

A Wedge of Brightness

It's winter and the trees of our neighborhood are bare; a light coating of snow covers the ground and the streets are pale with salt. From the window of our second story bedroom, I stare across the valley to the west. What remains of the sky is a wedge of brightness, tinged yellow and resting between a bank of pale blue clouds and the dusky horizon. On the other side of the valley, just visible beyond the roof of a neighbor's house, sits a rectangular building—a place I used to visit with a very special friend.

Myself and my dog Chester—a fifteen year old black and tan hound—had volunteered in April of last year to do therapy visits at Masonicare, a facility with several levels of care for elderly patients and residents. We were given specific floors to visit every Friday afternoon and two of those floors are in the building I see from my window. Perhaps a mile distant as the crow flies, it now seems worlds away.

Most of the people we visited were in bed or in wheelchairs. Many were well into their nineties and their world consisted of their rooms—where I imagine they spent most of their time—the

hallways and then the specialized areas for dining, therapy, entertainment or socializing. There was also a theatre and a model train room. On nice weather days they often sat in front of the building, under the entrance portico, enjoying the view and the fresh air.

My normal routine would be to go from room to room, poking my head in and asking if anyone wanted a canine visitor. Most did and I would chat and joke around with the men and women while Chester got petted and fed hotdog treats. I kept them in my pocket and handed them to the residents to feed the old guy—he knew he'd get them at every stop. What I didn't know at the time was that he was sick with two tick borne diseases. He had always been such a healthy dog that I thought the symptoms he developed were simply signs of advanced age. Our visits lasted between an hour and a half to two hours, but half way through I needed to stop, go back downstairs and then outside to let him pee. He couldn't hold it anymore—old Doctor Leaky.

From my window the horizon changes before my eyes: The wedge of light becomes brighter as the clouds—their undersides flushed pink—turn a deep violet-blue. Masonicare's windows remain unlit while details of the city recede into the gathering darkness.

One thing I noticed about the residents was how positive most of them were—despite the circumstances of their situation. They loved to pet my dog and touch his soft ears. But Chester—given his age and condition—could be standoffish at times, so I would have to turn him about and point him at the people in their beds or wheelchairs and then shove him forward. The treats helped focus his attention. Not an ideal situation, but we did all right. Sometimes I strained to hear the residents’ voices, but they seemed eager to share small talk or stories about themselves. One tiny woman, ninety-six years old, would always inform me about her son’s visits and how he would never forget her. One day she thought I was a doctor—perhaps because of the white dress shirt I was wearing. One gent, minus teeth, radiated such enthusiasm in talking about his newest great grandchild that I was taken aback—he was ninety-five. Another lady, who could tell a pretty good joke, informed me that she had trouble hearing and motioned me to come closer. When I did she kissed my cheek; I fell for an old trick. One lady couldn’t talk at all. She had a room to herself and would sit and babble. I could have skipped past her—I never understood what she was trying to say—but there was the dog. We fumbled a bit but I finally got her to hold a treat and then she had trouble presenting it—but Chester finally got his due and she smiled and hummed softly, apparently content. I had no idea about her history or state of mind, but it felt right to interact in some small way—if only to break the

monotony or loneliness of her day.

On July twenty-fifth I came to visit for the last time. I stayed for three hours—I had to tell them what happened to my buddy Chester—our beloved hound had died three days earlier. He had his diagnosis three weeks before and was on meds, but his condition worsened. He had a fever and would howl if you just touched his muscles. He couldn't climb stairs anymore and I couldn't carry him. I gave him a warm bath outside early that morning and noticed other signs of his illness. I was inside our house when I got word that he had lain down in the garden, curled up on the bright green tops of our carrots. Leaning over him, I petted his soft ears and cried like a baby. It was time, some of my family suggested, to have him put down. I couldn't believe this would be the day. He was tough but perhaps too old to fight anymore, and he was suffering.

Above Masonicare the purple clouds are now ablaze—a fiery illumination beyond color, beyond description. Lights begin to twinkle along the floors of the building—looking like distant stars, and I realize there are no answers, no explanations. I do not understand life and so I write, knowing the words I string along are feeble attempts to capture or reveal things I'll never understand—like the borders between light and dark, joy and pain, life and death. The Buddhists teach in their “great bright mantra,” the Heart Sutra,

that suffering will only be relieved when we stop clinging to that which will only slip away, nothing being permanent, and embrace a compassion for all living things. I doubt I'm capable of realizing the true nature of ourselves or the universe through Buddhism, yet on rare occasions I'm offered a glimmer, a wedge of brightness—though it's gone before I can grasp it.

This story was originally written in January, 2014, but at the time I had no blog to attach it to! And now two years have already passed—amazing.

For pictures, see the image gallery.