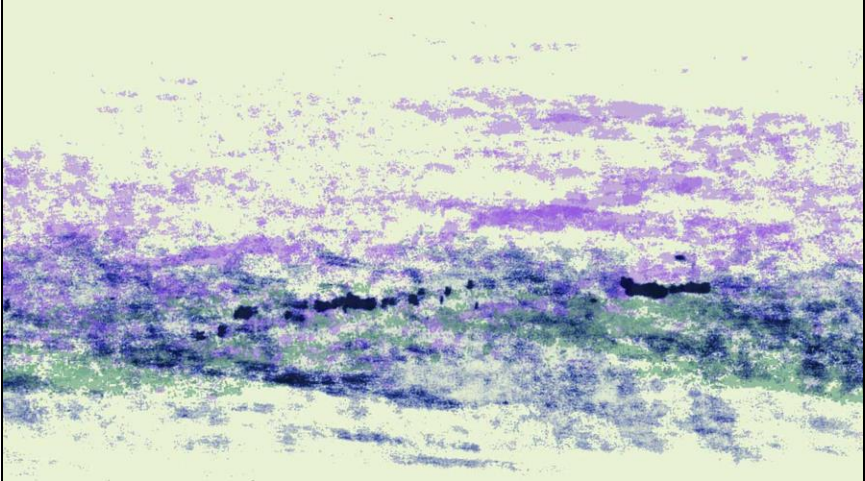


Summer Memories



Connie Chappell

Bronze Medal Winner
New York City Book Awards

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By Connie Chappell

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 Larkspur Cemetery.

With summer on the cusp of fall, 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 she would come back to Larkspur. 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 place since then.

This was the extent of his knowledge about her distant past. He asked 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.

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' 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.

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.

For another few minutes, Yates watched her through the rearview mirror. When she spoke again, her decision came with no explanation.

“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 Michigan and the heart of Larkspur’s compact downtown.

Yates still wore his nursing duds. He went straight home that afternoon in very early September to check on Terri. He did this every afternoon after his study group met. Today, and for as long as her energy lasted, she promised to help him cram. Yates, twenty-three and a recent college graduate, was scheduled to take the nursing boards tomorrow and the next day. Instead, when he arrived at the off-campus apartment they shared since his junior year, 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, then noticed the print date encoded along the paper’s

bottom edge. A month ago. She'd been significantly stronger in August.

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

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

"Now?"

"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.

"What do you mean, there's not a lot of time?"

"I'm surprised you have to ask." She indicated herself with a tug at clothing that hung on her slight frame. She could be wearisome.

"But 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. "But, 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 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 Thursday nights. This was Thursday. 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 again and watched the clock. Twenty-two minutes before nine.

“Should I get you inside?” he asked.

“No. Let's wait.”

“For what?”

“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 Terri 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 summer. 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. 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 guy?”

“I told all this before. The guy owed me a favor, so he drove 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 you 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.

“And with either Bobby or you in the back to help.”

When Yates was ready to move chronologically to the following summer, Terri spun out 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 that 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.

He climbed out. Words would 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, that boy thought about peeling out. For such a rash move, the man who loved Terri would hate himself forever. 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, the tourniquet that was Arthur's own belt, strapped around his leg to save it. Terri groped through the car's wreckage for his cell phone and placed the emergency call. Then she coned 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 drugs 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 so many summers on the cusp of fall, Terri entered a world that didn't welcome him. She timed her exit to coincide with his

nursing boards, miles away in Lansing, and always scheduled over Labor Day weekend. She would never forgive him for missing the test. If any person could die on command, that person was Terri Miller.

Yates fled the town, back past the cemetery, where, no question, she would be buried, and with no answers from her thirty-year old story.

The flame went out under his small pot of anger.

And he wept.

In true Terri Miller fashion, she would be gone, just gone, by the first day of school.



If you enjoyed this short story, you'll also enjoy companion books, *Proper Goodbye* and *Summers Only*. Both are available from Amazon in paperback and eBook editions. Thank you for reading.