

A Last Letter to Aunt Esther

February 28, 1999

Dear Aunt Esther,

The truth is that I was a bit startled when Mama relayed to me what the doctors in Wilmington recently told the family: “Now is the time to say your goodbyes.” And then I realized just how uncomfortable I am with saying goodbye.

It happens every year at graduation with the college kids. Many of them will disappear into their futures and I will never see or hear from them again, but there’s always a chance that I’ll bump into one or two of them somewhere, sometime. It is a bittersweet time, these graduations, because each year there are some kids I’ve grown close to and I’ll miss them. But every speaker at every graduation I’ve ever attended has emphasized the future and a new beginning, maybe in an attempt to allay the fear of the unknown, the mystery and perhaps even dread of the road not yet traveled. So when I think about saying goodbye to you, again I’m uncomfortable.

I’m much better at saying, “Thank you!” And I owe you many “thank you’s.” Thank you for all those sweet summer days in Bladenboro that I spent with you and Uncle HC and Kenny. I vividly remember those marvelous visits to the barn near your house and the smell of the horses. I remember the great freedom of riding my bike with Kenny on the sidewalks of uptown. We didn’t have sidewalks where I grew up, and a bike with the sidewalk is like ice cream with hot fudge. And the trips out to the farm, the smell of tobacco and corn, and gray, creaky floors of the dusty barn. And even the joys of an attic where we’d sometimes play. Then there was the time Betty Jane made us some spaghetti for supper. I remember eating heartily and then taking a swig of iced tea and feeling like there was a thin layer of wax across my lips. I was puzzled by this until Betty Jane explained that the spaghetti was a bit greasy and the cold tea had hardened the grease on my lips. Isn’t it strange what we remember and what we treasure?

I don’t have much of a sense of smell now. Don’t know when I lost it, but I do have strong recollections of the odor from your bathroom. Never said anything to you or your family about it. Just quietly thought to myself, “Somebody here is *rotten!*” Later on in high school chemistry class, I recognized the smell of rotten eggs and learned the proper name.... hydrogen sulfide. I was so happy to learn

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that it is not necessarily the result of internal combustion in the human digestive tracts, but that water can pick up that odor when passing through old pipes. So I've given you the benefit of the doubt through the long years since, and blamed the smell on the house's plumbing and not your own plumbing.

I teach Biology on the floor below the Chemistry department and as a result of this proximity, I smell hydrogen sulfide more than I care to, but, for me, the bad odor conjures up sweet memories of summer times at your house, and I thank you for all those pleasant times.

Thank you for being my supportive aunt all these years, for being interested in me and how my life unfolds. Thank you for being my Mama's dear sister, a source of strength and support during times of triumph and times of tears. I thank you for the example you have set as a daughter, sister, wife, mother, and grandmother. Thank you for living the Christian life, not perfectly, but in serious and relentless pursuit. You will be greatly missed and lovingly remembered.

At college graduations, I don't say, "Goodbye." Instead, I give each graduate a hug or handshake and say, "See you later." Somehow, that seems less permanent. But now, as I'm about to lose you to a different kind of "graduation," I can say with confidence and hope and faith that I will see you later because of what we believe happens after your "graduation" and mine. Until I see you next, the peace of Christ be with you always.

See you later,

G.R.