

Together

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Two elderly women, scarves wrapped tightly across their faces, trudged slowly through the winter white. Both wore long down coats, one black and the other tan, buttoned tightly around their lean frames, each in her protective cocoon of warmth. Their world was silent, newly covered with a thick veneer of snow. A police car drove by slowly. The officer raised his arm and smiled. The lady in black waved back. It was their daily morning ritual.

They strolled arm-in-arm, the woman in the black coat walking a fraction of a step ahead. They stopped at a street crossing.

“The light is red,” the woman in black said.

“Curious, it was red when we got here the last two days,” said her friend.

“I suppose it was,” the woman in black said, looking both ways as the light turned green. “You’re so good at remembering details.” A lone set of tire tracks creased the white street. Two cars waited for them to cross.

The 2 women entered the park. The trail, all white, snaked above the river, now spattered with islands of thin glistening ice. The trees were bare, standing quiet and tall. Their green leaves were long gone, and they arose like skeletons flecked with white. The isolated imprints of the women’s leather boots in the virgin fluff testified to the coldness of the day.

“The footing is good,” the lady in tan said.

“And we’re the first ones here,” her friend replied. “There’s not another footprint in sight.”

A furry squirrel hurried onto the trail ahead of them, his tail pointed up. He briefly stopped to eye the 2 strangers and then scurried on, as if looking for a warm shelter. His footprints punctuated the smooth white carpet ahead of the 2 women.

“It must be beautiful, Rose,” the woman in tan said. “I see all the whiteness and some of the shapes, but they aren’t clear.”

“If you could only see those huge rocks with ice hanging from them,” Rose said. “There are so many icicles that the rocks look like old men with beards.”

“My husband had a white beard,” Marie, the woman in tan said. “He didn’t need a scarf to keep the cold from his face.”

“I think my husband had a beard too,” Rose responded.

“I don’t remember your telling me that before,” Marie said.

“Well, maybe he didn’t. I’m not sure, anymore, now that he’s gone.”

A small brown bird, hidden by a clump of ferns above a wall of grey rocks, whistled a plaintive song. A light flurry of fine snow began to fall. The leaves of the nearby rhododendrons hung shriveled in the chilly air, the green edges clinging to each other, trying to stay warm. The 2 women continued walking along the wooded trail.

“How’s your daughter?” Rose asked. “I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“I haven’t seen her in a few weeks.” Marie answered. “She’s visiting an old college friend in Paris. The divorce was hard on her but I think things are better.”

“Oh, I forgot about the divorce,” Rose said. “I don’t remember if there were children.”

“It’s okay,” Marie said. “I’m thankful they didn’t have any.”

The flurry subsided to a few flakes of snow. A group of Canada geese splashed down into the river, their honking disrupting the tranquility of the wintry morning.

“My daughter wants me to give up the apartment in the hotel and move in with her,” Marie continued, “but I like my independence. I’m afraid she’d try to run my life. She’s so controlling—I think that was a big reason for her husband leaving her.”

“Maybe she worried about your eye problem,” Rose said. “I forgot the name.”

“Macular degeneration,” Marie answered. “And she does worry but I manage fine.” She paused for a moment. “Especially when we can take our walks together and you help me shop and walk with me to the ophthalmologist.” She squeezed Rose’s arm.

“That’s what friends are for.”

Ahead of them, a tree, growing on the steep hillside, had shattered near its base and toppled across the trail. Rose could not see a way around the barrier.

“There’s a fallen tree ahead of us,” she said. “I think we better turn back.”

Marie clutched Rose’s arm as they turned.

“It’s okay if I miss the appointment with the ophthalmologist. It was just a checkup, anyway,” Marie paused. “With your wonderful eyesight and my memory stores—we can do anything. We’re really a good team.”

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