

## Essay/Personal Reflection

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## Introduction

I pull up in the chilled air of my car. I step out; the steamy wetness fogs my glasses.

Emma is sitting in a wooden rocking chair on the porch of her one-room cottage, fanning mosquitoes and time. She’s small of frame—“more flesh than fat,” she says—with deeply creased wrinkles and a continual squint. Her skin is leathery from the years, with ropes of veins on knobby hands. She wears a wig to cover sparse hair, but twigs of gray peek from the sides. Rivulets of sweat trail down her temples onto her cheeks.

“How are you doing Miss Emma?”

“I’m doin’ just fine, doctor.” She mops her brow with a kerchief. “It sure is a sinner’s heat today; I’m glad I’m goin’ to heaven.” She smiles a wide, toothy smile.

Emma won’t come to clinic. “Too far,” she says. “You wanna see me, you gotta come to me.” And at 88 years of age, her demands are earned, and respected.

I sit down on the step. Emma rumples her face. “Doctor, I ain’t goin’ back to the hospital.”

“You don’t have to go to the hospital, I’m just here to see how you’re doing.” Droplets of sweat fall from my nose, spotting my shirt like polka dots. “Miss Emma, it’s so darn hot I can barely think; the heat cuts my thoughts to skin and bones.”

“I know whatcha mean, doctor. And there ain’t no breezes, and if there are, they got holes in ‘em, cause I don’t feel nothin’.” She gives a long, throaty cough, bends forward to catch her breath, and with neck veins bulging, spits a glob of blood-flecked phlegm onto the dusty ground. “It’s like somebody’s holdin’ a magnifyin’ lens over the sun.”

“It sure is,” I say.

“Doctor, before you git started, I know I got the cancer in my lungs, and I already told that other doctor I’m dyin’ at home; I was born here, and I’m dyin’ here.”

“She told me Miss Emma. I want you to stay at home, too, and I’ll do all that I can to help you, but I worry about you being alone. I know that church family and neighbors keep a watch on you...”

“Uh huh, two of ‘em just left, maybe 10, 20 minutes past, they brought me the food.” She points to a small table beside her chair; it’s covered with baked beans, fried chicken, blueberry pie, and iced tea. There’s also a cell phone, a battery-powered radio, and a Bible. “The pastor, he comes by every Monday, too, and the home nurses, they just started comin’.”

“But I’d feel better if you had someone you could call 24 hours a day, someone who’d come to your house if you needed them. The home nurses agree. A wonderful program that provides that service is hosp...”

“Doctor, don’t be mentionin’ hospice like the other doctor did. Donelle, he’s a black man used to live here in the holler, well, he got the cancer. His doctor gave him hospice. His wife says they poisoned him with morphine, took his life before his time. I ain’t doin’ that.”

“Hospice does use morphine to help pain,” I say, “but they don’t poison people. I think it was Donelle’s cancer that took his life, not the morphine.”

“Well, Donelle’s wife says it was the morphine, she says they started it, and he passed in two days.”

“Morphine is frequently used near the end of someone’s life, because that’s when they usually have the most pain, so while it may look like morphine took Donelle’s life, it was probably the cancer.”

“Doctor, I think hospice is just for white people, not black people.”

“It’s for everyone,” I say.

“Doctor, you ever hear of black folk havin’ to sit in the back of the bus? Or cross burnins’ and hangins’ by the KKK? Or Tuskegee?”

“I have, Miss Emma.”

“Then you know,” she says.

I felt schooled—and embarrassed. Emma had lived the tragic narrative of segregation, bigotry, and racial violence; I hadn’t. She’d seen the executions and scorching flames of Ku Klux Klan raiders; I hadn’t.

“Time done had its say, but ain’t much changed; people still ain’t treated the same. And I’m just tellin’ the truth. So I’m gonna let God decide when I pass, not hospice.”

Then she changes the subject, her teaching done. “Doctor, you hear that?”

“I do.”

“It’s the sound of August, the katydids, it means fall will be headin’ here soon. I’m ready for that, this August heat feels like a wool blanket; the hot mornins’ just pass into hotter days.”

I decide to forgo further discussion of hospice; it’s not the time. Besides, she’s already made her decision. “Okay, Miss Emma, we’ll continue with home care, but remember, if you call the nurses with an emergency, they’ll tell you to go to the hospital...”

“The fireman down the road, he’s a black man, he knows me, he won’t take me to the hospital.”

“If you’d like, I can speak with him so he understands...”

“Ain’t those katydids full of noise?”

I relent. “They sure are.”

“Sometimes they’re so noisy they hurt my ears.”

“They can get loud,” I say.

“Doctor, you gonna check my sugar?”

“I am, Miss Emma.” I prick her finger. “153.”

“Praise the Lord,” she says.

“Is it okay if I check your heart and lungs, too?” She nods.

I bend and listen to the slap of her heart and the pant of her lungs. “You’ve got a little bit of wheezing, but not bad. Just be sure you use your inhaler.” I lean to give her a hug; she grabs my hand, pulls me close, and gives me a kiss on the cheek. I smile. I’m sweat wet, my light blue shirt now dark blue.

“Okay Miss Emma, you’re doing pretty good, I’ll see you in eight weeks. You call me if you need anything before then; you have my cell phone number.”

“I sure will. And doctor, before you go, can you hand me my Bible and dial the radio to 88.6? I need to hear me some preachin’, and Pastor Jones—he’s the radio pastor—he can preach the clouds right outta the sky.”