

Excerpted from *Now, Where Was I?*  
by  
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## Remembering Betsy

I was sound asleep when I felt a soft, warm hand on my cheek. I didn't even have to open my eyes to know who it was. My mama always wakes me up by putting her hand on my cheek and kissing me on the forehead and saying, "Rise and shine, Sleepyhead." Except this morning she said, "Rise and shine, Queenie!"

I smiled before I even opened my eyes. I unfolded my legs and stretched out as long as I could. Then I opened my eyes and said in my best fake British accent, "Well, good morning, mother of the queen."

Mama pinched my nose and called me Miss Smarty-pants.

Then she whispered, "Hop up and wash your face and come on down to the kitchen. Daddy and I want a little time alone with you before everyone else wakes up."

I figured they wanted to talk about me being crowned homecoming queen the night before. They was at the ball game

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and they chaperoned the dance, but they hadn't had a chance to talk to me about it in private. You know, being crowned homecoming queen is a big deal, and it needs talking about.

After Mama kissed my forehead again and went on back downstairs, I stretched some more and slid out of bed. Nelda, BB, and Patty Sue was still asleep, and I could hear Nelda purring. When she sleeps, she sounds like a little kitten. It's so sweet. I tiptoed out so I wouldn't wake 'em up and went down the hall to the bathroom.

I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror to see if being homecoming queen had made me look different. Soon as I seen my hair, I busted out laughing. It was sticking out every whichaway, and it reminded me of sumpin funny Buddy had said a long time back.

One morning I come to the breakfast table with my hair all crazy and sticking out, and Buddy said, "Well, hey, Bit, looks like you combed your hair with Mama's egg beater."

I laughed so hard when Buddy said that—well, everybody did—and seeing my hair all sticking out that morning made me remember that time so long ago.

After I'd peed, I brushed my teeth and washed my face. I started to brush my hair, but I decided to just sorta comb it down with my fingers instead and headed on down to where Mama and Diddy was waiting for me in the kitchen.

When I come in the kitchen, Diddy grabbed me by the arm and pulled me to him, giving me a big old bear hug.

Then he said, “Bit, you made your old dad right weepy last night. I ain’t never seen a prettier girl, except your mama, of course.”

When he said that, he looked over at my mama and winked. She just smiled so sweet.

He went on to say, “You were the prettiest girl on the homecoming court, and the dress your mama made you was the prettiest dress ever. I was just so proud of you, Bit. Nobody deserved that honor more than you.”

I said, “Thank you, Diddy. And thank you for helping chaperone the dance. I really loved having you and Mama there. It made it so special.”

Diddy said, “We wouldn’t have missed it for the world, Bit Baby.”

I know it’s a special occasion when my diddy calls me Bit Baby.

Then he said, “I like that Rich. He’s a fine boy. You like him, too, don’t you, Bit?”

I said, “Yes, Diddy, I like him a whole lot.”

He got real serious looking and said, “Well, Bit, you and Rich have a good time and enjoy each other’s company, but don’t you be making any foolish choices. Me and your mama have tried to teach you to make wise decisions, and we’re expecting you to remember what we’ve said.”

I knowed Diddy was thinking about Charlotte when he said that. I could see the hurt in his eyes. He loved Charlotte like

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she was his very own youngin, and her situation had near about broke his heart.

I hugged my sweet diddy and said, “I promise, Diddy.”

When I looked at my diddy again, I could see tears in his eyes. He just said, “I’m very proud of you, Bit.”

Mama said, “Darling, what can I fix you for breakfast?”

I told her I thought I’d just have some Cheerios and banana.

She said, “You sure you don’t want some eggs.”

I said, “Mama, I’m still full of punch and cookies from the dance. I think Cheerios will be enough.”

She said, “Well, let me wait on the queen this morning. You stay put, and I’ll get your cereal.”

So Mama fixed me a big bowl of Cheerios and banana and sat back down beside me while I ate it.

When I was about halfway through, Mama said, “Bit, we got a call real early this morning from your Aunt Nelda. Jimmy called her in the middle of the night, saying that Charlotte was in a lot of pain and was bleeding. Nelda and Doc Spivey went down to the trailer, and things didn’t look good. Doc Spivey tried everything he could, but Charlotte lost her baby—a little girl.”

I put my spoon down in my cereal bowl and covered my face with my hands. And I just cried. Mama rubbed me on the back and didn’t say nothing—just let me cry it out. Guess there just wudn’t nothing to say.

Finally, Diddy said, “Bit, why don’t you finish your cereal and go get some clothes on. I believe you need to get on down to Charlotte’s. I’m sure she’s gone need you.”

I said, “I don’t want any more cereal.”

Mama said, “Darlin’, you need to finish your breakfast. You can’t be any help to Charlotte if you go down there on an empty stomach. Now, please eat a little more before you leave.”

So I ate a few more spoonfuls and asked to be excused.

I went upstairs to the bathroom and shut the door. I turned on the water and let it get real hot. I took my wash rag off my hook and held it under the hot water. Then I buried my face in it. The steam felt good, but the water was so hot it sorta hurt my face. But I wanted it to hurt my face. I needed for it to hurt my face. Onest my wash rag had cooled, I wrung it out and put it back on my hook.

I tiptoed to my bedroom, inched open my drawer real quiet, and pulled out my jeans and my Columbia University sweatshirt that Dr. Levine had give me years ago. It had got purdy worn and faded, but it was still my favorite sweatshirt. I took my tennis shoes out from under my bed and went back down to the bathroom to get dressed. Onest I’d put on my clothes and brushed my stick-out hair into place, I went back down to the kitchen.

As I headed for the back door, Mama handed me a sack and said, “Here, Sweetie, take these cookies to Charlotte.”

Mama kissed me on the cheek, and I just headed out the door without a word. I didn’t feel like saying nothing, and I

believe Mama and Diddy understood that. I don't think they took it as rudeness—least I hope they didn't.

It took me about twenty minutes to walk down to the little trailer by the river. It gave me lots of time to think about all the stuff that had happened cause of Charlotte's foolish choice. I wished God would let us go back to before Charlotte had made that foolish choice, but I knowed that wasn't possible. We just have to live with our choices, accept the consequences, and move on. Yeah, them's Meemaw's words. I was just glad my Meemaw wasn't alive to see what poor Charlotte had done.

When I got to Charlotte and Jimmy's trailer, I just opened the door without knocking and tiptoed on in so I wouldn't make much noise. I seen my Aunt Nelda sitting on the sofa, reading a McCall's magazine. She looked so tired and didn't even get up to hug me like she normally done.

She just said, "Hey, Bit. Charlotte's in the bedroom. Go on back."

And she went on back to leafing through her McCall's.

When I got to the bedroom, I found Charlotte laying in bed. And she was all by herself. I expected to see Jimmy with her, but he weren't nowhere around. I didn't ask Charlotte where he was at cause, to be honest, I just didn't want to know.

As soon as Charlotte seen me, she started bawling. I pulled a chair up beside her bed, sat down, and reached for her hand. She squeezed my hand so hard it hurt. But, like the hot wash rag on my face, I needed for Charlotte to squeeze my hand so hard it hurt.

And while she cried, she said, “Oh, Bit, oh, Bit, oh, Bit” over and over and over.

I just let her cry and say my name, and I didn’t say a word back to her. There just wudn’t nothing a’tall to say back. And like I always say, I think you oughtter just let a body cry and cry till all the sorrow bleeds right out. And my beautiful cousin Charlotte had a whole lot of sorrow to bleed out.

When her crying calmed down a bit, I went into the little bathroom and found a clean wash rag and wet it with cool water. I came back and sat down and dabbed Charlotte’s hot cheeks and forehead with it.

And she started sobbing again, saying, “Jimmy never even got me a cool wash rag.”

And my heart hurt so bad. The tears were stinging the backs of my eyes, and I had to swaller, swaller, swaller the cry lump that kept trying to creep up into my throat.

I just let her cry and say, “Oh, Bit, oh, Bit, oh, Bit” until she exhausted herself and drifted off to sleep, still holding my hand real tight. Charlotte looked so beautiful, laying there with her eyes closed. Her long, blonde hair was spread out over her pillow, and her wet, black eyelashes reached halfway down her cheeks. For the first time in a long time, Charlotte looked like my pretty cousin.

It was so quiet that I could hear Aunt Nelda leafing through the pages of her McCall’s magazine. It reminded me of when me and Charlotte was little girls and Mama and Aunt Nelda would tear the Betsy McCall paper dolls out of their McCall’s

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magazines and give 'em to me and Charlotte to play with. We'd drag out the hobby box and sit cross-legged on the living room floor. After we'd cut out Betsy and her pretty clothes, we'd set to making her clothes even prettier. We'd get ribbon and lace and yarn and buttons from the hobby box and glue them all over Betsy's dresses.

And we'd say, "I bet there ain't a girl in the world who has Betsy clothes as pretty as ours."

I was so tired. I didn't want to let go of Charlotte's hand, so I just laid my head down on the bed and closed my eyes. I could still hear Aunt Nelda turning pages.

My last thought before I drifted off was, "I bet Aunt Nelda's remembering Betsy, too."