

## An Unexpected Friendship

Lizzie slammed the door as she stomped down the front steps of her home. Once again, the afternoon had concluded with an argument between her and her mom, this time over her most recent report card. Lizzie tried to clear her thoughts as she drove to her job, helping serve meals at a local nursing home. When she arrived, she reported to the nurses' station on Wing C.

"Can you feed Ed Armstrong?" the nurse Karen asked.

"Sure, I can," Lizzie was not quite sure why Karen had asked the question.

"Have you ever fed him before?" Karen asked.

"No," Lizzie said with a confused look.

"Okay, I'll go with you and show you how to do it," Karen said as she walked off down the hallway.

Lizzie followed Karen down to room 220. As they entered, she saw a man lying flat in bed, with pillows under his right side so that he was turned slightly to the left. His hands were curled inward, and he did not move at all as they entered the room.

"Hello, Ed!" Karen greeted the man.

"Hello yourself, Karen!" Ed remained motionless as he and Karen spoke, and it slowly dawned on Lizzie that he couldn't move. He was paralyzed.

"Ed, this is Lizzie. I'm going to show her how we serve your supper."

"Nice to meet you, Lizzie!"

"Nice to meet you too Ed." Lizzie was a bit uneasy. She was accustomed to helping the residents at meals, but it looked like this was going to be different.

Karen washed her hands and took the lid off Ed's tray. She tore off a piece of roast beef sandwich. "You need to compress the food between your fingers till it is about this thick..." Karen showed Lizzie the morsel of food she had in her hand, "and then you slide it between his teeth. Drinks need to be done with a straw."

"Umm, OK." Lizzie was very ill at ease now.

Karen smiled, "You'll do fine, Ed is a great guy, and it's really not that hard." Karen said goodbye to Ed and left.

Lizzie spent the next half hour helping Ed eat his dinner. Much to her surprise, Ed was so cheerful and pleasant, she actually enjoyed the time. After he had finished eating, Lizzie tidied up and said goodbye.

"Thank you, young lady, and... come again!" Ed called as she left the room.

Lizzie walked down the hallway holding the tray, her eyes brimming with tears. She thought of all she had complained about this past week. She couldn't believe a man in his condition could be this cheerful and kind.

The experience remained in Lizzie's thoughts the rest of the week, and the next time she worked Wing C, she asked if she could feed Ed again.

"Of course," Karen smiled, "I told you he's a great guy."

Lizzie often worked with Ed after that, even coming in early sometimes just to chat. She found herself telling Ed about school, her friends, and even her frequent disagreements with her mother. Ed was a great listener and truly seemed interested in what she told him. He also told her about his life as a structural engineer. He was responsible for the design of many of the bridges her family drove over every day. Lizzie looked forward to her conversations with Ed. During one conversation, Ed asked Lizzie what she wanted to do with her life. Lizzie hesitated.

"I want to be an engineer!" the words came tumbling out, "But not a structural engineer, I want to design medical equipment that will help people who've been injured."

Ed smiled, "That's a wonderful ambition, Lizzie. I'm sure you can do it, if you work hard."

Lizzie was silent. Academics came easy to her, but she had never bothered to study much.

"Ed, can I ask you something personal?"

"Certainly, Lizzie," Ed answered.

"Why are you so cheerful? I mean, considering ..." her voice trailed off.

"Considering the fact that I'm paralyzed?" Ed finished for her.

"Yes," she said.

"Lizzie," Ed began, "Let me tell you something. I choose to be grateful and to make the most of every day. That's why I'm cheerful. I could choose to feel sorry for myself, I could choose to be angry at the drunk driver who hit me all those years ago. But I don't, because I have so much to be grateful for: the beautiful view outside my window, the good staff members who take care of me here, and my family who visits me. Happiness is a choice, Lizzie, and so is gratitude."

Lizzie thought about that conversation over the next few days, and by the time she came into work Tuesday, she had some exciting news to tell Ed. She had decided that she was going to take advanced Algebra next semester, her first step towards an engineering degree.

She walked down the familiar hallway to room 220.

“Ed!” Lizzie called, then she stopped short. The bed was stripped, the room was empty. Karen later told her that Ed had a stroke the day before and passed away suddenly.

Somehow Lizzy got through the rest of her shift, but on the drive home the tears finally came. She thought of all that Ed had taught her in their short friendship. He had taught her how to listen, and how to care about others by caring for her. But most of all he had taught her gratitude, in a situation where very few people would find it in themselves to be grateful. And he had taught her all this, not despite the fact that he was paralyzed, but because of it.

As Lizzie walked in the front door her mother called out from the kitchen.

“Hi Lizzie, I saved some supper for you.”

“Okay Mom, I’ll be right there,” Lizzie replied. Then she stopped, poked her head in the kitchen, and said, “Thank you Mom!”