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# To Melinda

**By Priscilla Mainardi**

Melinda died at noon on Friday, June 26.

The news ripped open a gap in my day, a rift dividing it into *before* and *after*. Before, Melinda was living her life up the road from me; after, she was no longer part of the world. I hung up the phone and looked out across the field where we had our last Christmas bonfire, six months ago to the day. That was the last time I had seen Melinda when she was completely well.

This was at our second home, in Vermont. In March 2020, when the class I was teaching went online and cities and towns across the country shut down, I decided to move there with my husband, at least temporarily, and teach my class from there. Before the coronavirus pandemic, we spent one or two weekends a month in Vermont, and we were casual friends with Melinda and her husband Kevin, who lived there year round.
Soon after we bought the house eight years ago, we asked them over for dinner. When they arrived, my husband offered them drinks, with a choice of gin for gin and tonics. Melinda, fun-loving and adventurous, suggested a taste test. This broke the ice, and we became friends. Another night when they came for dinner, they arrived breathless with excitement. On the walk to our house, they had seen the International Space Station pass by overhead in the night sky.

Later Melinda and I discovered we had gone to the same summer camp, back in the 1960's. But this is all I ever learned about her past. One day she told me she and Kevin had just gotten married. I was happy for them, and also surprised: I had thought they already were. One afternoon in early April, while I was upstairs at the sewing machine making masks, my husband saw Melinda outside weeding the hedgerow and went over to say hello. She was crying, he told me when he came in. She was very worried. Something was wrong with her. She couldn't eat, and had lost weight. She was going for tests the following week, and would let us know what she found out.

The next time we saw Melinda and Kevin, walking along the road on a bright day near the end of April, we learned that Melinda had a mass in her stomach. She looked thin but well, and sounded hopeful that she could have it removed. But a week later she learned it was malignant. She and I spoke on the phone that week. She told me that friends had been bringing her bone broth, the most nutritious thing she could eat to keep her strength up.

I cooked a chicken. We ate it, then ate the leftovers, then I made chicken salad. I studied bone broth recipes. Use a crock pot, use a slow cooker, cover it, don't cover it, boil it for five hours, for two days, no less than twelve hours. Finally I put the carcass in a spaghetti pot, covered it

with water, added carrots, celery, and onions, and boiled it all day. I added a tablespoon of cider vinegar, as Melinda had suggested, to draw the minerals from the bones. The next day, I took the broth to Melinda and Kevin's house and left it on the porch with a big bunch of pink alstroemeria. I didn't knock. Melinda might be resting, and I didn't want to disturb her.

In mid-May, she went for more tests. Her son and daughter flew in from Colorado, and went into a two-week quarantine. We ate another chicken, I made more broth, and my husband and I walked to their house to deliver it. I didn't bring flowers this time. Flowers were blooming everywhere, lilacs and daffodils, and wildflowers in the meadows.

Kevin came out of the house to meet us in the driveway. He had his work clothes on. Things were opening up. Neighbors had started getting together for socially-distanced drinks and walks. I wished we could do that with Melinda and Kevin.

Melinda's cancer was Stage 4, inoperable, he told us.

We stood six feet away from him, shocked and saddened by this news. Had she been diagnosed too late because of coronavirus? we wondered. Kevin mentioned one early test that was delayed, but only for a short time.

"She won't do chemo," he said. "I can't fight her on that. The doctors tell her 'Why not just try it?'" But she won't. Melinda called a few days later to thank me for the broth. "It's delicious," she said. "I taste carrots. And onion?"

She sounded cheerful, and hadn't lost her spunky inquisitiveness. How was this possible? "Did you remember to add the tablespoon of vinegar?" She asked the question in her usual assertive yet good-natured way that made me feel challenged and at the same time that she was keenly interested in my response.

"Of course," I said in a voice that didn't sound like my own. The conversation felt false, as if we were skirting the real issue, her illness. I didn't know what to say about the pandemic either. I couldn't talk about making masks, or ask her if she'd like me to make her one, because she wasn't going out anymore. Once I tried saying, "I guess you're not really worried about the coronavirus anymore —" but I stopped halfway through the sentence. My mother became very sick and died just after 9/11, and I remember clearly how hard it was to focus on the national tragedy when I was in the middle of my own private grief. But it felt dismissive to say this, as if Melinda was so absorbed in her own illness that she didn't care about the rest of the world's trouble. It also seemed petty to express worry about the pandemic, or complain about the changes it had brought, while I was perfectly healthy. My tears that spring felt indulgent, almost shameful. What did I have to cry about?

On May 27, SpaceX launched a private rocket to take people to the International Space Station. That afternoon there was another launch: Melinda's daughter and her boyfriend got married in their yard. There were few guests, mostly close family. My husband had returned to

New Jersey to reopen his office, and I stood alone off to the side, apart from the other guests. Melinda looked thin and radiant. It was the last time I would see her upright.

I cooked another chicken and made more broth. I printed a photo of a poppy and glued it to a blank postcard and wrote a note. What more could I say but that I was thinking of her? We were part-time neighbors, part-time friends. We weren't old family friends, or friends from town, or college friends, or friends with kids in the same schools and on the same sports teams. One day I was cleaning out a bedside table drawer and found a little plastic packet. I opened it and dusty-smelling green flakes spilled all over the bed, marijuana that Melinda had grown and given me, along with a few other small gifts over the years, without making a ceremony of them. They were little things, but now they glowed with special meaning. Why hadn't I paid more attention to them? Her illness had laid bare the limits of our friendship, in a manner oddly parallel to the way the coronavirus pandemic has laid bare the limits of a society divided by health care disparities, by politics and race and social class.

I walked down to Melinda and Kevin's house to deliver the card and the latest batch of broth. Pink and purple lupines bloomed in great profusion on a hillside along the road. Yellow and orange wildflowers bloomed among them. I told myself the amazing variety of colors was just a matter of pigments, that their purpose was to attract pollinators. But I had also read that the colors may have another purpose: to make the flowers attractive to humans so humans would grow them.

Melinda lay in a lounge chair by her garden, where her daughter was spreading leaf mulch around baby vegetable plants. We talked about the garden, the view of the mountains, the weather. Melinda spoke occasionally, very softly, but she was mostly quiet. I told myself it was difficult to have a meaningful conversation because we couldn't be physically close together. I couldn't kneel by her chair and squeeze her hand or use any other gesture to wordlessly convey comfort, to convey the very idea that there are no words.

But walking home, I thought: I should have talked, gushed even, told her how well she looked, described how I made the card, talked about the poppies that grew by our old house, about making the broth, about the wedding, about anything at all.

By late June, the lupines on the hillside had faded past their peak of color; their message to pollinators: pass us by, fly away. Kevin sent an email, letting friends, family and neighbors know that Melinda was no longer up to replying to emails and texts, or talking on the phone. She was "resting comfortably," and receiving hospice care. There was something final in the words, "Thanks so much for your thoughts, prayers, and help." I sent a careful reply, saying I hoped she was enjoying the beautiful summer day.

She declined with stunning speed, and yet I was still stunned by her death a few days later. I hadn't believed it could happen. She was buried the day after she died, with only her close family present. There won't be a service until it's safe to gather together the number of people who knew and loved Melinda. I still don't know when that will be.

Her son and daughter stayed on in Vermont. Her son had rented an apartment in town for six months. I wondered about this at first, then realized with a wrench that he had believed his mother had at least that long to live.

I composed a note to Kevin and left it in his mailbox. I received one a few days later in return. I told myself this was all I could do, these forms were what we had. This was the very reason for them, to the limited extent that they could help in the one-of-a-kind situation of a neighbor dying of something else during a pandemic. But my note was too formal. It boxed Melinda in, in a way she wouldn't allow herself to be when she was alive. How hard and sad to reduce her to a handful of words that fit on a notecard. A page or an essay or even a whole library of words can't take in a person.

But now I think that on that day I last saw her, lying by her garden, that there truly was nothing more to say. One night in August, I went outside and looked up at the sky. I thought of Melinda's face the night they came for dinner after they'd seen the Space Station, her eyes bright with joy, her cheeks red from the cold as she enfolded me in a warm hug. Now I tilted my face upward and watched until I saw a fast-moving object heading northeast, remote and bright as a star yet carrying humans, as impossible to believe as it was real.

**Priscilla Mainardi, a registered nurse, attended the University of Pennsylvania and earned her MFA degree in creative writing from Rutgers University. Her work appears in numerous journals, including *Pulse - Voices from the Heart of Medicine, the Examined Life Journal* and *BioStories*. She teaches English Composition at Rutgers in Newark, New Jersey.**