There Will Be No Goodbyes

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It’s early September in Vienna, Virginia. For a moment, I stop to gaze at the open fields beyond the fence bordering the farm. The land seems to welcome the change of seasons. There is a chill in the evening air I hadn’t noticed before, and other changes in the landscape I might’ve recognized in years past. But the passage of time has taken on a new meaning—no longer marked solely by changes in the weather.

The packages I hold are suddenly heavy, making me move toward the house. As I open the back door, the dog is there to greet me. I pet her, stroking her soft fur. “So, how’s Mom today? Let’s go check.”

The dog follows me to the bottom of the living room steps. I hesitate, not wanting to wake Chris. Then I hear a rustling sound upstairs.

“Chris, you awake?”
“‘I’m awake.”
“Just stopped by with the groceries you needed. You hungry?”
“Not really.”  
“How ’bout a salad and some fruit?”  
“No, I’m really not hungry.”  
“Can I come up?”  
“Please do.”

After putting the groceries away, I grab the *Washington Post* and start upstairs, Maggie following at my heels. At the top of the steps I trip, almost landing flat on my face. “Who turned out the lights?” I ask, trying to regain my balance.  
“Sorry. I was sitting here in the dark waiting for you.”  
“Can I turn on the light?”  
“Okay.”

I feel for the switch, flipping it on with the palm of my hand. “There, now you can gaze upon my beauty.”

Today I get a smile from her. She’s sitting up, pillows propped behind her. She looks pale and tired. I push those thoughts away.  
“Brought the paper.”

“Thanks. What would I do without you, Buddie? Guess I’d be in bigger trouble than I already am.”  
“I’ll be here as long as you need me.”

Chris yawns. “I’m really tired. Think I’ll take a nap.”  
“Maggie needs a walk. We’ll go for a quick one, then I’ll lock up for you.” I flick the light switch off again.

“Buddie, before you leave, can I ask a favor? Will you stay and hold me for a while?”

I stop in the doorway, turning to look at her—a soft shadow in the darkness. In the moonlight I see the outline of her small frame, hunched over, trembling. Without saying anything, I sit down on the edge of the bed. When I feel her hand touch my shoulder, I take her gently into my arms; she seems so frail and small.

“I’m scared,” she says, resting her head on my shoulder.  
“So am I.”

I hold her like that for hours that seem like moments. A thousand thoughts assault me, of what life might be like without Chris. It had been six months since Chris had found out about
her heart condition. Cardiomyopathy. The cumbersome word sticks in my brain. A degenerative disease that destroys the heart muscle. The doctor told Chris it had probably been caused by a virus that attacked her heart. She could live six months. She could live six years. Could live? Could die. Thoughts of living without Chris bring a stinging emptiness—the same emptiness I had felt as a child, not yet six. My father was dead of cancer at the age of thirty-two. Gone. The image of a man faded with time. What kind of man had he been?

I leave the room as Chris lies sleeping. Sitting for the rest of the night on the downstairs sofa, I stare into the blackness. The anger, the pain, the confusion are all there, swirling like autumn leaves on a windy day. I can’t sort through my thoughts fast enough to make sense of anything, too empty to know how to cope. I pray that I can put my emotions and doubts aside to be strong for her.

* * *

From my office window at radio stations WASH-FM and AM, I have an excellent view of the Old Downtown section of Washington, D.C. Daydreaming, I watch the hustle and bustle of 9th street. Not far away is the White House, the F.B.I. Building, Ford’s Theatre and the National Archives. It feels like the center of everything happening in this city—and an ideal location if you happen to be a news reporter.

The extension in my office rings and I pick it up.

“Buddie, it’s Harry. Stop by to see me before you leave.”

Hearing the name “Buddie,” I laugh silently. Even my boss has picked up on the childhood nickname.

Harold Taylor, general manager of both radio stations, is on the phone when I arrive. He motions me in and I take the seat in front of his desk. Dressed in an expensive gray suit, he’s leaning back in his chair. He talks in a loud, booming voice while clipping his fingernails—tiny pieces of nail landing in various locations across the large desk.
Fifteen minutes later, Harry ends the conversation, slamming the phone down in the professional manner to which I’ve grown accustomed.

“Buddie, how are you?” he says beaming. He places the nail clippers in the top right drawer of his desk. I wonder what other things he keeps in that drawer.

“Fine, Harry. What can I do for you?”

“You’re covering the rally tomorrow at the Mall.”

“The rally for AIDS research funding? Yes, I am.”

“There will be live reports, I assume.”

(Of course.)

Not one to mince words, Harry gets right to the point of our meeting. “I want to caution you on any live interviews. Let’s be prudent when it comes to on-air remarks. I don’t want to hear a lot of radical homosexuals screaming about how rotten the government and this country have been to them. If remarks are calmly made, and backed up with facts, fine. But if you’ve got to do some creative editing in the studio, then do it.”

“I don’t anticipate any problems, Harry. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, sponsor of the rally, is a very reputable organization. I don’t think I’d call them radicals.”

“Buddie, you’re an excellent reporter. But let’s not get caught up in idealistic fantasies. We’ve got a lot of good sponsors and advertisers we can’t afford to piss off. Are we understanding each other?”

“Yes, but I think you have a misconception of who these people are. They’re confronting some serious issues. Lack of funding for AIDS research is a reality.”

“No doubt. But as I said, if there are any problems, the story’s going to get buried at the end of a five minute newscast.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

“Good. One more thing. Take Doug with you. He’s new and needs the experience.”

I nod and get up. As I exit Harry’s office, a stream of less than prudent thoughts flies through my head. Without a single mental edit, I let them fly.
The Mall, located in between the Capitol and the Washington Monument, is swarming with thousands of people. Press passes in hand, Doug and I make our way to the section up front which has been roped off for reporters. In between his grumblings, Doug sets up the remote broadcasting equipment.

“Need some help?” I offer, bending down next to him.

“No. I can’t believe I had to give up my Saturday to record a bunch of queers.”

“I’ll try to forget I heard that remark.”

“Why should you care?”

“We’re reporters. We’re supposed to be objective.”

Doug stares at me, his dark eyes shifting up and down. Then he laughs, a sickening kind of laugh that goes right through me. “I thought there was something funny about you,” he says with disgust. “You’re one of them, aren’t you?”

I feel myself turning red—not out of shame, but of anger. “That’s none of your business. We’re here to do a job.”

“Guess that answers my question,” he says, shaking his head. “And I thought being here was bad enough. Now I’ve got to work with one.”

“I’m not interested in what you think, now or ever. We’re here to cover this rally whether you like it or not. I’m going to get a couple of interviews before this thing gets underway. Stay here with the rest of the equipment.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere.”

Behind the podium and stage area I find a group of National Gay and Lesbian Task Force officials. I gravitate toward two women, clipboards in hand, engaged in a vigorous conversation.

“Excuse me, I’m Liz Callow from WASH-FM. I’d like to get an interview from an NGLTF representative on today’s activities.”

The women eye my press badge, then escort me about five yards to my right where a group of people are congregated.
“You’ll want to talk to Kathryn McGowan. She’s in charge of p.r., and one of the organizers of today’s rally. Hang around. I’ll get her for you.”

While waiting, I check my equipment to make sure it works. Placing a new tape inside the recorder, I test the record levels, readjusting them slightly.

A few moments later, I notice a short, slim woman walking in my direction. In addition to a red ribbon pin, she’s wearing a button that says simply, “Research Funding for AIDS.”

“Hi, Kate McGowan. I understand you’d like an interview.”

“Yes, I’m Liz Callow from WASH-FM. I only need to ask a few questions.”

“Shoot,” she answers, folding her arms in front of her.

Turning on the microphone, I look up at the woman standing in front of me. She’s disarming, her face strikingly beautiful. Suddenly I’m nervous.

“Do you believe that funding for AIDS research is keeping pace with the spread of the disease?”

“Absolutely not. That’s what this rally is all about. We need to raise the level of AIDS funding, and we need to do it now. Research into new drugs, prevention, treatment and a cure has to be given a higher priority.”

As she talks, I can’t help noticing her strength and confidence. I follow the movement of her hands as she speaks with a directness and knowledge that’s impressive.

“We need to see more community-based AIDS services dedicated to prevention, counseling, diagnosis and other health-related issues. AIDS-designated care centers are still needed in the major cities throughout the country to cope with the rising number of new patients and to purchase and administer AZT.”

“There’s been an increase in funding, particularly federal, in the past two years, correct?”

Probably in her late thirties, I think, noticing the lines around her eyes and mouth. At five feet eight-inches, I’m several inches taller than she is, but her slight build in no way diminishes the strength of her presence.
“Yes, that’s true. But with the first Republican congress in 50 years, we’re fearful of cut-backs.”
“We have an AIDS Czar—and big p.r. events like World AIDS Day. Are these changes helping?”
“On the surface in terms of general awareness. But some of this stuff isn’t very meaningful in terms of solid results.”
“What do you hope will be accomplished by today’s rally?”
I notice her eyes—the color of rich, brown earth. Her hair falls softly in hues of auburn and blonde.
“To impress upon the public, that although we’ve made some moves in the right direction regarding funding, we still have a long way to go. This is a disease that’s already claimed more lives than the Korean War, Vietnam War and Desert Storm combined. We need more fully-funded health studies and programs that’ll finally put an end to the dying.”
I turn off the recorder, signaling the end of the interview.
“Thanks for your time.”
“Will this be broadcast tonight?”
“During the six o’clock newscast.”
The woman extends her hand and I take it. “Look forward to hearing it. I listen to your station all the time. Just moved here from New York. It’ll be nice to hear a familiar voice on my way home from work.”

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Two hours of editing later, the story is ready for the evening newscast. The final version seems anticlimactic, but includes the strong, eloquent words of Kathryn McGowan. I’m certain hers is a voice I’ll hear again.

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When I arrive at Chris’s farm it’s quiet and peaceful, the darkness of the evening a blanket over the house and the field. A cool breeze blows across the openness, stinging my face—the edge of it biting as September fades into autumn.
I fumble at the door with my keys, finally getting it open. The living room is quiet and dark until I hear the clicking of the dog’s toenails. Maggie greets me excitedly, licking my face, her front legs on top of my shoulders.

“Were you a good girl today? Did you take care of your mother?”

Draping my coat over the living room chair, I make my way to the kitchen. It looks as though Chris has eaten, so I wash the dishes, take Maggie for a walk and then settle myself on the sofa. I only intend to rest a few minutes before checking on Chris, but I fall asleep.

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…I open the door to my parents’ house and it’s quiet inside. Until I hear the sounds of sobbing coming from the first-floor bedroom. Even though I’m frightened, I move toward the sounds—creeping around the corner to the open door. Inside the room my brother, Tom, has his face buried in a pillow at the foot of my parents’ bed. My mother is sitting next to him, stroking the back of his head. I try not to be noticed, struggling to figure out what’s wrong. And then, as if from instinct, my mother senses my presence in the doorway. As she looks at me, her face stained with tears, I feel my stomach pulling and knotting with fear. I’m afraid to see her cry, to see my brother, who’s always bigger and braver than I am, cry.

“Buddie, come here,” my mother says, reaching for me. But my feet are heavy and stuck to the floor. My brother turns to me, eyes wet, nose dripping. Pulling the sleeve of his shirt over his crumpled fist, he wipes away the newest tears, but not the horror; it stays on his face, creeping across the room into my heart. Somehow, he gets out the words I could never have said.

“Elizabeth, Daddy’s dead.”

I look at him as the room closes in, the light gone suddenly dim and dark. He’s lying, I think, my feet still stuck to the floor. He’s always playing games. Always telling stories.
My mother moves to the edge of the bed, clutching the bedspread. “Buddie, do you know what it means to die?”

“No,” I lie, hoping they will think I’m too dumb to bother explaining.

“It means you go to heaven to be with God.”

I glare at my mother. She’s lying too. When you die they put you in a hole in the ground, and you never see the person again. Yes, they both think I’m dumb. Why else would I be sticking to the floor?

My mother reaches out to me, finally able to grab an arm and pull me to her. She strokes my head as the lump in my throat threatens to choke me, my brother’s sobs mixing with my own…

* * *

I wake up to a sensation of warmth on my head. In the dim light of the living room I think I see my mother, but it’s Chris standing over me, stroking my head as though I’m a child. As she bends over me, she looks concerned, her small frame silhouetted against the desk light.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to wake you. Rough day for you. You must be exhausted.” She sits down next to the couch in a lotus position, arms wrapped around her knees. “I listened to you on the radio tonight. You did a great job. The rally must’ve been interesting.”

“It was. How was your day?”

“I feel better.”

I notice how thin she’s become from the neck down. In sharp contrast is the puffiness of her face, the result of large doses of steroids. But she’s still beautiful to me—her shoulder-length dark hair catching the room’s light, framing a soft and gentle face. From the couch, I reach down and hold the first three fingers of her right hand. Chris looks up and smiles.

“Hope I can get back to the shop next week. Jean called today. The framing orders are piling up. And I’ve got several paintings to finish for the museum show next month.”
“Everything will be fine.”
“I know.”
“I better get going. What time is it?”
“After eleven o’clock. You might as well stay here tonight. It’s late and you’re tired.”
“Well, I am a little bleary-eyed.”
Letting go of my hand, Chris stands up. “And I won’t have you sleeping on this couch, either. Sitting on it’s bad enough. I always save it for the guests I don’t like.”
“Is that why I always end up on it?”
“Very funny. Come upstairs.”
“Do you have a T-shirt or something I can wear? One that could possibly fit this heavenly body?”
She laughs. “I think I can manage it. Bob left some old shirts here.”
“Do you still hear from him?” I ask tentatively. “He called today. Hadn’t talked to him in a while. It was hard hearing his voice.”
Silently, I wish I had Bob’s address. Even though I’ve never met him, I have the urge to kill him. One day, almost two years ago, he’d walked into Chris’s shop. He was married with two children but, by the time Chris found out, she was already in love with him. The relationship continued until she became ill. Then he hit her with the news. He loved her but couldn’t leave his wife. He couldn’t bear the thought of hurting his children. They agreed, after that discussion, not to see each other again. At the time, I thought Chris had taken the news well. But I know better now. She was devastated; she really needed him. I imagine kicking him where it hurts the most.

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In bed, thoughts of Chris alone and needing someone gnaw at me.
“Do you think you’ll ever see him again?” I ask.
“I don’t think so.”
“I’m sorry. I know you need someone now.”
“Not really. I have you, my dearest friend. It’s more than I could’ve asked for.”

Chris touches the left side of my face, a delicate stroke that comes and goes before I have time to react. She turns away and so do I, exhausted and barely able to keep my eyes open. The thought of her next to me lingers, until finally I fall asleep. Early in the morning when I wake up, her arm is resting lightly across my waist, head nestled against my back. Thoughts of killing Bob resurface then fade again as I place my arms across hers. Maybe this is better. I know I’ll never hurt her.

* * *

As I stare, the pile of work on my desk stares back. A half an hour passes and, although I’ve shuffled through some papers here and there, I’ve accomplished nothing. Then the phone rings and I’m saved once again from having to think.

“Liz Callow, can I help you?”

“Liz, Kate McGowan. You interviewed me at the rally last Saturday. I wanted to call and thank you for the excellent coverage the station provided. Your efforts were greatly appreciated.”

“That’s nice to hear.”

“I also wanted to invite you to a party I’m having this weekend. I’d like to introduce you to some people who are active in the task force. It’s not all business, of course. I thought you might be interested.”

“When is it?”

“This Friday at eight. Think you can make it?”

“I think so.”

“Terrific. I’ll call you Friday with directions. Have a great week.”

After hanging up the phone, I notice my hands are perspiring. I have no idea why.