

Health

First Place Prose 2005

Falling ill typically involves for the patient a disruption in that unique continuity of knowing and understanding that ordinarily characterizes health and well-being.

“George Engel, MD

At one time, I had occasion to make a lot of house calls, and seeing these people was a weekly highlight for me, not only because it got me outside, away from the fluorescent lights and scything clock hands of the office, but because house calls also allowed me to study people under the gun, to see how they were handling their extreme losses, to rehearse for a role that most of us will eventually have to play.

One of the people on my home visit list was Esther. She was in her 70's, a large woman who continued to flaunt Big Platinum Hair long after the bouffant style had languished, and who wore glasses with blue frames whose upper corners were points armed with four small diamonds. These glasses were rarely seen on Esther's nose, though, as she preferred to hang them from a gold chain around her neck.

She was big in a grand style, growing up in an era when such females were called “large boned.” She had wide shoulders and long arms, and her hair pushed her height to nearly six feet. Her face was worthy of all this, large and oval with a prominent nose, wide lips always coated with fire-engine lipstick, and huge eyes made to look even larger with many carefully placed layers of Mascara. At one time, she must have been heavy, but by the time I knew her, her magnificent frame supported only the loose flesh that her metastatic ovarian cancer allowed her.

Esther always received me sitting on a gold sofa in her bright living room with French Provincial furniture placed artfully in front of gold-flocked wallpaper. The sofa held a dark green pillow beautifully embroidered with the words, “The Golden Years Suck.” She lived in the penthouse of a 20-story apartment building, cared for by a live-in housekeeper and attended by a fleet of nurses that she treated with constant disdain. She owned a powder-blue Cadillac of the large-fin persuasion that, since she could no longer walk, she never drove. Esther had the garage attendant drive the car around every day so that she could look at it from her 20th floor perch. I never saw it less than perfectly washed and waxed.

Here, obviously, was a woman used to having things her way, someone for whom wealth had allowed her to do pretty much as she pleased. These circumstances had, in Esther, produced a wit as expansive as her eye-make-up, a love of laughter, and story-telling produced in the best Borscht Belt style. When she was rolling, one was bathed in the glow, laughing and laughing. Even when she was hurting especially badly, she maintained at least a bemused reserve, her eyes taking it all in.

Somewhat guiltily, I always saved my visit to Esther for last of the afternoon the way one might save the tastiest bit of a meal. The guilt I felt in getting more from Esther than I was giving her led one day, as we were laughing at something or other, to say in my best Seinfeld delivery,

“Esther, we can’t be sitting here laughing like this, don’t you know you’re dying of cancer here?”

She turned to look at me. “Cancer Schmancer.” she said, “At least I’ve got my health.”

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