



Proper Goodbye



“From the first page to the final paragraph, you won’t want to put Connie Chappell’s Proper Goodbye down.

What a fabulous read.”

—Kathie Giorgio, author of Rise From The River

Connie Chappell

Proper Goodbye

Connie Chappell

4am
BOOKS™

Proper Goodbye

Beebe Walker's life changes when she learns about a secret buried in her father's cemetery. The secret revolves around the burial of a homeless woman and, eventually, draws her home to Larkspur, Michigan, to renew a relationship with her father Cliff.

Months earlier, Cliff stood back from that sparsely attended funeral, unaware the woman's passing made him a widower. Cliff, devoted caretaker of the cemetery, doesn't know he's tending to his wife's grave. Beebe must find a way to tell her father that the homeless woman was misidentified. In reality, she was the wife and mother who abandoned them decades before.

Oddly enough, the first person Beebe meets upon her return is a young man who's new in town. Yates Strand is also chasing the secret behind the homeless woman. He has another story to tell.

Forget-Me-Nots

Sunrise quietly made its way into Abigail Walker's life. Its hazy, golden rays eased into her bedroom and prodded her to open an eye. In the breath of a second before Abigail complied, she sensed what she would see. If the dawn could do more than prod, the worrying dawn would have said that its peek around the forget-me-nots printed on cotton curtains in the room next door found the child's bed cold and empty.

A foe in the darkness had not snatched the child away. There was no reason for alarm, no reason to rouse her husband Cliff, lying beside her, from sleep.

Abigail opened her eyes to smile at a scene that was repetitive in her life: Her nine-year old daughter Beebe was curled into the cushion of the oversized chair spaced little more than the width of a nightstand away.

Folding back the covers, Abigail slipped her feet to the rug. She wore a pretty pair of mint-green pajamas. When she stood, the hems of the silky pant legs dropped down, skimming her ankles. Two short steps brought her within reach of her daughter. She lay a hand on her shoulder. The child stirred. Her gray eyes had just focused on her mother's when Abigail said, "Morning, sweetie. Make room."

With their coordinated efforts, Abigail managed to slip onto the chair with Beebe half-sitting, half-laying on her, her knees drawn up, and safely held in place by Abigail's arms. This maneuver was easier achieved when Beebe was smaller.

"Daddy asleep?"

Their conversation was held in low whispers, more because the gentle moment called for it rather than to preserve the peace for the sleeping man.

“You know him. I’m not sure he would wake if the bed fell through the ceiling into the living room,” Abigail said. “Hopefully, they would land sunny-side up.” Both of them giggled.

Abigail had long since stopped asking her daughter about the circumstances that brought her into her parents’ room. Beebe simply didn’t sleep well. Cause unknown. She admitted to no bad dreams. Neither did the dark or anything in it frighten her.

Beebe’s wakeful nights occurred with no predictability. They weren’t as noticeable on mornings when Abigail found the cheerful one-year old in her crib, sitting up before she entered. The crib had at least contained the child where, when the time came, the standard bed did not.

Their chair was angled with its back to the window. Dawn extinguished the night, but cradled between the wingbacks, mother and daughter still sat in shadow. “I remember the first time I got up and found you asleep in the hall with your dolly.” It was a ragamuffin thing Beebe adored. “You’d climbed out of bed and played on the floor next to the night light. Do you remember sitting on that stool in the bathroom to watch Daddy shave?”

The head against Abigail’s shoulder nodded. “Why’d I stop?”

“Kindergarten. Catching the bus. One day, I realized you were more than merely smart, you were an exceptionally bright little girl.”

“What’d I do?” Abigail could tell her daughter smiled as she spoke.

“You were three when you carried the stool to this chair and used it for the climb up.”

“You didn’t make me go back to bed?”

“The chair was better than the chilly, hard floor. At least I had an eye on you and was pleased you used the flannel shirt Daddy left in the chair as a blanket.” As the midnight journeys continued, the mother’s trained ear, alert to sounds in the house and her child’s restless movements, became desensitized to the occasions when Beebe settled down in the chair.

“Don’t need the stool now,” Beebe said, her arm tightening around her mother, which Abigail sensed to mean nothing in this world could separate them.

“That’s because my bright little girl grew longer legs.” She kissed the top of Beebe’s head.

Neither of them mentioned how Abigail always kept a throw and small pillow in the crook of the chair arm for her daughter's nocturnal visits. Neither of them mentioned how someday, Beebe would truly outgrow the chair. She was almost there now. Soon, she would be ten. Double digits. A division in time.

With the mother's nudge, the two began to move, unfolding themselves, like twin butterflies emerging from the same cocoon, their faces images of the other.

Barefoot, neither of them bothered to step over that one creaky floorboard on their way to the door. Cliff Walker would rise only at the alarm clock's ringing persistence. He'd push his feet into battered slippers and begin his day without ceremony. No stretching, no moaning, no yawning.

Then one day, he'd scuff across the bedroom in the trailing shadow of his child's abandoned habit. Without a glimmer of conscious thought, Beebe would forsake overnight stays in the chair.

Farewell

After forty-six years on God's earth and nineteen years with the church, Pastor Beebe Walker was sacked on the first Monday in March.

She couldn't say the turn of events was totally unexpected that afternoon. From her office window inside Trydestone Lutheran Church, she watched two men out in the parking lot. They shook hands at the bumper of a silver Toyota. The Toyota bore Tennessee plates and belonged to Phillip Dixon, the man who would move to Cassel, Maryland, and replace her in the pulpit. The other man, Norm Rogers, was Trydestone's head deacon. Another few strands of dialogue passed between the men. Through the glass, she clearly recognized the future camaraderie they would know. Deacon Rogers genially slapped Phillip Dixon on the arm, then turned and hurried to the church's side entrance.

Trydestone's pulpit had not been given without reservation when she moved to Maryland from Kansas nine months before. Her arrangement with Trydestone consisted of filling an existing void as interim pastor while the search for a permanent one ensued. She had a better-than-even shot at snaring the job. The problem was, a rather ominous void existed simultaneously inside of her.

Today, Beebe's focus remained fixed on the Toyota as it exited the lot with its thin line of exhaust trailing behind. When it was gone from view, she pulled in a deep breath that straightened her backbone. By now, she thought Norm must be reseated in the deacons' board room, where two other deacons waited, all worthy representatives of Trydestone. A glance at her watch told her it was time for her appointment with the search committee.

There was a strategy to the order of the appointments that day. The

committee met with Dixon first, made the offer, received acceptance, then brought Beebe in to relay the bad news.

Slipping away from the window, she followed a dimly lit hallway to the board room. Once inside, she was surprised to find Norm Rogers alone, standing at another expanse of windows, looking out. The demeanor in the room felt casual, not what she anticipated. Twisting his wide torso slightly toward her when she entered, he said, "Come in. The wind's picking up."

A large meadow adjoined this side of the church. It was open and flat. A rush of brittle, dry leaves whisked through the air, then dropped to tumble against tufts of field grass, listing to the right, surrendering to the wind.

Beebe took a place beside Norm. His fists were bunched in the pockets of dress slacks. The top button of his shirt was undone; the knot in his necktie loosened. A sports coat lay folded over a nearby chair back.

Matching Norm's relaxed stance, Beebe slipped her hands into the side pockets of the dress she wore. The curious discomfort she felt in the last weeks and months was oddly at bay. When Norm offered no more than the weather report, she said, "You released Raymond and Stan early." The Morrow brothers were the other two deacons who made up the committee.

"Yeah. Didn't need them really. They were just dragging me down." He turned his teasing eyes her way. "In all honesty, it seemed like triple teaming, given the circumstances, because, Beebe, my friend, as of now," he said, draping an arm around her shoulders, "you're fired. I hope that doesn't come as too much of a shock."

"I'm glad I heard it from you, not from someone at Lutheran Central." Her hand patted his before he withdrew his meaty forearm. "That's how it went in Kansas."

"Kansas. Yeah. That was a tough sell."

Trydestone's board of deacons knew about Kansas. When church elders removed her from Kansas and sent her to Maryland to be Trydestone's interim pastor, they forwarded a work history composed of their words. Norm and Beebe sat on many occasions while she reprised the story, adding a dalliance of emotion here and there, and not just sideswiping the heartache.

The more she rehashed the Kansas story, either verbally or in the privacy of her thoughts, the more cynical the telling became. The Blessed Lutheran Church In All Its Wisdom sent Beebe to Bixler, Kansas, with an assignment. She was to infiltrate the four Lutheran churches there. (On those occasions when cynicism ran rampant, she used infiltrate rather than counsel as a descriptor.) Her mission was to set the four churches on a path to merge into a single, more viable one. She was not only the emissary for the Blessed Lutheran Church In All Its Wisdom, but a replacement pastor at one of the four.

She spoon-fed the Bixler Lutherans. She broke down barriers. It took eighteen hard-fought months, but eventually, the membership at all four churches accepted the idea. The actual vote was sixty-six percent in favor. Majority rules.

Her intervention perpetuated the future survival of the Lutheran church in Bixler, creating a more potent vessel to complete God's work. She made Bixler's community of Lutherans understand that the day of a landscape dotted with a multitude of church steeples had disappeared. Their losses were numbered alongside the quaint corner drugstores and corner groceries.

Corner bars seemed a bit more prolific in Bixler. She nearly frequented one last July when she drove east with her suitcases packed and riding in the trunk.

Her disappointment at being relocated rose to the point of anger and tears. Church elders blindsided her with the news of her relocation after the merger's success initially brought nothing but accolades. They couched their decision in the guise of a reward. She balked nonetheless. Yes, Trydestone was a healthy, growing church, but she wanted the Bixler church.

Her heart and soul were wedged inside that living, breathing triumph. As an elder on high explained, excising her from the Bixler church was strategic. (*Elder on high* and *excising*: yep, more cynicism.) The church's post-merger stratagem provided just compensation for the thirty-four percent who disagreed with the plan, but had it stuffed down their throats. Not seeing Beebe in the pulpit made the merger more palatable for those in the minority. Less palatable for Beebe was the chunk of choking deception caught in her throat. It never entered her mind that she would not be the one to take the reins once the merger

was nothing but a bad taste. That measure of masked deceit she laid at the elders' feet.

Norm fished out Beebe's feelings over the last few months, concurrently with Tyrdestone's search efforts. The elders expected her to be a shoo-in. However, a congregation expected its pastor not to be shoehorned in. That's where the Morrow brothers stood, she suspected. Norm, though, wanted Beebe's wounds to heal. He counseled her to accept Trydestone. Every heart is asked at some point to leave something or someone behind while it yearns and aches for a different outcome. Despite her attitude, Norm encouraged her to remain in the pulpit as part of his recovery plan for her. She agreed, but knew she only gave Trydestone her best imitation of a good pastor.

"I can't get it back, Norm," she said one evening after a board meeting broke up and the others went home. By "it," she meant the internal fire necessary to ignite her faith.

"Politics was played back in Kansas. I won't deny that. The situation was difficult. How could it not be? People's lives. Their faith. *Their* support of *their* church. Changing times counts for a lot of it, but you fought through it all and left Bixler better than you found it. *You* did that."

She shot him a sideways glance. "The church betrayed me, Norm, after I did its bidding. I wanted God to step in. I wanted a miracle."

After a thoughtful pause, he said, "It is my profound opinion that God goes silent on us all at some time or other."

She allowed the words the insightful layperson spoke to the ordained minister to sink in and make their mark. She remembered them again today while they watched eerily brilliant sunbeams shine through a hole punched into thick clouds, the color of an ugly bruise. Then as God had gone silent, the opening to the heavens slammed shut and the afternoon mimicked the darkness that shadowed Beebe's heart.

"We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto," she mumbled to herself.

As if adopting the little dog's persona, her funny friend scratched the skin behind his ear. "No, we're not." The tone Norm used wasn't humorous. It said, that's the point. "You know, your first few months here were fine. I thought that."

"I tried, but I couldn't let go despite the fact that Trydestone offered everything I wanted in Kansas. Everything. It was billed as the prize.

But the prize was a misfit for the battle. They didn't mesh," she said. "This work I've chosen shouldn't be about me, I know. But my feelings have come front and center. And yet, in that framework, I've lost myself entirely." The sentiment she described gave her a jittery feeling as if electricity pricked her spine.

"I'm here, Beebe, if you ever want to talk. I'll continue to pray for you."

Norm's words sounded like a conclusion to the issue. Beebe's conclusion ran another course entirely. It was apparent to her that an undercurrent of cynicism doesn't work from the pulpit. It'll get you fired every time. Once was enough for her. "You know what this means."

"Still waiting for that miracle?" He grinned.

"It means I'm done, Norm."

Her simply stated pronouncement vanquished his grin. "You don't mean done with the church? Don't say that. There are other options."

"I don't want you to feel guilty about my decision in the least."

"How can I not?"

"Don't, Norm."

"Take a furlough," he said, anxious, "but don't turn in your shield. You may be disillusioned by the church, but give God another chance."

"I don't think I'll find God inside the church. If I find Him again, I think I'd rather find Him outside the church. We might be able to reconnect on neutral ground. It'll take some getting used to. It'll be hard on Olney."

"Olney will work through it. I'll have a talk with him."

"No. Let me do it." Truth was, she already prepared him.

"I'm sure, by now, he's waiting outside."

"Well, this is it." Beebe put out a hand. It rested in Norm's for a moment. While the dark afternoon loomed beyond the glass, she wound back around the board table toward the door.

When her hand rattled the knob, Norm rushed to say, "You may not think you touched us at Trydestone. Know that you have. Olney is just one example. There are others. Don't forget about your Sunday morning walks with little Jonah. He's your true-blue."

Mentioning Jonah Young made her smile. The six-year old liked to meet her at her office door on Sunday mornings and walk her in to services. "Thanks, Norm. This is my first firing. It wasn't so bad."

“Aw, shucks, ma’am, credit’s gotta go to the quality of the person I had to work with.” He winked.

She adjourned their mutual admiration society on that note and stepped out into the hall, but not quickly enough for her peripheral vision to miss his crestfallen expression and his chin drop to his chest.

Closing the door softly, she found a worried Olney Jones waiting with his trusty dust mop and his trashcan on wheels. Olney was friend, custodian, member of Trydestone’s flock, and expectant to the point of pain. By the slump of his shoulders, he finally believed the outcome Beebe predicted: She was not the deacons’ pick.

Throughout the last few weeks when prospective pastors walked Trydestone’s halls, Beebe tried to ease Olney down the path that would ultimately lead to her resignation from the Blessed Lutheran Church In All Its Wisdom. (She tried to be less cynical in Olney’s presence, but was not always successful.)

Olney was the first church member she met who was not a deacon. Her first memory of him was kneeling before the monument sign out at the corner of the church yard, where the sidewalk met the street. He added her name, letter by letter, beneath the church’s name. She could imagine his misery when he replaced her name with Phillip Dixon’s. Given his duties at the church, she saw Olney on a daily basis. They knew a kinship. He correctly interpreted her sighs, struggles, and lackadaisical efforts when her dissolving faith worked against her. His never faltered.

Olney’s dull eyes followed Beebe’s approach. He fell into step alongside her. The dust mop hitched a ride on his cart, its one wheel squawking in opposition.

He was an older gentleman, his timidness oversized for his small frame. Olney appeared stooped as if Beebe’s battle with God hovered weightily over him. Cynicism aside, God did nothing, she wanted Olney to understand. What she felt was supreme indifference. It was a one-sided venture. That fact sparked an inkling of guilt. She was the reason Olney no longer stood tall.

Olney was a casualty of the mistake she made many years ago. The ramifications of which, she strangely felt, were just beginning to surface. She was never cut out to be a minister. She got that wrong. Her rebellious attitude proved that.

She pegged the church as a refuge for a young woman's loneliness. As a minister, she would always have a church family within reach and be the guiding hands in its spiritual well-being. For a long while, she flourished. The blossom began dying on the vine during her last days in Kansas.

Beebe and Olney strode away from the board room without a word between them until they stared in at her office through the doorway.

"I'm going to need some boxes. Can you round up three, four? Not too big," Beebe said.

Olney grumbled something, then disappeared.

Beebe walked over to the office window to again peer out at the lot, empty except for her red Ford Taurus. It sat forlorn in the small parking alcove set aside for the pastor's car.

Olney returned, apologizing. He scrounged up only two decent boxes. Beebe gathered personal items and transferred them to the desk. Olney packed them. When Beebe's activities slowed, Olney picked up the nameplate from the desk's front edge.

"No, Olney, I don't want that." Along with her name on the engraved plate was the title she cast aside: Pastor. She took the nameplate from him and lay it face down on the oaken desktop.

His face fell. "Why can't this be fixed?"

She laced compassion into her voice for his sake. "I know my giving up the church hurts you, my good, good friend, and I'm sorry."

"But why?" Olney truly couldn't understand. He was a simple man with simple fixes. Something for stains, something for shine, a squirt of something to replace elbow grease.

"Olney, please. We talked about this. We knew what was coming. I want you to make peace with it."

"I won't, Pastor Bee—"

She waved a hand, cutting him off. "Not pastor. Not anymore. Not ever again." Then she tempered her tone. "Don't you understand? I can't find myself. I can't find the pastor I used to be."

Olney hung his head. She turned away from his grief, but from the corner of her eye, she saw Olney slip her engraved nameplate out of its wooden holder and tuck the plate in his left breast pocket, over his heart. He lay a hand on both.

For a moment, she squeezed her eyes tight, then opened them to

scan the room. They slid from the extended desk drawers, to the closet with its door standing open, to the twin bookcases. There was nothing else she wanted. Everything with any thread of religious connotation was left in place for the incoming Phillip Dixon.

The packing was done. It took—she looked at her watch—less than ten minutes. Olney spent more time than that hunting down boxes.

She gave the carton on her desk a resolute thump. Another closed carton sat in a guest chair.

“Looks like I have everything. One box for each of us. You don’t mind helping me get these to the car?”

“I don’t want to, but I will.”

Olney Jones got one box up in his arms. Beebe Walker hoisted the other. The chubby woman and the slight man strolled side by side down the tiled corridor that would intersect the front hall and push her out into a blustery afternoon with her bosom drained of spirit.

* * *

Gauzy moonlight drizzled across the country road. Yates sat with Terri in what passed for transportation, his banged-up Jeep Cherokee. They were parked across from a cemetery and what Terri termed the caretaker’s house.

For the three-hour road trip, Yates bundled Terri into the back seat, cushioning her on all sides with blankets and pillows. She sat up now. Yates could almost feel Terri’s will to live slip from her body with each labored breath. An eerily cold sensation slithered over Yates’s shoulder, before being pulled through the driver’s window, lowered a few inches, and out. It made sense to Yates that nearness to all the natural haunts of a graveyard would lure her will away.

That spring, he drove Terri Miller to Larkspur, Michigan, to die. He knew why the woman of sixty-six would die. She had AIDS. And not much time left. He didn’t know why the caretaker’s house. Why the cemetery. And he didn’t know why Larkspur, for that matter. Why would she come back to this place he learned just today was her hometown? It was possible an extremely old and quite faded wanted poster for her hung on the post office wall. The charge was levied thirty years ago, and she avoided the town since then.

This was the extent of his knowledge about her distant past. He asked her for more often enough over the last ten years. She could be one stubborn woman. Stubborn enough to disappear from his young life when school started each year, though he begged her not to. Tough enough to live on the streets.

Yates Strand shivered. “How long are we going to sit here?” By his calculations, they were close to their eventual destination.

“We’ll sit here until I’m ready.” Her squawk brought up a cough.

He tried to keep a small pot of anger brewing over her contrariness because if he didn’t, he’d cry like a baby.

After another few minutes, the upstairs light was doused. It was early, but the house slept. Yates watched Terri through the rearview mirror.

“Okay, let’s go into town.” Her words eked out through a held breath and the uncompromising pain brought by the movement of leaning back against the pillows.

He bit his lip. Her condition was so fragile.

The Jeep sputtered and shook, then started. Its headlights cut through the darkness. He followed the road that veered closer to Lake Huron and the heart of Larkspur’s compact downtown.

Yates still wore his nursing duds. He went straight to Gaven House that March afternoon, as he did every afternoon after school, to check on Terri.

Gaven House was a large residence in an old and deteriorating neighborhood. The house doubled as a hospice for people suffering the last stages of AIDS and who would receive no care elsewhere without the benefit of insurance. Gaven House was a privately run charity ward. More than charity, Eddie Gaven provided love and comfort. Eddie Gaven afforded respect to the people he and other volunteers nursed. He was afflicted with the disease himself. Well, the earlier version. Eddie carried the HIV virus.

Gaven House was a blessing. Gaven House gave Terri a home and a level of care. Yates volunteered several hours each week. He owed the establishment whatever he could give.

Today, and for as long as her energy lasted, Terri promised to help him cram. Yates, twenty-three and on track to graduate from college, was scheduled to take the nursing boards tomorrow and the next day.

Instead, when he arrived at Gaven House, he found Eddie out front.

Eddie pushed himself off the porch steps and met Yates halfway down the front walk. He carried his smile with him. But smile or not, Yates's heart beat at a rib-breaking crescendo. Eddie was heading Yates off. That could only mean one thing: Something was wrong with Terri.

"What happened?" Yates's voice shook.

"It's nothing like that." Eddie waved Yates's fearful thoughts away. "Terri and I had a long confab today. A long, long confab. Hell, she wore me out."

"What about?"

"Terri wants to be moved."

"Moved? Where? Why?"

"She'll tell you. Her mind is made up. I can't hold her here. I can't force her to stay. This is what she wants."

When Yates entered Terri's small room, he found her sitting in an old recliner wedged in the corner beside her bed. She presented him with a piece of paper, the results of an internet search.

Had she rallied enough that day to sit at the computer? he wondered. Gaven House kept one in the common area. Then he noticed the print date encoded along the paper's bottom edge. A month ago. She'd been significantly stronger in early February.

He scanned the sheet that provided driving directions to another hospice, along with other general information. "What's this?"

"We're going there. Get me ready."

"Why? Why are you doing this?"

"Come on. We don't have a lot of time." Her attempt to collapse the recliner's footrest lacked the strength to complete the task.

"Talk to me, Terri. Tell me what prompted this." Yates looked around. The extra pillows and blankets Eddie promised for the move lay on the foot of Terri's bed. These items represented Eddie's firm conviction that nothing would alter Terri's decision. Stubbornness would never drain out of her.

"I'll tell you along the way." For a woman whose clothing hung on her slight frame, she could be wearisome.

"But does it have to be right now?"

"Yes, today. We've got a long trip, and I'm high maintenance." She paused to catch her breath. "You can see the place closes at nine."

“This place is in Larkspur?”

“I know. Get me ready.”

The full brunt of realization dawned. He thought he prepared himself for her eventual death, but this option never entered the realm of possibility. This was unfair. “Terri, you can’t do this. No.”

“Yes, I can, and you’ll help me. Now get moving. Stat.”

He stared, he knew, with sad spaniel eyes. She commented on those the first day they met. He’d been thirteen and scared.

“This is the nursing life, Yates. Get used to it. We can cram for those boards along the way.”

So, this had been her plan all along, Yates thought.

Now they crept forward, looking at the numbers painted, nailed, and otherwise affixed to Larkspur’s downtown businesses. He steered the Jeep to the curb, several parking spots back from the hospice named Crossroads. It also doubled as a homeless shelter, senior center—and based on the advertisement written on the sandwich board out front—a bingo hall on Tuesday nights. This was Tuesday. The place looked full.

In an earlier day, the old bricked storefront looked like it operated as a department store. It was located on Battlefield Road, which ran parallel to the main drag, and intersected with Standhope. The street names signified the weighty counter-pull of life. In Terri’s case, though, she could neither stand, nor hope; Battlefield spoke for itself.

They sat and watched lights again, and the clock. Twenty-two minutes before nine.

“Should I get you inside?” he asked.

“No. Let’s wait.”

“What for?”

“For the people to clear out.”

He gave a slight nod. He’d honor her pride and privacy issues.

With these few moments, he reminisced one last time about the past, about the tail end of his childhood, about summers at his house, about her never-wavering impact on his life since the car accident, when she saved his father with her own nursing skills.

“Every day. Every day of your life, Yates,” his father, Arthur, told him, “pray for Terri Miller. Thank God she helped me.”

Yates stood by his father’s hospital bed when Arthur accomplished so much with a few simple words for the wandering Terri. “Come back

and see us,” he said.

An invisible tether tugged at Yates. He sensed its tug at his father and Terri, too. A handful of hospital visits took them through that last week of summer. When school let out each year thereafter, Terri Miller returned, and she stayed until classes took up again.

Yates prayed for her still. It was natural that she came to him when the merciless disease put up a better fight than a warrior-of-one could combat. They were close, like family, but not.

Yates turned some in the front seat. “Remember the summer I learned guitar, me and Bobby from up the street? We were pretty good, huh?”

He saw Terri’s grin. “You two stank that first summer. But I admit, your fingering improved. I said so the next June. You and Bobby stuck to it.”

“When school was ready to start that first summer, I said, ‘All we need is a drummer.’ Remember, you were there.” The conversation took place in the garage.

“I was right there on the stool by the workbench,” she said.

For a male in his first year of teenage life, sensitive Yates accepted Terri without reservation. She was the cushion of adult supervision that summer, since his mother began working again at the county library’s research desk. Terri checked in, hung for a while, like that day in the garage, then left Bobby and him alone to admire her because they knew she lived life on the lam. For Yates, it was more. He loved her outright. She saw through him at the hospital, clear through to his soul and his sadness at even the thought of losing his father.

“I still can’t believe what you did. The next June, you arrived in a pickup with a drum set in the back. Where’d you find that lady?”

“I told all this before. She owed me a favor, so I asked her to drive me with the drums.”

“Yeah, but you took lessons. You were awesome, Terri.”

“A natural,” she said. “Who knew?”

“Now, that was one radical summer.” Yates and Bobby called themselves Metal Mouths, for the braces. “The next summer, there wasn’t much time for music. Bobby and I were business magnates. Still using Metal Mouths. Metal Mouths Lawn Service.”

“I cut more grass that summer than I ever imagined.”

“But it was fun.”

“It was fun, but not as much fun as the next summer.”

“I couldn’t believe when Dad came home with that ice cream truck. Mom had a fit, but we drove it every day.” Yates’s mother’s fit was quickly curbed by his father. Such a curbing was not standard practice in the Strand household. “It was you, me, and Bobby that summer, all summer long.”

When Yates was ready to move chronologically to the following summer, Terri spun out on a tangent.

“Where is Bobby?”

“West Coast, still. He asks about you.”

“He’s a good kid. You both are.”

Yates wanted to tell her he loved her, that she was a good soul, but he knew she refused compliments of any kind. Something else to honor.

“Before the crowd leaves, Yates, get me out. Sit me on that bench up there, then back the Jeep up, so you can’t be so easily seen.”

His eyes passed from the sidewalk bench to Terri, dragging shock with them. Summer memories crashed to the concrete. “No, Terri, please.”

“Do it. I’ll be all right.”

She would not be all right. That was the point of this entire exercise. He blinked and suddenly all he could see and feel was his own misery, not hers. During his childhood summers, she looked after him in her own way. But she’d done *this* to herself, damn it. Got AIDS. Who knew how. She was leaving him and asking him to fast-forward the ending. Only respect made him open the Jeep’s door. Respect, and the summer she avoided speaking of.

He climbed out. Words did not come. Something was balled in his throat. Anger, he told himself. Anger for the needless loss: his, with their imminent and final separation. Anger for the lost need: hers, the drugs now behind her, and yet those addictive days ruled her through the disease. Another breath, another heartbeat. By his own hand, he facilitated her abandonment of him. That was tantamount to emotional abuse, and testament to the strength of character she knew he possessed. She never asked him to perform more than his capabilities. That was how Terri honored him.

Yates lifted Terri out, giving extreme care to the process. He carried

her to a sidewalk bench thirty feet or so from the senior center. He placed a blanket over her and kissed her cheek. She nodded. Their eyes met. Love rebounded. The child and the drug addict.

“Go back,” she whispered.

“Please,” he begged.

“Go. Back.”

“But Terri—”

She pushed him. “Hurry now. Be a good boy.”

The boy who first loved Terri did hurry. He jumped in the Jeep and started it. For a moment, the boy thought about peeling out. For that rash move, the man would hate himself forever. Self-loathing funneled through Terri, too, he knew, for what she did to someone in her past. And how she tried to make up for that grating mistake with him. He slammed the transmission into reverse and parked in front of the drycleaner, three doors down.

He waited and kept his eye on Terri. She looked like a pitiful waif, sitting in the shadows, the light from the closest streetlamp was blocked by a curbside tree. He could see that Terri’s head was turned toward the bricked storefront and away from him. Just as with the start of school each fall, Terri passed out of his life. She returned to the homeless world and, he fully suspected, took up her addiction again. He always wondered, always worried that she would not return the next summer, and was always delighted when she did.

The summer after the ice cream job eased into his memory. Terri’s pattern of *summers only* in town changed without ceremony when Yates was seventeen. Yates’s mother was slowly dying. Between Yates, his father, and Terri, they nursed his mother and kept the small neighborhood hardware store his father owned going. From Yates’s seventeenth birthday to his next, Terri remained a constant in his life, housed, dressed, and fed in his parents’ home. She saved his father’s life, and now she would make the loss of his mother’s life easier for the Strand family. When the end came, that closely held cluster included Terri, too.

He was absolutely sure she remained substance-free throughout the ordeal. Yates’s mother, Naomi, was never a fan of Terri Miller’s presence, despite her heroic rescue of Naomi’s husband. Terri strapped a tourniquet around his leg to save it. She groped through the car’s

wreckage for his cell phone and placed the emergency call. Then she conned the paramedics into letting her ride up front in the ambulance taking Arthur to the emergency room. Yates and his mother arrived after a call came from hospital admissions to find Terri hovering outside the treatment cubicle.

Terri's stint at sobriety lasted over a year, all while Naomi's pain medication sat within easy reach. Yates thought when Terri got through that ungodly period, she'd remain free of the addiction. But old haunts, like the cemetery, preyed on her, coaxed, and cajoled. Terri was gone, just gone, three days after the funeral. None of his mother's unused medication was missing. Terri wouldn't let Yates experience that. Never did she use during those childhood summers, nor any summer between his years at college.

Summer memories faded abruptly when the bingo crowd disbursed. Laughing and talking, they headed away from Terri and toward the parking lot across the street. Then, a man came out and stood on the stoop under the porch light. Yates tilted the folded website page he used for directions toward the moon's glow. The man's face was there. Vincent Bostick. He operated the center.

On the stage before Yates, the tragedy played out. Terri pushed up from the shadowy bench. She stood in silhouette and found enough strength to pitch her voice through the still night air. Even from this distance, Yates swore he heard her. "Please. Help me."

Vincent Bostick ran. He caught her just before her knees gave out. Quickly, he got her up in his arms, took a few seconds to look around, then carried her to the door, kicked it open, and disappeared inside.

Like her departure from his life on school's first day, Terri entered a world that didn't welcome him. She timed her exit to coincide with his nursing boards, miles away in Lansing. She would never forgive him for missing the test. If any person could die on command, that person was Terri Miller.

The flame went out under his small pot of anger, and he wept.

Yates fled the town, back past the cemetery, where, no question, she would be buried. His headlights grazed the nameplate on the mailbox in front of the caretaker's house. Walker, it read.





Proper Goodbye is available for purchase in paperback and eBook through Amazon.