sister.

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