

Weeding through the Wreckage

by Mary Billiter

I've been thinking about weeds a lot lately. Not the weed that's smoked, though that's entered my mind a few times. I'm referring to the weeds that have overtaken my back yard.

It was inevitable. Last summer, instead of watering and tending my yard, I was tethered to an IV bag of 5FU. For those unfamiliar with chemo shorthand, 5FU, stands for fluorouracil. An oncology nurse explained that 5FU stood for the five different chemicals that comprised the chemo treatment. All I know is that fluorouracil, or 5FU, is aptly named. Fluorouracil is given intravenously for aggressive cancers—colon, rectum, stomach, and pancreas. I fell into the latter. 5FU has one purpose—to stop the growth of cancer cells. It also stops life as you know it.

I've always taken pride in my yard. But when I became a single parent, it became my sole responsibility. Mowing my yard—the front and back—was an outward sign that I was holding it together. Even if life was going sideways, my yard reflected otherwise. Plus, there was the sense of accomplishment. The clean, uniform rows and raked clippings made my lush lawn look like it'd been properly cared for. Whenever I pulled up to my house, my groomed lawn made me smile. It brought great joy. The payoff was worth the sweaty hair and grimy, grass-stained sneakers. When I looked at my lawn, I saw progress. I saw beauty from ashes. I saw what it meant to hope.

Labor Day weekend 2021 marked an entire year of mowing my lawn following my unexpected divorce. But as more time passed, and the more I mowed, the more I realized that I had often taken my husband's yard work for granted and most likely the balance of our marriage.

As the season wrapped up, I changed out my front planters from colorful annuals to a harvest of autumn gourds. September rolled gently into a long fall. It was as if Mother Nature herself ensured I was on solid footing before winter hit.

Winter was late arriving in Wyoming that year. I was more than happy to keep my snow shovel tucked behind the front door as long as possible. While mowing provided a great sense of achievement, shoveling snow had the opposite effect. No sooner would I clear a path from my front door to the street when the wind and snow would instantly erase my efforts.

By mid-November, an impressive amount of stacked firewood awaited my fireplace, the outdoor faucets were capped and covered, and the fall wreath on the front door had been exchanged with a wreath of winter white. I was set.

I wasn't thrilled to start another winter without the love of my life beside me, but my outlook, like the weather, slowly changed. Instead of feeling like a victim of circumstances, I felt like a victor. After all, I had successfully mowed every week of summer and my yard was spectacular. In that area of life, I was winning.

But then, on a Friday night after a long workweek a sharp, piercing, unrelenting pain radiated below my left shoulder blade. I thought I was having a heart attack. I was raised by a nurse and an investigative journalist. I had to be bleeding to death or unconscious before they'd even consider taking me to the emergency room. One made me think I could walk off anything—pneumonia, fractured bones, or in this case a heart attack—while the other made me weary of hidden hospital costs.

But since neither of my parents were alive to ask, I waited it out.

"Clearly, this will pass," became my mantra. But it didn't. The pain continued all weekend until I heard my mom's voice as clearly as if she were in my bedroom beside me.

"Referred pain."

Simply put, referred pain can make someone think they're having one thing, like a heart attack, when in reality it's something else.

Was it a heart attack? Or was this shoulder pain something else?

I did the only thing I knew to do and called Ron, my former husband. We were on good terms and the only alternative was my fifteen-year-old teenage son, who couldn't drive.

"I think I'm having a heart attack," I said when he answered my call.

"Well," he said calmly, "We won't know until we go to the ER."

I watched the first snowfall cover my front yard as Ron drove me to our small community hospital. It was Sunday night after a full day of football games, and the emergency room was teeming with sick people. When I quietly told the intake nurse that I thought I was having a heart attack, the locked double-doors behind her instantly opened. That's when it hit me—what if I *am* having a heart attack?

My dad died suddenly of a heart attack when he was sixty-two. He was a runner and was returning home from a 5k race when he died while driving on the 405 freeway in California. Besides his brown hair and brown eyes, did I inherit his weak heart too?

I was immediately attached to an EKG and waited while it spit out a long tape. I watched the nurse to gauge her reaction. She was good and wore neutrality well.

When she removed the electrodes and asked me to follow her, I turned to Ron.

“Well, I'm either not having a heart attack or they're stealing a move from my mom's playbook and want me to walk it off.”

The thing about Ron is his crooked smile radiates up to his blue eyes. For a moment, I relaxed in the warmth of the familiar.

I knew the ER team of doctors couldn't give me anything for the pain until they knew where the pain originated and what caused it. So, while they ordered a CT scan, blood draw, and other tests, I lay on a hospital bed and Ron sat on a chair beside me. Of all the things I could think of, the only thought that swam through my mind was my yard.

“I forgot to wrap the tree trunks,” I said of the two new trees I had planted to replace a diseased pair I had lost. “They're hot wing maples.” I found myself laughing. “Hot wing maples. But that's what they're called.”

Ron smiled.

“But they have to be protected.”

Ron rested his hand on top of mine. “We'll do it this weekend.”

Only I didn't go home. I remained in the hospital and then a series of hospitals when what was thought to be pancreatitis ended resulted in the diagnosis of pancreatic cancer. I was fifty-three, looking down the barrel of a cancer with one of the worst survival rates. But I wasn't alone. Ron never left my side.

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I didn't see my front or back yard until late spring. Even though I was at home—the weekly, three-day, 5FU chemo treatments kept me in a permanent state of nausea, with an added dose of neuropathy. Certain chemo treatments, like 5FU, can cause damage to the nervous system. Neuropathy affected my hands and feet. First, there was numbness that gave way to a tingling sensation that felt like my feet were always asleep. But, when the neuropathy spread to my legs, so did the symptoms. Sharp, jabbing pain shot through my legs, feet, and hands. The mere act of walking to the bathroom was excruciating. When I wasn't throwing up or hooked up to chemo, I slept. I slept to avoid the pain. I slept through the winter and most of spring.

And yet I was one of the lucky ones. My tumor was caught early, making me eligible for the Whipple surgery where the tumor was resected along with most of my pancreas. It was a long, slow, painful recovery with more chemo to follow.

This time when I returned home, my head was as bare as the limbs on my maple trees. And my body was equally as thin and brittle as their unprotected trunks.

"I think they died," I said to Ron, who steadied me against him.

"They're strong," he said, "They'll make it. You'll see."

When the last frost of the season gave way to warmer mornings, the neighbors on either side of me, took turns mowing my front yard. They made sure my front yard maintained its appearance. But the backyard, which was fenced, was left unattended. After work, Ron would water the trees in the front yard. Collectively, they kept my front yard alive. And in turn, my spirits.

By the end of summer, I rang a bronze bell that I walked past every time I went to the infusion center. It wasn't a big bell, rather it was small, inconspicuous and hung from a stand on the nurses' station. What it lacked in size and demeanor, it made up for in strength. It was the sound of hope—for me, others still on their journey, and my family. It rang the conclusion of chemo and the hardest battle of my life. I had soldiered through nausea, surgery, and nerve damage to get to this point. However, I remained weak and exhausted. I didn't have the energy to mow or even the drive to retain the manicured appearance in which I had taken such pride, which saddened me.

When would I return to life? Or was *this* my life? Thanks to the efforts of my neighbors and former husband, my front yard was in good shape, but when I finally saw

my backyard, I stood in shock. The prairie had taken over and went wild. Weeds stood a foot high. They choked off the grass and trapped in heat. Standing in this weed patch felt suffocating. The weeds appeared seemingly out of nowhere and were as invasive as cancer. They spread and continued to spread, consuming my back yard and my thoughts. Any time I stepped outside, I turned and walked back into the house. There were too many weeds. It was just too much.

Still, every time I passed a window, I couldn't stop noticing the toxic takeover of my back yard, which made me mad. The emotions that rose in me were as ugly, thorny, and as unwanted as the weeds. Because what I *really* wanted was someone or something to blame—for the deterioration of my yard, my body, and my marriage.

Buried anger is tricky that way. It seeks a culprit, like a weed, rather than deal with the underlying issue—the root cause.

My marriage and my yard were no different. I had stopped tending to my marriage with nurturing words and actions. Over time, our relationship overgrew with resentments, anger, and loss.

It took surviving cancer for me to sort through the debris and find my way back to my former husband. Ron is my best friend, my hospital hero, and the love of my life. Again, I was one of the lucky ones. I was given a second chance.

The only thing that remained in need of repair was my back yard. The more I stared at it, the angrier I became. I finally had enough. I laced up my grass-stained sneakers and headed outside. It had recently rained and the yard was still wet. I reached for a weed and firmly grabbed the thick base of it, expecting a good fight. I was ready. *Bring. It. On.*

Instead, the weed came out root and all with such ease that I shook my head. That can't be right. *It can't be this easy.*

I reached for another weed and yanked so hard I threw myself backwards, the weed still clutched in my hand. Weed after weed—ground ivy, stinging nettle, thistle—I ripped until my yard was as clear as my last CT scan.

And then I lay on my patio and wept.



Mary Billiter writes about beachside resorts, romantic mis-adventures, and second chances. She also writes psychological fiction as “M. Billiter.” Collectively, Billiter’s books have received starred reviews in *USA Today*, *Romance Times*, *Forward Reviews*, and *Barnes & Noble*. Mary is a two-time cancer survivor—breast and pancreatic. In 2015, during treatment for breast cancer, she wrote six resort romances on her cell phone. In 2022, while undergoing three-day chemo treatments for pancreatic cancer and the subsequent Whipple surgery, Mary escaped the pain by writing her first political thriller—also on her phone. Mary’s living her own Happily Ever After with Ron, her unabashedly bald man, Daisy, her sweet golden lab, and Super Cooper, her youngest son. She does her best writing, in her head, during her daily walks in wild, romantic, beautiful Wyoming.