

Saying Goodbye

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to the people, places, and things
in our lives

Julie Rember *Editor*

Mike O'Mary *Series Editor*

Dream of Things

Downers Grove Illinois USA

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Editor: Julie Rember
Series Editor: Mike O'Mary

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Foreword



When my daughter was five, her great-grandfather died. At the funeral, I read a story about him, and his two sons-in-law each said a few heartfelt words.

After the last person spoke, my daughter, who was sitting in the front row next to her grandmother, stood up in her chair, turned around to face the room full of mourners, and said, “Is that it?”

That moment sticks with me because it shows that in the midst of the most solemn of goodbyes, there is sadness, yes. But there is also irony and humor and in some strange way, a sense of continuity. So it is, I believe, with all goodbyes.

Years later, Stephen Parrish, author of *The Tavernier Stones*, sent me a story called “Bridget.” I had just launched *Dream of Things* with the intent of publishing anthologies of creative nonfiction that will fill the gap between popular anthologies that publish stories I regard as “short and sweet” (sometimes so saccharine-sweet they are hard to

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swallow), and the *Best American Essays* series, which I love, but which tend to be quite a bit longer. So the goal for Dream of Things anthologies is to be not short and sweet, but short and *deep*. With depth comes authenticity. The result is stories that are easier to swallow because they are authentic, and easier to digest because they average 1,250 words in length.

Stephen Parrish's story fit the bill...short and deep...but it didn't fit neatly into any of the anthology topics that were in the works. So we created a new anthology—a collection of stories about saying goodbye. The topic struck a chord, and the stories came pouring in from around the world... from the United States, Canada, Ireland, Great Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere. The result is this book—a remarkable collection of stories, and the first of what I hope will be many anthologies from Dream of Things.

I say these stories are remarkable not just because of the quality of the writing and the subject matter, but also because a remarkable thing happened as I read them. I cried at sad stories and laughed at funny ones...that was no surprise. But I also learned valuable lessons about how people say goodbye—sometimes under the most difficult of circumstances. I learned because the authors who contributed to this collection were unflinchingly open and honest when it came to sharing very personal stories about how they and their loved ones say goodbye. It was a lesson that has better prepared me for whatever the future may hold. Thanks to the authors and their beautiful stories about saying goodbye to family


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members, relationships, jobs, pets, old homes, couches, jogging suits, the past, and other things, I will be better at saying goodbye in my life whenever the time comes. You will be, too.

I hope you enjoy these stories. Goodbye—for now.

Mike O'Mary, *Series Editor*

Introduction

n a language containing a quarter of a million words, we can say the same thing many ways—farewell, see ya, bye-bye, catch you later, ta-ta, goodbye. We even borrow words from other languages: adios, adieu, hasta la vista, ciao. On the other hand, just one word—*goodbye*—can mean many things. We use it when we head out on a fifteen-minute walk around the block, or after we’ve spent an evening with good friends. But we also say it when we lose something forever—a friendship, a home, a loved one, an idea of ourselves.

And often, we can’t say “hello” again until we’ve said “goodbye.”

Last year, I helped my mother with a book project. She was compiling the letters that my grandfather wrote to my grandmother when he was stationed in the South Pacific during World War II. Reading letters I hadn’t even known existed, I met a man who had hopes for the future, questions

about his place in the world and universe, ambitions for his family and himself—not to mention a terrific sense of humor.

I thought back to the last time I saw my grandfather alive, back in 1993, after he had descended into the darkness of dementia. Back then, his death came as a relief. His memorial service remembered someone far different than the childlike person my grandpa had become.

Now, having read the letters he wrote to his wife when he was twenty-nine, in the midst of great fear and danger and longing, I wish I could say both “hello” and “goodbye” to the grandfather I never really knew. For the first time, I truly grieve for him.

The stories in *Saying Goodbye* explore how we leave the people, places, and things in our lives. In “The Evolution of Your Goodbyes,” Ruth Schiffmann painfully and beautifully shares her response to her father’s decline. Dianna Calareso’s “We Are Gathered,” a meditation on family, grief, and hope, weaves together the deaths of her brother, cousin, and grandfather with the joy of a wedding. And Diana M. Amadeo and Katrin Horowitz both tell stories of how women close to them faced death with courage and dignity.

Not all of these stories are about saying goodbye to someone who is dying. Glynis Scrivens uses her son’s “Santa sack” as a metaphor for his crossing over the threshold between childhood and adulthood. Saying goodbye to teaching after thirty-seven years isn’t easy for Ann Ingalls, but her description evokes both the joy and heartbreak of leaving one stage of life for another.

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Other stories in this collection describe losing a pet, leaving behind a child's pacifier, letting go of the anger and pain of old enmities, even the agony of giving up a newborn for adoption.


Saying goodbye isn't always a bad thing. Annmarie B. Tait's account of her family's sofas will leave you in stitches. And by the end of "Au Revoir May" by Jane Shortall, you'll feel like cheering.

Taken together, these thirty-one stories serve as amazing examples of people saying heartfelt goodbyes with grace, dignity, and good humor. I am grateful to the authors who shared them, and I hope this book will spark conversations about all the ways we say goodbye.

Julie Rember, *Editor*

Bridget

Stephen Parrish

 It was February, 1967. I was eight years old. My family had just moved from Kentucky to a small town on the Vermilion River in Illinois. A Catholic grade school was within walking distance of our new house, so my parents took advantage of an opportunity to reverse a heathen trend and enrolled me.

The first thing I learned when I joined my third grade class was one of my fellow students, a girl named Bridget, couldn't meet me yet because she was in the hospital. Not long afterwards, Bridget died.

If my teacher, Sister Joseph, had known that what she was about to do would traumatize me, I'm sure she wouldn't have done it. She took the class for a walk. We marched down the street in the morning chill, turned a corner, and entered a funeral home. On display in the middle of a large

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and otherwise empty room was a casket. The casket was open, and there lay Bridget.

Sister Joseph instructed us to gather next to the casket on our knees, press our palms together, and recite a sequence of exhortations on behalf of Bridget's soul. As luck or providence would have it, I ended up kneeling next to Bridget's face, my elbows resting on the edge of the casket. Students jostling for position behind me shoved me even farther forward, so that I was leaning over her.

She didn't look at all dead. She looked like she was asleep. She wore a white lace dress, and her hands were clasped across her stomach. She had soft brown hair, smooth skin, and long eyelashes. She was pretty.

We said prayers. We sang songs. All the while I stared into Bridget's face, from fourteen inches away, waiting for her eyes to flutter open. Waiting for her to look up at the strange kid gazing down at her. The only kid in the class she didn't know. The only third grade classmate whose acquaintance she would make *after* she died.

On the way back to school, in an effort to grab onto something corporeal, something of existential certainty, I searched the sidewalk beneath my feet. I was ready to pick up a flower, if one should happen to appear so early in the year, or a frog; anything I understood, anything I could hold onto that reconnected me with a world in which one sunrise followed another, and no sunrise was ever the last.

I saw a penny. I broke ranks to snatch it up. It shined with freshly minted newness. 1966, it said. The last full year of Bridget's life.

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The church held a memorial service. I attended, at Sister Joseph's insistence, and not knowing where else to sit, I joined a group dressed all in black, clustered near the front. I realized too late it was Bridget's family. No one complained about an innocent-looking, towheaded, eight-year-old intruder, so I stayed put.

The priest spoke in a plastic and authoritative tone. He asked a rhetorical question, one distinguished by the absence of a question mark, of a rational follow-up, of even an attempt. One whose answer eluded him as much as anyone:

Why did Bridget die.

Sitting to my right was a man I guessed was Bridget's grandfather. His eyebrows were in bushy disarray, the way older men who no longer fussed with their appearance let them grow. He was convulsing. Holding the backrest of the pew in front of him for support. Gasping for air between stifled sobs.

He didn't know why Bridget died, either.

I went home after the service and did the only thing an eight-year-old could do, one whose newest friend was dead, and dead on the day he met her: I made her my imaginary companion.

For a girl, Bridget was pretty good at climbing trees. And wading in creeks. She clutched her white dress above her knees to keep it dry, and was careful not to slip on rocks. She didn't like toy soldiers or G.I. Joes, but she understood when I wanted to play with them. And with other kids. She never got in the way.

I told my dad about her. I told him I had an invisible

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companion, and that she was a girl. What he said was insightful: “Enjoy her while she’s still around.”

As I got older, and flesh-and-blood girls took part in my life in a way an imaginary one couldn’t, Bridget’s white shoes and stockings remained disconcertingly visible beneath a curtain that had already begun to separate us. She hadn’t grown at all since we met at the funeral home. She was still eight. I needed to be with kids my own age. It was time to tell her.

You have to go now, Bridget. You can’t keep waiting for me.

The girl disappeared but the curtain remained. Behind it were memories of running through sprinklers and chasing after lightning bugs, all stored away like monochrome prints in an old attic. As the years passed I sometimes watched the curtain, hoping to see movement, but nobody was back there. I eventually came to realize that I hadn’t let Bridget go after all.

In 2005, thirty-eight years after she died, I kept a promise I’d made when my family moved away from that small town on the Vermilion River. I had business in northern Illinois, and when it was concluded I aimed my rental car south, navigated back to my boyhood home, and found my way to the library.

It was easier than I expected. The librarian showed me how to feed the newspaper microfiche, how to scroll from day to day, beginning the first of February 1967. A few minutes later, there it was, the obituary of an eight-year-old girl, a student at a local Catholic school. I read the announcement of the memorial service I had attended thirty-eight

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years before. I read the names of relatives I had sat with. At the end of the article I got what I came for: the name of the cemetery.

It was on the outskirts of town, in a place that was always quiet in the middle of the day. I parked my car on the side of the road, then systematically worked my way across rows of headstones, looking for Bridget's. Three-quarters of the way through, I found it. A pillow marker. A simple block of granite commemorating a brief and consequential life.

For me the distinction between what was and what should have been has blurred beyond recognition, and foiled even my own stubborn faith. All I carry with me is a kaleidoscope of feelings, a conviction to get them down on paper, and the sense of peace that results when I have communicated something true and unobscured by static detail—when I have helped an otherwise forgotten little girl to live forever.

I stood over the monument. A dusty curtain appeared. Beneath it, white shoes and stockings came into view. The curtain eased open.

The eyelashes. The way she clutched the hem of her dress.

You have to go now, Steve. You can't keep waiting for me.

I reached into my pocket. Out came a penny. Its luster had long since faded, but the date was still clear. A faint halo of green oxidation circled its outer edge. I wedged the penny into the soil next to the monument, pressing down with my thumb to sink it as deeply as possible. Then I said goodbye and walked back to my car.

The Evolution of Your Goodbyes

Ruth Schiffmann



he day your father forgets your name doesn't come out of nowhere. You see it coming over weeks, months, and years. There's the day he orders pizza and can't remember the address of the house he's lived in for forty-five years. The morning he pours orange juice in a bowl and drinks with a spoon. The afternoon you arrive at his house to find him wearing two pairs of pants, five shirts, and two hats. With every detail that slips from his grasp you feel the moment that he will forget you approaching like a dreaded, unavoidable fate.

So you try to outrun it. You do this by cooking. You cook in large batches, lining plastic dishes on counter tops and spooning stews and slotted spoonfuls of vegetables into multi-sectioned plates. You label each container in bold blue print, and build leaning towers of stacked covered dishes in your freezer until the next trip to your parents' house, when

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you will carefully rebuild the towers in their freezer.

After each daily visit, your father walks you from the dining room, carrying the empty plastic dishes down the back steps and to the car. He waits for you to get in, closes the door, and hesitates at the open window. His eyes are wide and bright. You feel him holding you close with his gaze, searching for words that he can't quite find until finally they come. "I'm glad you came," he says, and you know that he's dredged the words from deep in his heart.

Suddenly you are glad that large, dark sunglasses are back in style. You slip them on and start the engine. As he heads back to the house, breaking into a jog to make sure he's at the picture window before you back down the driveway, your heart hurts knowing that you mean that much to him. Before he's out of view, your eyes fill. The tears on your face fall off your chin, and you're relieved that from the window where he's waving to you like a five-year-old, he can only see you smiling from behind movie star sunglasses.

Each day that he greets you by name is a gift to you and a triumph to him. You realize that he's using your name deliberately to test himself, or maybe to keep himself from letting you slip away.

The day comes when you gather the empty plates and head for the door, but he doesn't rise to walk you to your car. You know that there is no other reason than he has forgotten that it is what he usually does. As you climb into your car your chest is a little heavier, your brow knit a little tighter and suddenly, you wish you had hugged him and told him that you loved him. But that's not the kind of family you

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were. Or are. Instead you back down the driveway, look for him at the window, smile and return his exuberant wave.

The months go by and then suddenly one day you are stunned when he utters a complete sentence. It blindsides you as you realize how long it's been since he's strung words together or joined in a conversation. You wonder where the words have gone, how you could have missed them stealing away. Until you look back, reexamine the visits of a handful of months and recall the struggle in his voice as he fought to keep them from dropping off.

Finally, as you leave one day you can't help yourself. You hug him. He won't even know it's unusual, you think. You will hug him and he will think that's what you do. You wrap your arms around his frail body, feel the sharp angles of his shoulder blades, but he doesn't hug you back. Doesn't know how.

One warm spring day as you sit together in the living room listening to an Elvis CD, you suggest going for a walk. He's on his feet in an instant, following you to the coat closet, eager and excited. As you lead his arm into the sleeve of his sweatshirt he reaches out for you. A hug? you wonder. But then you realize, he is dancing. With you. And it doesn't matter that you are not that kind of family. A family that dances. Because he is smiling and holding your hand and enjoying the music. So you forget about the sweatshirt, and the walk. You take his other hand and dance.

You hold on to the days as long as you can. You serve him lunch on a tray as he sits in his recliner, but have to remind him how to pick up his fork and bring it to his mouth. He

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falls asleep after a few bites. It takes two of you to get him, half asleep, from the chair to his bed. Elvis is singing in the background, but today you're not dancing.

Eventually, your visits find you signing in at a reception desk, asking strangers to punch numbers into a keypad to unlock doors. Both of you are content to sit and smile at one another while Bing Crosby sings "You Are My Sunshine" and Frank Sinatra croons "Strangers in the Night." It strikes you that he hasn't called you by your name in a very long time, but he still brightens at the sight of your face. As the song ends, your father echoes Frank's "dooby dooby doo," and you both laugh. He holds your gaze and you wish you could read his mind. When you leave you hug him, tell him you will be back soon, and always, always you say, "I love you."