

The Present

I'm leaning up against a wall in a nursing home, charting, as a chaplain, near a patient's room. *Thinner More gaunt Less Able to Find Words*. Everyone's together on one floor, no separation of Alzheimers patients from others. I work with lots of Alzheimers. Most people have given up reaching them.

A clicking sound in the hallway: a woman, maybe all of seventy pounds, working hard, propelling the shortest wheelchair I have ever seen with her feet.

Talking to herself, a sign I recognize. She's not my patient, yet, and the sight of her stirs even more empathy in me. She seems almost familiar, or maybe I'm just taking to her already.

When she passes in front of me, I say, "Hi," and she looks up. I'm talking to her like a person, not a clinician. "How you doing?"

"Fine," she says with emphasis. Her neck curves like a dove, with nicely done white hair, and her yellow sleeping gown has peach-colored roses embroidered along the neckline. "I'm Emily."

"I'm Jef." I slide down the wall and lean over so we can smile at each other. Give her my hand and hold her small dry one.

She leans closer, her blue eyes clear, wholly present. "I knew you, when you were a little boy." Her voice very sure.

"Yeah?" I straighten some, and laugh a little. Hold her hand tight. "So -- how'd I turn out?"

She looks me over carefully and says, "You're a damn fine-looking man."

"Well, I thank you, Emily." And let go of her.

She nods at me, her face calm with knowing, her feet already tapping. She steers her tiny chair down the brown carpeted hall, around a lilac wallpapered corner, then vanishes.

I tell you, I keep thinking about Emily. She seemed – hard to explain it – just fine, in that moment. And so was I. Peaceful, clear, truly and completely here.