

Saying Goodbye

She pulled into the driveway and parked underneath the ancient willow tree guarding the walkway that led to the home. She pushed her sunglasses atop her head and checked herself in the mirror as she told herself to breathe.

Deep breaths, Katherine, deep breaths.

She opened the car door and stepped onto the cobblestone driveway. The heat hit her frail body making her almost lose her breath.

She stood in awe, her brown skin soaking up the sun. The house looked just the same as it had the first time she had laid eyes on it; beautiful.

It was three stories tall with columns holding up the second floor patio. It was the typical plantation house of the South. It was white with yellow shutters and had a personality all its own. The yard was laced with gardens and a creek ran under a tall oak tree that held the tree house she and her friends had played in when they were younger. No matter how many homes she owned or how many beds she slept in, no other would ever compare to this one.

She walked to the white fence surrounding the property and reached to touch it. She closed her eyes.

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She was ten years old again and she, Claire, and Jacob were painting that fence just as they had every summer. They were laughing. She could smell the wet paint and feel the wet summer wind in her sweaty hair. She was happy. She opened her eyes and realized that for the first time in what seemed like forever, she was smiling.

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A voice from behind startled her, “Miss Bradley?”

She turned to see a slender man about 6’2” dressed in a suit that probably cost more than her car was worth. He was carrying briefcase that matched his suit and had small business-like glasses perched on his nose. His face was ghostly white and expressionless as he stared upon her brown face looking serious. *Looks like a lawyer*, she thought to herself as she shakily answered, “Yes?”

“It says here that you are the next of kin and the only family Mrs. Bradley had left. Is this correct?” he asked as he looked up from the stack of papers in his hand.

She looked at her feet. *Oh, so he is a lawyer, this must be my lucky day*, she thought. Her eyes met his again and she answered, “I guess it is.”

“Good,” he said with an unwavering business manner, “then you’re just the lady I need to talk to about Mrs. Bradley’s will.”

He sauntered quickly along the walkway leading to the house she called home so long ago. His feet crushed the colorful leaves below them, and hatred burned in her stomach. She followed hesitantly behind wishing she were ten again. He stopped short of the first step up to the front porch and turned to face her.

“Oh,” he said with not even the faintest amount of concern in his voice or face, “sorry about your loss.”

No he isn’t! She thought. *He didn’t even know her and he didn’t care to. He’s just doing his job. He’s getting paid to witness my misfortune.*

She stumbled through the doorway to her childhood haven. She looked around as if she were a young girl again, and suddenly, she was.

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“Mommy, why do I have to stay here?” her five-year-old self asked.

“Because, Sweetie, Mommy has to go away for a while,” said a lady who had become a stranger to her.

“Why can’t I come?”

“Mommy can’t take you.”

“Why not?” she asked as she started to cry. Katherine had never liked goodbyes.

“Because,” said the lady whose chocolate skin had grown paler in the last few months and whose eyes that used to shine and sparkle had grown dark and dull, “I don’t want you with me!”

She was angry, and Katherine was scared. She drew up her hand to strike the cowering girl as she screamed, “Stop that crying!”

Suddenly Katherine felt warm arms lift her into a soft embrace, and for the first time in her life, she felt safe.

“Stop this,” spoke a rich voice unfamiliar to Katherine. “Get on outta here and leave me the child. You ain’t got no business bein’ a momma, and I raised you better than this. Now you get on outta here and leave the last remaining good in you here with me. You ain’t bringing this baby into your drugs and confusion. I’m still your momma and you ain’t actin’ like this in my house.”

The lady ripped a golden chain from her neck and threw it at her mother’s feet. She slammed the door and sped down the driveway and out of Katherine’s life forever.

The old lady hugged the little girl and said, “Now, I’m your grandma, but you can call me Momma B.”

She walked to a rocking chair beside an open picture window and sat down, causing it to creak. She set Katherine up in her lap so that she could see her face.

“Aw, now aren’t you beautiful?”

Katherine’s little fingers reached up to touch her grandma’s face. Her skin was the color of coffee and milk and her eyes were nearly black and shone with love. Momma B. grabbed the little girl’s fingers and kissed them.

“Oh, oh, oh, sweet as sugar!” she sang.

Katherine giggled. Momma B. smiled at her and gave her another hug. Katherine looked up at her grandma and said, “I love you, Momma B.”

“Oh, listen at you. I love you too, Katydid.”

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Katherine shook her head, bringing her back to reality. She reached for her locket. Like her mother, even with the smoldering temperature, it was cold as ice.

“By the way,” spoke the lawyer, “my name’s Brian Wilson. I’m an attorney from Wilson and Warner. I’ll be taking you every step of the way and walking you through Mrs. Bradley’s will.”

“Okay,” she said, but she wasn’t really listening. She hadn’t been home in nearly ten years.

It still looked the same, still smelled the same. She’d missed this place so much. She walked to the window and sat in that same rocking chair Momma B. had so many years ago. She inhaled deeply and could almost feel Momma B.’s arms around her. She closed her eyes, and she was six, waiting on the school bus on her first day of school.

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“My name’s Jacob. I live down the street, and this is Claire. She lives in the big houses on Oak Avenue. What’s your name anyways?” spoke a lanky boy with a sweet but crooked smile and dark skin that mirrored her own.

“Oh, my name's Katherine. But, my Momma B. calls me Katydid. I live with my Momma B. in that house.” She pointed to the house she now called home.

“Oh, we call her Momma B. too. We stay there ‘til our parents want us to come home. We love Momma B.”

Katherine looked at Claire. She looked like a princess. She had blonde curly hair and big blue eyes. She wore a frilly dress and shiny shoes as white as her complexion. She was the most beautiful person Katherine had ever seen.

“Don’t you have a momma?” asked Jacob.

“No,” said Katherine purely.

“Oh, well, me and Claire are best friends. You want to be best friends with us, Katydid?”

“I guess so.”

“Okay. You’re our best friends, too. We’ll show you the hideout after school.”

“It’s real nice,” said Claire. “I hope you like it.”

She was even nice. Katherine was sure she was perfect.

“Oh, here’s the bus. You can sit with me. Ladies first,” said Jacob as he held out his hand and let the scared little girls hold it as they stepped onto the bus for their first ride to school. Ever since that day, they’d never left each other’s sight.

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“Miss Bradley, I know it’s a hard time for you, but this is important. Please try to focus,” said the man as stiff as his suit was pressed.

“Oh, yes. Sorry.”

“Now, as I was saying. The estate, the money, everything is yours with the exception of two items or, well, yes, I guess you could call them items.”

“What might these items be?” asked Katherine already knowing.

“I know it may sound peculiar but it says it right here. The creek is to be left to a Claire Edwards and the tree house to a Jacob Thatcher. I’m not sure if you can make sense of that, but I sure can’t.”

Katherine just smiled.

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It was winter and they were all eight. They sat in front of the fireplace giggling as they strung popcorn for the tree. Momma B. walked in and gave them all hot cocoa as warm as her smile.

“What you chillens want for Christmas?” asked Momma B. as she sat down in her rocking chair with a sigh.

“I want the tree house so when I grow up I can give it to my kids and tell them stories and make them happy,” said Jacob as sure as ever.

“I want the creek, “ said Claire. “ The creek is my favorite, Momma B. It reminds me of you Momma B. ‘cause it’s pretty too.”

“Aw, thank you, Baby. What about you, Katydid?”

Katherine thought for a while and finally looked up at Momma B and said, “I want an angel.”

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I guess I was just too little to notice I already had my angel, thought Katherine.

“Well, I guess that’s all. If you have any questions call me,” said the lawyer as he slid a business card across the table.

“She wouldn’t call you even if she did have any questions,” said a man’s voice from behind her.

“She’s as stubborn as a mule,” said another, and she smiled, knowing just whom those voices belonged to. Her best friends.

She got up and ran to give them both hugs. It had been way too long.

“How you holding up?” asked Jacob flashing a smile that made her melt but didn’t hide the sadness in his eyes.

“Oh, you know. It’s just hard.” *She’d always hated goodbyes.*

“We all loved her. That’s for sure,” said Claire honestly.

Claire was as beautiful as ever. Her eyes were still like two shiny sapphires and her blonde hair still sat in fresh curls all about her perfectly white face.

Jacob was a different story. He wasn’t that lanky little boy from her memories, but a man.

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“Have you ever been kissed before, Katydid?” asked Jacob

“What’s a kiss?”

“This!” said Jacob as he pressed his lips to Katherine’s on the bus.

“Ewwwww!” she yelled as she ran off the bus and into Momma B.’s arms crying as soon as it had come to a stop.

“What’s the matter, Baby Girl?”

“Jacob was trying to love me.”

Momma B. couldn’t help but laugh as she held Katherine until the tears stopped.

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“What time’s the funeral?” asked Claire.

“In an hour. You girls had better get ready if you want to be on time,” answered Jacob as he looked down at his watch.

Jacob used the bathroom downstairs to get cleaned up while the girls climbed the stairs, rushing to get ready. Jacob was like an older brother and protector for both Claire and Katherine.

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“What’s the matter, Katydid? Get a B instead of an A?” asked Jacob. His smile vanished as she handed him a letter, her tears never ceasing. Jacob read it and looked at Katydid. His face turned red as fire grew in his eyes.

“He dumped you right before the dance? I knew he was trouble.”

“No, he’s perfect,” said Katydid looking out the window.

Next thing she knew Jacob was out of his seat yelling for the bus driver to stop the bus. After finally getting the grumpy old man to listen, he jumped the three stairs leading off the bus and ran back towards the school.

“What are you thinking giving up a girl like her?” he asked his new enemy.

“It was just over man. Chill.”

“Don’t tell me to chill. You don’t even know what you had if you’re willing to give it up just like that.”

“Look man, I’m just done with her. Take her if you want.”

“She’s like my sister, and you don’t mess with my family!”

Jacob reared back and punched the kid in the nose. His entire face was swollen for the dance, and the girl Katherine had been dumped for broke it off and asked Jacob to the dance. Jacob had turned her down, even though she was beautiful, and had chosen to escort Katherine.

That was just Jacob, though. He was always watching out for his best friends.

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“How long has it been?”

“Since graduation.”

“I miss this place,” said Claire.

“I miss you and Jacob and all our memories.”

“Nothing’s changed around here. It’s nice.”

“The less things change, the more they never seem the same.”

“I know what you mean. It’ll never be the same without Momma B., though.”

“She’s the only one that ever loved me.”

“That’s not true, Katydid. You were always like a sister to Jacob and me. We all loved each other, and we all loved Momma B.”

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Katherine heard the phone ring. It had to be late. She rolled onto her side to look at her alarm clock; 1:57 A.M. *I wonder who’s calling so late?* she thought as she threw the covers off her body and started down the stairs.

Rain hit the windows and roof filling the house with noise. But, she could still hear Momma B.'s tears as she hung up the phone.

“Come here Baby,” whispered Momma B. as she pulled the thirteen-year-old child into her lap.

“What is it?” asked Katydid getting scared.

“It’s your Momma, Baby. She’s died of an overdose. I’m sorry,” the old lady said as she began to sob.

“I don’t care! She never loved me and I don’t love her!” screamed Katherine as she ran through the door and into the storm.

“Katydid! Come back!” yelled Momma B. But Katydid was already on her bike and halfway down the dark driveway.

Normally, Katherine would have run straight to Jacob and cried for hours. But, before she even realized where she was going she found herself parked in front of Claire’s huge baby blue house. She climbed the latticework on the side of the house and pushed her way into Claire’s bedroom window, still crying. Claire jumped.

“Katydid?” asked Claire looking concerned.

Katherine collapsed onto the floor and, through tears, told Claire everything. Claire crawled down in the floor listening carefully as she sat beside her friend.

“I hate goodbyes, and I hate her!” said Katydid.

Claire put her arm around Katydid and softly said, “If you look a little harder, or maybe a little less, in almost every goodbye’s a hello.”

Katherine placed her head on Claire’s shoulder amazed at how wise her friend truly was.

“I never thought about it like that,” said Katydid as her tears slowed.

“That’s why we have best friends,” spoke Claire with a smile, “to see things the way we don’t.”

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They finished getting dressed in silence and rushed to Watson’s Funeral Home. Everything was a blur from that point on.

They were all seated as the family. The service was beautiful and nearly the entire town showed up. Momma B. had been a mother to everyone. She was buried by the creek under the tree house with an angel engraved on her tombstone, which read:

*“A mother to many
An angel to all.”*

Shortly after the funeral Katherine called for a taxi. She drove to Wilson and Warner and arranged for the sale of the beautiful house. The only place she’d ever called home. She cried as she signed her name at the bottom of the papers.

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They were nine and it was Christmas time again. They were making gingerbread houses when Claire looked up from hers and asked, “Momma B., what makes a home?”

“Love, Baby.”

“How do you know when love’s there?” asked Jacob.

“You feel it. Love isn’t something you can describe. It’s a feeling. A look in someone’s eyes.”

“Like butterflies when you’re nervous?” asked Katherine.

“That’s kind of what it feels like, Baby.”

“Where you in love with Grandpa, Momma B.?”

“Yes, I was.”

“Why’d he die?” asked Claire.

“Because, God loved him and wanted to spend some time with him, too.”

“I don’t like goodbyes,” said Katherine.

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Katherine pulled up to the house and paid the taxi driver for his services.

“Where you been, Katydid?” asked Jacob.

“We need to talk,” was all Katherine said.

They all went out to the tree house and sat inside as Katherine broke the news. All three of them were crying by the time Katydid was done telling them she had put the house up for sale.

They stayed up all night talking in the tree house. They talked about Momma B. and all the good times they’d had. About four o’clock they all dozed off, and for the first time in a long time they slept in the tree house.

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“How ‘bout one more night in the ole’ tree house ladies?” said Jacob on the night before high school graduation.

“I don’t guess one more night will hurt,” said Claire smiling.

They all piled in the tree house and talked for hours. The next day they were all so exhausted they could barely throw their caps. But, one night without sleep was a small price to pay for a night in the tree house with their best friends.

The all said goodbye. Except Katherine. Jacob headed to Duke to become a doctor, and Claire headed to Vanderbilt to become a lawyer. The first night without them she spent alone in the tree house missing her friends.

“What’s wrong, Katydid? Why don’t you come down?” called Momma B. from the ground.

“I don’t like goodbyes,” was all Katydid had to say. Momma B. left her alone.

Katydid couldn’t stand to leave Momma B. all alone, so she stayed for a few more weeks before she moved to Charleston to start her internship and her life.

The three best friends had called each other once or twice. They sent each other Christmas cards each year. But gradually, as most childhood friends do, they grew apart.

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Katherine stuck around for a week after the funeral and finished cleaning out the hope chest of her childhood. The phone rang. She ran down stairs.

“Hello?” she said out of breath.

“Miss Bradley?”

“Yes?”

“This is Brian Wilson. You’ve got two offers on your home.”

“Already?”

“We’ll be over around five to view it. See you then.”

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She had her feet curled beneath her as she sat drinking iced tea. Her stomach sank when she saw the car in the driveway. *Am I making the right decision?* she asked herself as she held her breath.

Claire and Jacob got out of the car and smiled at their best friend. Katherine's mouth fell open.

"We figured it should stay in the family," said Jacob.

Katherine started to cry. She got off the swing and pulled them into a tight embrace. She choked on her tears as she said, "I never did like goodbyes."

Mr. Wilson turned to go.

"Mr. Wilson?" yelled Katherine.

"Yes, Miss Bradley?"

"You know how you asked me if I was Momma B.'s only family?"

"Yes?"

"I lied. Have you met my brother, Jacob, or my sister, Claire?"

The stiff young man smiled as he walked back down the cobblestone path to his car and drove away.