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Feeling Helpless in Hospitals

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Remember the last time you were a patient in a hospital? What did you see and hear? What did you smell? How did you feel? Who was around and who was missing? Think about how confusing and disruptive your hospital stay was for you. Now imagine that you have a disease or disorder that impairs your cognitive functioning. How much more threatening and frightening would that experience have been?

You are surrounded by unfamiliar people. Most everyone you encounter is someone you have never seen before: nurses, doctors, other people being treated -- they all mix into a sea of strange faces.

You are being asked to do things you don't normally do: recount your family medical history, list your medications, hold still while something pinches you, put on a robe that fastens in the back where you can't reach. You're besieged by people asking you to do unfamiliar things.

Hospitals are unfamiliar places full of unfamiliar people doing unfamiliar things. And all this is happening when you are ill enough to require acute care.

The story below is based on every day occurrences in hospitals throughout the nation and around the world.

French Toast

The beeping. The constant beeping. And they keep talking in the hallway. But they never answer and they never come in. They can hear me. I know they can hear me. They just don't answer. And they never come in.

Just when I get to sleep, here she is again. She's the one who did it before. She doesn't listen. She's no good.

I don't like eggs. They keep bringing me eggs. They get me up and push me down. Tugging and pulling. They don't listen when I tell them I'm not ready. No one tells me who they are or what they're doing. They don't give me any warning. I just want to go home. And I tell them, and I tell them, and they just don't listen.

"I want to go home!"

"That's all she says," instructs one aide to another. Carol has been on the night shift and has heard Miriam's repeated requests to go home. As Edward moves in to greet Miriam, Carol warns: "Don't bother, it ain't going to do you no good."

Edward is a tall slender man, well over six foot two. He has a scruffy graying beard and warm eyes slightly hidden by his dark rimmed glasses.

Edward positions his hand up next to his face and pauses by Miriam's toes. "Good Morning!" His greeting is clear and kind. There is a slight playful bounce in his words.

Miriam stares at him, or past him. In the moment, it's hard to tell. Edward waits until he knows that Miriam truly sees him.

With his hand still perched next to his face, his words are welcoming: "Hi, I'm Eddie." Slowly his hand moves outward extending to a handshake. Miriam reaches up for his hand. She is a Southern lady and is true to return a cordial greeting.

Carol rustles a plastic bag dumping in soiled linens, as she warns: "Careful, she swung at Joe last night."

Eddie didn't hear or wasn't heeding the warning. Stepping closer and moving slightly off to the side, he took Miriam's delicate 89-year-old hand gently, ensuring that his palm was supportively positioned under hers. He squatted down beside her, looking her in her eyes and smiling.

"Are you my Theodore?" She asks wistfully.

"No ma'am. I'm Eddy. And we get to spend some time together this morning."

"I want to go home." This wasn't a demand. It was a plea, a desperate plea.

"Oh Lord, here we go," exclaims Carol as she drags a chair from one corner of the room to another making a dull rumbling noise along its entire journey.

Eddie kept his gaze on the frightened and sad eyes of his new friend. "You want to go home." His words carried compassion and understanding.

"I want to go home." She repeated.

"I want to get you home. And to get you home, we need to get you well."

"Who are you?"

"Hi! I'm Eddie. See..." He said pointing to his name tag that featured his picture.

"You look like Theodore."

"I look like Theodore? Tell me about Theodore."

"That's my grandson. He doesn't come to visit."

"Theodore is her husband. And he was here last night." Carol corrected.

Not breaking his connection with Miriam, Eddie said gently: "I'm sorry he doesn't come to visit. But I sure am glad I'm here with you this morning. You have the most beautiful silver hair. I'm getting some myself. See..." he playfully pulled at the gray hairs near his temples.

This whole time, Edward was squatting down by Miriam's side holding her hand, with her hand on top which helped give her a sense of control of their interaction.

Miriam gave Eddie a slight smile which faded quickly. Then she whispered to him: "I want to go home."

"You want to go home." His words were calm and comforting. Then with a little smile he moved a touch closer and spoke as if it was a secret just for her: "I do too."

Miriam reached up and gently pulled at the gray hairs by Eddie's temple.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get you sitting up." He used a forward motion visually indicating for her to sit up. "Let's get you some breakfast, and get you well enough so you can go home."

"I don't like eggs."

"I don't like eggs either. How about some cereal or something else?"

Miriam didn't answer.

"You know, one of my favorite breakfasts is French toast." He paused, waiting for a reaction rather than an answer.

"I love French Toast."

"French toast it is! You sit tight. I'm going to be right back with your French toast."

"You're a nice boy. You look like my Teddy."

"I want to hear all about Teddy when I get back."

Edward went over to the whiteboard and erased Carol's name. Next to the area that said "Nurse's Aide" he wrote "Eddie." Underneath it he wrote "French Toast!" And added a smiley face.

Picking up the tray of scramble eggs, he said: "Give me two minutes. And I'll be right back." He smiled and waved at Miriam as she tracked his every movement.

Carol had stopped moving things around the room and had watched the end of this interaction. Slightly stunned, as Edward passed her on the way out, Carol asked: "That's the most I've heard her say in two days. How did you do that?"

Walking with her out into the hall, Eddie responded: "she doesn't like eggs." And then added, "you might want to ask her about Teddy. I understand he's a nice boy. I'll be back in two minutes with her French toast."