

Goodbye, Bailey - Kaitlyn, Year 7, NSW

I still remember that day I left for camp. My suitcase was a glowing cheese yellow, drawing the sun's dappled rays through our fly screen as I dragged it across our hard, square-tiled stone floors. A Kånken backpack, the same vibrant yellow, sat on the windowsill, its straps intertwined in a messy checkerboard of sunrays and shadows. Brown strands of my hair fell over my shoulder in a waterfall of vermilion highlights as I leant down to pick up Bailey.

Bailey.

His gently curled brown beach waves were streaked with ghostly strands of white, which ran across his paws like dust trails. Skin wrinkled and full of blemishes, and his foot bandaged in white plaster, he looked like a stray taken by the sands of time. Yet his eyes still sparkled underneath cataracts, which gave the appearance of a piece of the sky underneath a gently misting fog. Many years later, I still remember the next words I whispered in his weak, thin ears:

“Bailey, remember to eat your food and to stay safe. Wait for me here, and I promise I’ll be back in three days.”

He licked me then, his rough peach-pink tongue drawing across my fingers.

Darling Bailey, seventeen years old with major heart issues, had then lain down next to his wheelchair and his favourite squeaky toy, before gazing at me as I shut the door on him without a second look.

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At camp, the first day went past in a sunburnt whizz, full of chaos and spirit. From drowsy pools to leering towers of rock climbing, our grade ran past multiple challenges and activities next to a glistening, turquoise lake. Whilst we sailed leisurely under the sun to fish for trout and beautiful salmon, I enjoyed the camp to its fullest. My friends and I giggled and whispered our way to a drowsy dawn, sharing secrets in a dark cabin.

The next day, we scaled ladders, ran races and kayaked across the wide, velvety lake. The scent of eucalyptus clung to our wild, dirt-dusted shirts and shorts, giving an aroma of outdoors freshness, crisp and exotically addictive. At the campfire on the second night, dancing fairies of crimson, pumpkin orange, and savage marigolds lit the shadows of twilight in a haunting routine of curves and slides.

When we were sitting on splintered logs and toasting our melted marshmallows, while licking dewy white residue from our skewers, my phone buzzed.

It was a soft vibration, yet my gut urged me to slide it out of my bag. I swiped the cracked screen, half illuminated by the wild firelight, half by the twinkling, diamond-studded stars. The white light from my screen flashed in my eyes before a dark blue message lit the clean, bright page.

“Bailey...has passed.”

I remembered nothing of that campfire. I remembered nothing of the whispers that night. I remembered nothing of the bus ride home. I remembered emptiness, so deep and uncontainable that it welled like an overflowing tide too high for my small frame. I remembered dark grief, more blue than that message. I remembered the agony of loss, sharp as a barbed knife slicing my soul into tiny glass shards.

The lock turned in my door at home, before the great wooden frame swung open. Once, the swing had been full of life. Once the swing had been warm and welcoming. Once, the swing had opened the door to a leaping and bounding Bailey.

No longer.

The house seemed cold as ice, frozen in the memories of that night. On reflex, my cracked lips opened to shout my dog's name, but they paused, halted, and a sob rose inside of me. Heart-wrenching tears, rivers of emptiness, yet full of a blinding emotion, veined my face.

My parents were a blur in my peripheral vision, their tear-stained faces wafting a perfume of sadness that had shrouded the whole house. I ignored them, racing upstairs on our timber staircase that Bailey had once climbed every day.

In my room, even the light seemed to fail to pass through that shroud, that veil of mourning. It hung like a dark shadow on our lives, its dress train a web woven with broken strings of memories that I thought had been shattered with his death. On my bedside table, a glass photo with a golden frame of Bailey sat, forever capturing his life. Quivering with the scars of misery, my fingers found the edge of the frame and picked it up. Outside, the afternoon set in a struggle between the battle of light and dark. As night fell, an oppressive canvas of ebony and blue blanketed the world, and my eyes never left his never-blinking ones, behind the sheet of paper. A question rose out of the blue as I continued to gaze at his smile.

“Why?” I whispered. “Why leave without a goodbye? Why? Bailey!”

My heart poured its confusion, its horror, its trauma, its dolour, its anger into that *why*, the one question hitting my eyes from the inside. Suddenly, fury cracked open in my soul. I screamed, weeping as a pool of tears dripped onto the floor, growing into a small, curdling lake as the night went by.

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The next few days passed in a grey sheet of desolation. As I sat down for my daily piano practice routine, the ivory keys brought me to a past life when Bailey would settle down next to my feet, prancing with the golden pedals, while singing the melody.

As my fingers danced through my Chopin Nocturne, I could feel his light fur tickling my toes gently, like a soft paintbrush whispering against my skin. Next to the dining table, my mind transported me to a past spring, revealing a kitchen laden with beautiful dishes. Crumbled biscuits lay in piles of kaleidoscopic colours as Bailey, slightly older but still as energetic, jumped up to lick the plate. Our family sang untuneful karaoke while Bailey's young paws intertwined in leaps between our feet. The aroma of baked butter mingling with roasted duck and scented vegetables clouded our kitchen.

But as I reached for a biscuit, drizzled in syrup, my past life fell away like a dropped curtain. Even when I paced up and down my room in boredom, my mind was filled with the songs of birds from past springs. My feet felt the crisp, dew-bejewelled fields, soft and sweet like emerald seas, as my shin felt Bailey's young fur. Still brick-red, his skin was smooth and clear, his paws muscled and strong, and his sinews steady and supportive. Twisting my head, I saw the gold specks of reflection in his irises, beautiful silky honey trails that seemed to lock your heart with his.

I picked up a wet, weathered stick from the muddy grass before throwing it. Then the scene disappeared, as I chased after those flying paws.

Such was my life for many days. Empty, barren - like a worn, threadbare cloud of musty smoke and ashes, shrouding everything in a monotone cold light.

Slowly, like a stain on a shirt that has been rinsed many times, my memory of Bailey faded.

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It was another dreary breakfast. Having spilled some of the milk while pouring our everyday meal, I hastened to clean up the mess. As I reached into the tissue box, my fingertips, with a thud, touched cardboard. I headed towards the storage room, and as the cupboard swung open, almost in suspense, the vibrant colours of toys and bells were revealed.

Bailey's old toys.

The tissue boxes called to me, but I ignored them, my whole mind focusing on the painful treasure I had found. Running fingertips on the cold, wrinkled steel of his wheelchair, soft, bright green unicorn toys, and his favourite, a squeaky chicken, my mind drew, once again, the picture of my late "brother".

I saw him at my feet, tongue lolling, begging me for another game of fetch. Feeling warm breath on my cold, pallid cheeks and the slight scratch of his paws against my leg, I thought of his eyes. Imagining the dark pearls, I suddenly remembered the day I left for camp.

He had, as I closed the door, lain down next to his favourite toys, gazing at me with his imploring eyes. His eyes were as clear as day, and they smiled at me as they always had and always will forever.

Forever.

Right in that moment, an epiphany struck my mind.

He did say goodbye, on that sun-filled dawn, with his quiet, reserved manner. He didn't want me to see his last moments of pain.

With his final smile, he had imprinted the scent of wild grass and the songs of swallows mingled with his bright barks in our hearts forever.

Goodbye, Bailey.