

## Kay's Eternal Garden by Geri McArdle

“If I ever go to hospice, please drop by with a handmade watercolor card flower *every day* so that I am there so that I can build a garden to take with me.”

I'd recently started painting watercolor flowers on blank cards, as a hobby and a personal way to connect with people in those pre-digital days. Kay was always buying my cards to send to others. Hospice, I thought? My vibrant friend was many years away from hospice. I blew off her strange comment.

Kay and I lived in the same building. Our friendship began when she helped me fix my computer; she often left notes with a candy bar on my doormat, encouraging me to call her if I needed anything. Kay loved doing things for others. At Christmas we played Secret Santa for our neighbors and invited those who were alone to a holiday feast. I often traveled from Florida to cold-weather states for work, and Kay was always stepping in to lend me jackets, gloves, and sweaters. Her gestures were modest but frequent; Kay's kindness always had a big impact.

One year, Kay's annual physical results required more testing. She ignored it, yet her health declined in the following weeks. Back pains persisted, she had trouble walking, and she lacked energy. The doctor delivered devastating news: stage four cancer.

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We could only watch helplessly as Kay endured chemotherapy, rehab, and a three-week hospital stay. It was a relief when doctors discharged her from the hospital, but after just one day at home, she lost the feeling in her legs. Hospice, she was told, was the final option.

Kay remembered her comment from years ago, and it was her only request: that I paint her a flower on a card every day. So every morning I painted a card and visited her before work, hoping my little flowers would help her improve. But Kay showed no signs of getting better. I could do nothing but continue to bring her “flowers” for her garden. She had hung the cards all over her walls, lending a soft, ethereal vibe to the drab little room.

I was determined to make Kay's last days as bright as possible and visited whenever I could. One night I decided to pay her a second visit in the evening with another card. As I approached her bed, she opened her eyes and said, “...good bye, my friend, you kept your word. See all your cards? These flowers are my garden forever.”

Kay passed away later that night. My friend finally found peace, surrounded by dozens of muted watercolor flowers. I will carry Kay with me through the rest of my days, just as she carried her garden with her into the afterlife. I like to think she is up there giving out cards and other surprises to her friends in heaven. Perhaps she even leaves kind notes with candy bars for newcomers at heaven's doormat.