

# Tea and Daisies

Category: Stories

written by Amy Cooper Rodriguez | November 26, 2010

**Amy Cooper Rodriguez**

It's been almost ten years since Esther died, and I still think of her almost every day. I was her physical therapist at a rehabilitation hospital. My patients had many different diagnoses—head injury, stroke, multiple sclerosis, hip or knee replacements. I was in my early twenties. I thought that if I tried hard enough, I could help everyone. And often, I could.

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"What are you going to do to me?" Esther asked, looking up from her hospital chair.

I laughed and pulled up a chair. "I'm Amy, your physical therapist. I'm not going to do anything to you. I'm here to help you get back to doing things you miss."

Esther smoothed her long skirt over her plump legs, then pushed her glasses up on her nose. "I just want to go home and be able to do things for myself."

"All right. We'll work together to get you stronger and back home," I said confidently.

Nobody could tell why Esther felt weak. Doctors said maybe it was old age (she was eighty), arthritis or a vitamin deficiency. She had to use her hands to lift her legs in and out of bed. It took her five tries to get up out of her chair.

Over the next two weeks, I worked with Esther every day. A former English teacher, she believed she had a reputation to maintain. Before we left for the gym, she'd brush her soft, gray curls and freshen up her lipstick. She exercised wearing a dress, nylons and shoes with little heels.

Esther was private and proud, and only slowly revealed herself. She grew daisies, drank Earl Grey tea and loved a good crossword puzzle. I felt I knew her. I come from a long line of reticent Yankees, including my adored grandmother. I was used to talking about tea and daisies instead of feelings. Even at twenty-five, I connected with Esther more than I did with most people my age.

"What's happening with that boyfriend of yours? How's your crazy landlord?" she'd ask, deflecting my questions.

One day, I told her that her daughter had called.

"What the heck is she worried about?" Esther grumbled, then went on, "She worries about me. We've really only had each other. My husband and son died

in a car accident when she was little. It's been hard on her."

"Oh, Esther," I said, putting a hand on her shoulder. "I'm so, so sorry."

Every day, the nurses gave me a report: "Amy, Esther's stumbling around her room by herself! She's not safe. You need to talk to her. She makes her own bed, for Pete's sake!"

But how could I scold her when I admired her stubbornness? And when I nagged her, "Esther, are you kidding me? Where's your walker?" it was to no avail. I was the therapist, but we both knew she was the boss.

After two weeks of therapy, Esther was strong enough to go home. A month later, though, she was back after a fall. I hurried to her room and hugged her.

"Silly me, I just had to see you again," she laughed. But I could see that she was weaker than before.

I encouraged her to have breakfast with the other patients. "It'll be great! You'll meet other nice people. You might even get some good food!" Then I saw her push her glasses aside to wipe away tears.

"I can't do it," she whispered. "I hate choking in front of people."

*Why was she choking?*

I planned a home evaluation. Esther wore a floral dress, bright pink lipstick and heels. "I can't wait to make you some tea," she said. But by the time we got to her house, she could barely move. She couldn't turn the key. She couldn't step over the threshold. Trying to look like I didn't notice, I helped her through the door and into a chair.

Though neither of us said so, we both knew this was the last time she would be in her home. I let her shuffle around the kitchen, clumsily fill the teapot and wrestle with the china teacups. Like two old friends, we sat and sipped tea together.

Back at the hospital, her doctors had gathered, shaking their heads. Tests had confirmed their quietly mounting suspicion that Esther had ALS—Lou Gehrig's disease. Their guess was that she had a year or two to live.

As they told Esther about the advances in treatment and gave her brochures, I hugged her slumped shoulders. The dove on the brochure made death look so hopeful.

Then they tried to place a breathing mask on her face. She shook her head: "No."

I wanted her to put it on, but realized it wasn't my decision.

The next morning, I went to Esther's room before taking off my coat. She lay on a stretcher, the mask now covering her face. She was being transferred to

the regional hospital, no longer a candidate for rehab.

As the EMTs busily strapped her in, her eyes pleaded with me to understand. I laid my head on her shoulder.

“I love you,” I said. “Do what you need to do. It’s okay.” Tears rolled from my eyes.

“Is she your mom?” asked an EMT. I shook my head, and they rolled her away.

After work, as the sky turned pink, I drove down Route 95 to Esther’s new hospital, where I asked a smiling lady at the front desk where I could find Esther. The woman looked at her computer and frowned.

“I have her name, but I don’t know where she is.” She turned the console and pointed. “Esther C. Status: D.”

Esther’s eyes had told me. She’d been through enough. She no longer wanted to fight. She didn’t want to live with breathing machines and feeding tubes, waiting for another day of decline. She wanted to leave on her own terms.

I’d been fortunate to have twenty-five years of innocence, believing that I had the power to fix problems and take away pain. With Esther, I learned the harsh reality: I can’t always do that.

What I can do is listen to what my patients want—even if it means feeling uncomfortable and helpless. Sometimes I need to sit quietly and let them get their own lipstick, pour their own tea or refuse medical care.

Esther also showed me that it’s okay to cry with my patients, and that sometimes there are no words. And while she could see the old soul in me, I could see the young soul in her—the one who once must have been so effervescent.

It’s been ten years, and I still think about Esther. I hope that somewhere she’s wearing her sassiest shoes and her brightest lipstick. More than anything, I hope she knows how much she taught me.

#### **About the author:**

Amy Cooper Rodriguez is a physical therapist at Deaconess Abundant Life Communities in Massachusetts. She especially enjoys working with seniors because of the stories they have to tell and the wisdom they have to impart. She has learned a lot from them, as well as from her two little children. When she’s not working or chasing children, she writes. More of her published writing can be read at [www.parentingontheloose.com](http://www.parentingontheloose.com).

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