

THE BENCH AT THE END OF THE DOCK

By Stacey Horan



Guy Babbitt took small, careful steps. The paving stones under his feet were slick and uneven, owing to the several decades that they had been in place and left largely unrepaired. Guy had walked this path from his house to his dock almost every day for the last thirty-one years, starting almost from the day he and his wife, Mae, had

bought this property and moved in. Today's stroll was to be his last trip. It took him almost fifteen minutes to make the journey, something he would have done in his younger days in under a minute. When he reached the dock, he stepped up, carefully positioning his cane on the planks so that it didn't fall through the cracks. Years of wear and tear had been no kinder to the dock's boards than they had been to the path's paving stones. When he reached the end of the dock, he sat in his usual spot on the right side of the two-person bench. He always kept the left side open.

A few moments later he heard it. The morning's lazy breeze carried to him the sweet tinkling of laughter and the padding of tiny feet running along the boards. She had come to visit him again. This had become their little routine.

He sang to her as she approached, "Annaleigh Sweetpea."

She giggled and smiled as she came to a stop in front of him. He patted the seat he had left open beside him on the bench. She climbed up next to him, stuck

her legs out straight in front of her and wiggled her toes. Her bare feet were dirty and the front of dress was stained with something red, probably watermelon or popsicles or cherry Kool-Aid. Her golden blond hair stuck out in all directions, a bird's nest of curls and tangles. She usually looked this way. She was a mess, a lively, adorable mess. She looked up at him, smiling and swinging her legs back and forth.

“Annaleigh Sweetpea,” he repeated softly, looking into her dark brown eyes. She blinked long thick lashes at him and nodded her head slightly.

“I’m afraid I’m not gonna be able to play with you anymore, baby girl,” Guy said. He shifted in his seat, trying to find a more comfortable position for his sciatica, but he never took his eyes off the angelic little face. “You see, I’m goin’ away. I’m movin’.”

The little girl tilted her head to the side and bit her lip. That simple action nearly broke Guy’s heart in two.

He cleared his throat and continued, “It’s not that I want to leave. It’s more like I’ve got to. I’m getting old, Annaleigh. Too old to be livin’ here in this old house. I can’t keep it up. It’s too much work and the place is fallin’ down around me.”

Guy swiveled slowly on the bench and glanced back up at the house. The one-story cinder block house was in gross disrepair. It hadn’t been much to look at when he and Mae bought it all those years ago. They had tried to spruce it up, adding an extra bedroom and a sunroom and painting it a lemony yellow, but it was never a pretty house. It served its purpose, though. It gave them a place to live on the piece of property that they had fallen in love with the very first time they saw it. The lot was almost three acres in total, long and narrow and covered with live oaks and old cypress. He and Mae had installed the paving stone path

and the wooden dock, giving them access to Julington Creek at a picturesque bend where manatees were frequently spotted. Now, however, the house was worn and faded, and the property was overgrown. The Creek was still lovely and largely unchanged, save for the few old homes that had been razed and replaced by mini-mansions and fancy docks. His house and dock were slated for the same fate.

The house had only been on the market a few weeks when Guy received a full price offer, which his daughter guilted him into accepting. The new buyer had plans to tear down the old house and put up his own little castle on the Creek. Guy wasn't sad to see the house go. It had never meant much to him. They moved into it after the kids had graduated college, left home and gotten married. Sure, it held a lot of memories, over thirty years' worth, but not all of them were good memories. Mae had passed away almost eight years ago now after a long and painful battle with cancer. This place wasn't the same without her in it. There was no music playing, nothing baking in the kitchen, no nightly shouting at the television during Wheel of Fortune. She had loved the old house and would have been devastated to learn that it was going to be demolished.

Good thing you're not here, honey, he thought to himself.

Guy sighed and turned back towards the water. The little girl hopped down from the bench and stood at the edge of the dock, searching the water for fish and manatees. "Don't get too close, Annaleigh Sweetpea," he warned. "You know that's dangerous. Keep your toes back from the edge, now."

The little girl giggled and scooted her feet backwards an inch or two. She continued to stare into the water.

Her name was Annaleigh Hyacinth. Guy had thought it a ridiculous name the first time he heard it. It was too much name to heap onto such a tiny person. Besides, Hyacinth didn't suit her at all. It was some old family name on her dad's

side, apparently. Guy had taken to calling her Sweetpea instead. It rhymed with Annaleigh, and it made her giggle. And that made Guy's heart sing every time.

"Annaleigh Sweetpea, how old are you now?" asked Guy.

She spun around and held up four little fingers. There were dirty, like her toes.

"You're four years old?" he asked, slapping his knee and winking at her.

"Well, my goodness gracious. You're a big girl now, aren't you?"

She giggled and covered her mouth with the same fingers she had just held up in front of him. He knew she wasn't quite four years old. She was just shy of four by a few weeks. It would be her birthday soon, and that made this good-bye even harder. He wouldn't get to see her birthday. No party, no pretty dress, no chubby cheeks smeared with pink frosting.

"Annaleigh Sweetpea, I need you to come here a moment. Can you do that for me, baby girl?" he asked.

She nodded and skipped over to him, leaning against the bench and scrunching up the front her dress in her small, dirty hand.

"Alrighty now. I want you to listen very carefully to me," he said. He smiled at her and leaned forward. "I'm gonna be movin' away from here. I've got to live somewhere were I can get some help with the cookin' and cleanin' and shoppin' and such. I won't be goin' far. Just the other side of this Creek, in fact. But, Sweetpea, I won't be here any more."

She cocked her head to the side again, and he watched her smile fade once more.

Guy blew out his cheeks before continuing, "So, I won't be here tomorrow to play with you. Do you understand? Not tomorrow, and not the day after, and not any more days to come."

The little girl stood up straight and swayed back and forth from one foot to the other, biting her lip and contemplating Guy as he leaned in closer to her.

“Annaleigh Sweetpea, you can’t come ‘round here anymore. No more.” He shook his head at her. “You have to stay away now. You hear me, baby girl? You can’t come here to play with me. You and I need to say our good-byes today.”

Guy felt a tear escape and roll down his weathered cheek. He wiped it away with the back of his hand and cleared his throat.

The little girl took a step closer to him, head still cocked to the side and dress still scrunched up in her fist. She smiled at him and nodded her head.

“So you do understand what I’m sayin’?” he asked.

She nodded her head again.

“Ok, baby girl.” He chuckled and wiped away another tear. “Guess I shouldn’t be callin’ you ‘baby girl,’ huh? You’re four years old after all. You’re a big girl now.”

The little girl giggled, jumping away and twirling so her wrinkled and stained dress floated out from her body.

“Dad! Dad!” The voice that came from behind him belonged to his daughter, Sadie. She was standing in the doorway of the sunroom, waving her arms above her head. “We need to get going soon. The movers just left, and John is heading over to your new place to meet them and let them in.”

“Be there in a few minutes, sweetheart,” Guy shouted back at her. “I won’t be much longer.” He waved his hand, and she waved back before disappearing into the empty house. He sighed. Sadie, his youngest, was a good daughter, forever dutiful, and her husband, John, was a nice man. They certainly had their share of ups and downs as a couple, but they were still in love each other and had a better chance than most of making it all the way to the finish line together. They

were like Guy and Mae in that respect, and it made Guy proud to think that Sadie might have learned a thing or two about marriage by watching her parents.

The little girl completely ignored Sadie. She continued to jump and spin and giggle, getting dizzier and dizzier with each twirl. Guy watched her. She was lovely, albeit a bit untamed, and he would miss her. He wouldn't miss the house so much, nor the dock or the Creek. He'd had plenty of years with all of them. It was this silly, unkempt little girl that he would miss, for he had not had nearly enough time with her. She had taken to visiting him for only a short time each day. There were those rare occasions, though, when she didn't come or he couldn't make it down to the dock for some reason or another. Such days without her were dark and painful. She was his little Sweetpea, his baby girl, his granddaughter.

Annaleigh should have been turning thirty-four years old on her birthday a few weeks from now, not four like she insisted with her tiny fingers. They lost her to the Creek shortly after Guy and Mae moved to this place. Annaleigh had been so enchanted by some manatees Guy pointed out to her on her first visit to the new house that she had wanted to spend every waking minute, and even those in which she should have been asleep, on the dock.

It had been Guy who found her, face down in the water, her dress snagged on a cypress knee not far from the dock. She had snuck out of the house when she was supposed to be taking her afternoon nap. Annaleigh's naps had been getting shorter and shorter, lasting only an hour or so on her best days. That day, when almost two hours had passed without the little girl charging into the living room and announcing she was "all done sleepin'," Sadie had gone into the back bedroom to check on her. Guy remembers Sadie's calls for her daughter, at first curious and then quickly turning frantic.

Guy had raced down to the dock while the others searched the house. He knew where Annaleigh had gone, even if he had no idea how she had escaped without anyone seeing her. Children could be sneaky like that. He pulled her from the water and tried to revive her. Someone, he can't remember who, called for an ambulance, but it didn't matter. Annaleigh was gone.

For the last thirty years, they sat together for a few minutes each day on the bench at the end of the dock. Guy talked, and Annaleigh giggled and played. Now, it was time to say good-bye. He wiped his cheeks, now soaked with tears, and stood up slowly. He took hold of his cane and banged it on the boards to get the little girl's attention.

"Annaleigh Sweetpea, it's time for me to go," Guy announced. "Walk with me back up the dock."

She stopped spinning, smiled at him and nodded. She walked next to him, matching his slow pace and glancing up at him now and again with a radiant smile.

When they came to the edge of the dock, where the paving stone path began, Guy turned to face her. "You be a good girl, you hear me? Don't go gettin' into trouble."

He looked down at her, into those big brown eyes. He wanted to pick her up in a big bear hug and kiss her chubby pink cheeks, but that wasn't possible. He had tried years ago when she had first appeared to him, but she faded as soon as he reached for her. He had learned to resist the urge to touch her, although that urge was particularly strong today. "Well, this is it, baby girl. You run along now. Go on home to your Grandma. I'm sure she's waitin' for you."

The little girl nodded and smiled, twisting back and forth so the hem of her dress swayed rhythmically.

He cleared his throat and continued, “Now remember, don’t be comin’ ‘round here tomorrow. I won’t be here. No more now. Remember?”

She nodded again, still twisting and swaying.

Guy blinked away tears so he could see her clearly. “I love you, Annaleigh Sweetpea. And I’ll see you someday soon. Don’t you come lookin’ for me. I’ll find you when the time is right. Sound good?”

She looked up at him, paused a moment and then nodded her head a third time.

“You go on now, baby girl.”

Annaleigh turned on her heels and skipped back down the dock towards the water. When she reached the bench where they had sat moments earlier, she climbed up onto her usual seat on the left side and spun around to face him. She waved her tiny hand and blew him a kiss. He could hear her giggling as the wind changed direction for a moment and blew towards him. Annaleigh was gone.

Guy let the tears flow and didn’t bother to wipe them away. He turned and carefully stepped down from the dock onto the paving stones and made his way back up to the house for the last time.

