

The Park

Kate Birdsall, April 2023

It was snowing that morning.

I rose early, before the sun, as I always did. I dressed and walked the one block to the park, as always. This was my only time for myself, the only time I could be sure of peace, the only time to be quiet, and I guarded it, treasured it, held it close.

I stood by the bench, looking out through the falling snow at the empty space of the park. The snow muffled even the sound of the light, sporadic traffic on Grand Avenue, three blocks away. No one was up yet. The houses around the park were all still dark. There were no cars here. No dog walkers yet. It was still too early. The only movement was the slowly falling snow.

When she'd refused to continue chemotherapy, Kurt, our doctor, had counseled me. He said, "You seem to be the sort who will see it through." It was an observation, a benediction, a command.

But there had been times when I thought I might not. Back when I was able to leave her for an hour, once a month I'd ride my motorcycle the 20 miles out onto the prairie to the abandoned town of Bosler, to charge up the bike's battery and my own. Sometimes on the road out of town I would wonder what would happen if I just kept going. How would I manage? Where would I go? What would happen to her?

But Kurt was right: When I got to the long-empty buildings that marked where Bosler had been, I'd turn around and go home, to start again, to continue.

That was before. This winter I needed a battery tender for the bike. I couldn't leave her long enough to ride even as far as Bosler. I no longer had the option of wondering about leaving.

On this day – this cold, snowy day – we were to start the last leg of the marathon. Things would be different – a little different. Perhaps enough different. Today she would begin hospice. A nurse would come to tell us what to expect, what they could help with, to ask what we needed, to shoulder a little of the load.

It had been a close thing, getting Kurt to sign off on hospice. He worried that he hadn't tried hard enough to help her, to change her, to cure her. He saw hospice as a failure on his part. But I needed help. I didn't know how much longer I could do it alone, whether I would survive to see it to the end. Friends had offered to help, but they'd slowly pulled away. She was too adept at the mind-games, too clever, too difficult to be with. I needed hospice, and today we would start.

I stood by the park bench, drinking in the stillness of the morning, charging my batteries. I did this every morning, storing up enough peace to make it through, maybe, until I could come back here for another dose. Today I had some hope that perhaps I could indeed make it.



I was lucky. It had only been three years. It could have been a lot longer before we got to this point. And in the beginning, it wasn't that difficult. I could even leave for a day or two, setting out her pills in clearly marked paper cups – Sat. AM, Sat. noon, Sat. supper, Sat. PM. When it became clear that was too long, I could still leave for an hour or two – the grocery store, lunch with Bruce, a quick ride to Bosler in the frigid air.

Then I came back from Albertsons to find her collapsed at the bottom of the basement stairs, unhurt from her tumble but unable to get up. I knew I had to stay home.

It hadn't always been this way. Once there was a lively, smart, appealing woman with an ear-to-ear grin. A six-foot personality in a five-foot frame. Once there been an avid motorcyclist, too small for her own bike but an eager pillion rider. I rode through 47 states and 5 provinces with her happily hanging on the back, a willing companion. (We missed Iowa somehow.) Now she resented that I'd no longer take her riding, but even at her worst she knew she wouldn't be able to stay upright on the bike.

She also resented that she was dying and I wasn't. She resented that her past excesses were catching up to her. She resented that her family heritage, which she hated, was catching up to her. She resented that she was no longer care-free, funny, witty, sexy.

She also knew me well, knew my weaknesses, my vulnerabilities, where to strike. But through it all, she also knew I cared for her, emotionally as well as physically, that I would stay with her. Yes, Kurt's reading of me had been right.

I drank in the park's stillness, storing it against the day. On this day a hospice worker would come, and again, one or two or maybe even three times a week so that I could go out to the store, so I could have lunch with Jim or coffee with Ralph. So that I could talk with a friend about them instead of me, life instead of death, perhaps to pretend, just for an hour, that the world still revolved as it always had, and that – somewhere – normalcy existed.

Through the falling snow I saw a walker on the other side of the park. Behind me, a car went by, crunching on the snow. It wasn't quite light, but the city was waking up. The day had begun. It was time to go home, to start once again. Today there would be some help. Perhaps I would make it through to the end.