



Jual, "The Queen of Goodbyes"

Queen of Goodbyes

By Nancy Stordahl

I am a daughter standing alone on a bridge between two worlds, but I do not want to be on this bridge or get to the other side. My bridge is wobbly and unstable connecting me to somewhere I do not want to go. But maybe it's not the bridge that is unstable, it's me. I am the one who is uncertain, overwhelmed and frightened. I am not ready to be on this bridge much less cross it. I am not ready to say goodbye.

Throughout my life my mother was the "Queen of Goodbyes." It didn't matter if I had come home for an hour visit, a day visit or a week-long visit. It didn't matter if I had just seen her the day before, or if I would be back the next day. No matter the circumstance or length of my visit when I left, there was always a lengthy goodbye that could not be skipped or hurried.

First, there would be a hug in the doorway as I was getting ready to leave. Then we would proceed onto the front porch for more send-off hugs and last words. We never really used that front porch much while I lived there growing up. It faced the west side of the house, so the afternoon sun made it too hot and bright to sit out there. And we always had dogs, so it was just easier to stay in the backyard, especially after it was fenced. So, that porch became the porch of goodbyes, the place where my mother and I always ended our visits and said goodbye.

Many times when I stepped off the porch of goodbyes, I also balanced paper plates piled with leftovers covered with foil. Mother insisted on sending with me, while I also juggled my purse, suitcase and whatever other belongings I had brought with me. It would have been simpler to just make a couple of trips to the car, but for some reason I always tried to get it all in one trip, miscalculating the amount of stuff I had actually brought home or accumulated during my visit.

Mother always escorted me to my vehicle and after I got inside, I cranked down the window in order to do more waving and smiling as I backed out of the driveway. It had to be a pretty frigid day to keep her inside, and even then she stood in the doorway holding it wide open, waving me off as if I would not be seen again for years. My dad would undoubtedly comment about not wanting to "heat the outdoors," but it didn't matter and he knew it—he still felt obligated to say that. The door never closed until I had turned the corner and was out of sight. Warm days enabled our goodbyes to be lengthier and more pleasant; we could linger even longer.

I have often wondered if goodbyes in other families are such a production. I know my mother learned it from her mother. I can still see my grandmother wearing her green knit pants and perfectly ironed blouse with tiny flowers printed on it, standing alone on her driveway in low-heeled beige leather shoes that held her cramped, bunion toes, waving goodbye at

the end of one of our summer visits to her house. I don't picture my grandfather out there. He tended to slip me and my siblings all a ten-dollar bill, give us a hug and send us on our way. Is it easier for men to say goodbye?

Life is a timeline marked off in goodbyes beginning with our mastery as infants of the simple skill of waving "bye-bye," all the way to the final goodbyes at our deathbeds. We all have common milestone goodbyes that are part of the growing up and letting go process for both parent and child. Some that come to mind are the first day of school, the first sleepover, leaving for college and getting married.

The day I left home for college sticks in my mind clearly, as I'm sure it once did in my mother's. Once again, the "Queen of Goodbyes" and I parted ways on the front porch. I proudly carried out of the house my two brand new orange popsicle-colored suitcases that I had recently received as a high school graduation gift from my parents. I remember the day I picked out those two brightly colored suitcases, their bold color making some kind of statement to the world that I was too shy to make myself. They represented a new grown up phase in my life. I was thrilled they had locks on them with combinations only I would know, another indication I was now mature and needed to be able to lock up important belongings.

Those two orange suitcases came to have a life of their own, following me throughout my life's travels to destinations both known and unknown. I packed the smaller one for all my trips home for the weekend from college. Both accompanied me on my honeymoon. I packed the smaller one for all of my trips to the hospital when my children were born. They both traveled with me on various trips around as I visited relatives and took sightseeing trips. The larger one somehow got disposed of one day when the lock quit working and we purchased newer, more modern, brown-colored suitcases and then later black and green ones with pull-out handles and wheels. I still have that small orange one, however, all these years later. I don't think I'll ever be able to throw it out. It represents too many memories for me. My husband, David, sometimes says to me when we are packing, "You aren't taking that ugly orange one are you?"

"No," I usually say, but it's still the one I throw a few things into when I go home to visit for a night or two. It is like taking part of me home.

That warm September day long ago when I left for college, I said a hurried goodbye to Mother, threw my two, new orange suitcases into the car of whoever was giving me that ride to my dorm room, hopped in myself and never looked back. I was pretty insensitive in my youth that day. I couldn't wait to get going on my new life of college freedom at Mankato State College in Mankato, Minnesota. Years later after I graduated, they changed the name to Minnesota State University making it sound more prestigious and collegiate I guess. Mankato was only

twenty-five miles from Madelia, but to me that twenty-five mile separation meant a new life of independence. I never once thought about what it meant for Mother's life. I didn't think about how it must have felt for her seeing her third daughter leaving home for college that day. She looked so alone standing there on the front porch waving goodbye to me.

There are, of course, more painful and permanent goodbyes when you lose grandparents, other relatives, friends and even pets. While these are incredibly difficult, they pale in comparison to saying your final goodbye to a mother. I was totally unprepared for that one. I was not ready to cross the bridge.

I never really gave much thought to what my final goodbye to Mother might be like. That's kind of odd in a way since I always knew how important goodbyes were to her. Perhaps I just didn't want to think about that day. Perhaps I was just afraid to imagine how my life would change when I became motherless. Maybe I should have thought about these things. Maybe all daughters should.

What is it about the mother/daughter bond that is so powerful? How do you come to terms with its end, and is that even possible? It's almost like you have a second umbilical cord only when that one is cut, your mother is no longer there to take care of you.

The day a daughter loses her mother is the day she really grows up. In fact, a daughter's life can be divided into two parts, the years she has a mother and the years she does not. Crossing the bridge between the two is incredibly lonely, overwhelming and frightening. When you have a mother, even a poor one, you feel somehow anchored and connected with a comfortable link to your past. When that link begins to sever, suddenly you feel cut off and afraid. It is almost like going back to your toddler years when your first steps were unsteady and shaky and you counted on your mother to catch you if you started to fall. Now once again you feel emotionally wobbly and unsure of what your next steps should be. You know your mother will no longer be able to guide you.

You are becoming a changed person. You are crossing the bridge.

