

Lunch Date

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I was working as a certified occupational therapy assistant and director of rehabilitation in a skilled nursing facility when I meet Ms. Y. I had been working for a week with this wonderful lady to help her eat. For breakfast or lunch, I would come into her room and help her with her meal. It was a quiet time with no TV, no radio, and very little conversation. In fact, we would only talk at the beginning of the meal and at the end. I would come into the room with my usual greeting,

Hi Ms. Y., it's Teffie. I've brought your lunch and boy does it smell good.

Oh, good I'm ready to eat. What do we have today, she would respond?

I would set up her tray on the rolling bedside table, get out her utensils, and set up her drink while naming the items on her plate. I would get around to the right side of her bed, make sure the head of the bed was up, and then set us up in Hand under Hand[®]. With her hand in mine I would pick up her spoon and start with the meatloaf as requested.

Okay, Ms. Y. would you like meatloaf or mashed potatoes? Let's start with meatloaf.

I think I'd like the mashed potatoes now.

The silence was so difficult for me, however, needed for Ms. Y. She would quietly lay there directing me as to which food item she wanted to eat next, and I supported her hand to it. Finally, after a week of this routine in the middle of a spaghetti lunch she asked me,

Why can't I do this on my own?

Oh, crud what do I tell her? I can name the muscles in her arm and their weakness level. I can talk about fine motor control or the lack of it. I can also talk about the effect on the body when someone doesn't use a skill and has others do it for them. All the medical jargon was flowing in my brain but I rejected it as too much information as soon as it came to me. I decided to just say,

Your body has gotten weaker. My hope is to build it back up slowly so that you can do this on your own.

You know, this would be a lot easier for you if we got you up in your wheelchair, so you can sit at a table.

I think you're right, she replied.

Oh, what Joy! I could barely contain the fireworks of excitement I had for her. I had to keep my answer low key.

We are almost done with lunch today. How about tomorrow you get up in your chair for lunch?

That sounds good to me, she said.

We will make it a date, a lunch date.

Yeah, I'd like that, she smiled.

After her last bite on her plate, I practically ran out of her room. I gathered the aids at the nurse's station and told them what she had said. In the nicest possible way, I asked the aids to get her cleaned up, washed, dressed, and up in her chair for lunch tomorrow. I knew this was not a small task for them and scheduled myself to be there to help make it happen.

The next day I arrived outside her room nervous that I made a big mistake and that she would change her mind. The aid and I walked in together.

Hello Ms. Y., it's Teffie. I'm so excited for our lunch date together. Let's get you dolled up and in your chair.

Okay, I'm ready, she responded.

We had lunch together that day at a regular table, while using Hand Under Hand®. That lunch date led to another, and then another. Week after week she came down for lunch. It then turned into her getting her hair and nails done weekly. Her participation increased to include her helping to hold tools for me while I fixed or cleaned spare wheelchairs as well as us playing checkers and setting up dominos to fall.

Everyone in the building was amazed that she was up and kept getting up. The most shocking comment came from a close co-worker,

I've never seen her up, she said.

How long have you worked here in this building, I asked?

Four years, she replied.

Ms. Y gave me the greatest gift of all. One day while she was eating lunch on her own (without my physical support). She said,

You know, I feel like I've been in a fog for years and it has finally lifted.