

Peggy Wallis
February 2019

Disappointment

February is a bleak month; too far from spring to feel hopeful, and long past the excitement of the holidays. Streets have an abandoned look, as many living things take refuge under the cold earth. On a frigid afternoon, with snowflakes swirling around me, I carefully park my car next to a large patch of dirty ice and walk to the front door of an Assisted Living facility. Bright lights inside give an appearance of warmth.

The woman at the front desk gives me a quizzical look and a smile. "I'm with the Ombudsman's office," I tell her. Relaxing a bit she watches me enter and turn down the first hallway. Resident's rooms are lined up on both sides with a name on each door. I am looking for Janet.

Memory care, Janet's new home, is at the back end of the building, and a code is needed to enter and leave. I punch it in 3 times before I get it right. Once I enter, a large room with couches and overstuffed chairs is visible and I hear music.

Some of the residents are seated there, others sit in wheelchairs and some are making their way around the room with walkers. It's Happy Hour and a bar is set up with wine and snacks.

Walking to the end of the hall I find Janet's room and knock, requesting permission to enter. The room is empty but I find her outside and I walk toward her. She is a small and athletic looking woman wearing a wool hat and Irish fisherman's sweater. We sit down in a quiet place and she tells me, "Thank you for coming to talk to me. I don't know what to do. I'm 76 years old and my son thinks I'm losing it. I've lived in Aspen for many years and I still hike, run, and ski. My memory is bad, I admit it, but I take care of

myself and my home is immaculate. My son thought I should move into a retirement community and promised that I would be able to run and hike when I got here. But he took my phone and left me here, I think it was 2 weeks ago, and hasn't spoken to me since. There is no way to run or hike, as I can't get out. This is my worst nightmare and I think I'm losing my mind. I hid my I-pad so that I can e-mail people. If I need to be in a facility, why can't it be in Aspen? I need to go home. Can you help me." A big yellow lab lies at her feet and Janet worries that he isn't getting enough exercise. We discuss lawyers, powers of attorney, and other rights that she has. Asking permission to speak to the facility's director for more information, I leave and tell Janet that I will get back to her tomorrow. She has no trouble understanding what I am telling her.

The director is happy to talk to me, and agrees that Janet does not seem to need memory care. She has reached out to the family but they have not responded to her attempts to communicate. A cognitive evaluation is set up for next week. I ask if a pre-placement evaluation was completed before she entered the facility to see what level of care was appropriate for her, but am told that she was brought in heavily sedated. It is only recently that the sedative has worn off and an assessment can be done. My stomach clenches and I feel my heart breaking as I recall Janet's anxiety and confusion as she tried to remember how long she had been here.

Part of me wants to beat Janet's son over the head and scream at him, while another part of me wants to take Janet and her dog home and go for a hike. But I am a resident advocate and my responsibility is to advocate for and empower Janet to speak for herself. I cannot imagine what it must be like to be sedated and wake up in a locked facility. I cannot imagine what it must be like to feel so betrayed by family; how disappointed she must be. I've spent my working life advocating for children, and working with child protective services. Advocating feels right to me, and it's time to move on to another vulnerable population.

As I leave the building and walk toward my car I can feel the sad gray sky slipping lower and lower until it presses against my head. February is a bleak month. But as I walk I remember what Mother Teresa once said. "No matter how we have lived we should die like angels." May it be so.

Peggy Wallis

February, 2019