

Sophia's Goodbye by Michelle Brain

The winter winds slowly twined themselves around the spires of the old town's churches and cafes, winding in between the towers and through the cobblestoned alleyways like an old friend come to visit. The leaves had fallen away, the birds were quiet in their hidden perches, and no green things grew, but the cold brought with it a life of its own. Inside the old stone buildings with heavy wooden doors and shutters, hearths were tended, and families spoke softly to each other around their kitchen tables. Inside the small cottage at the outskirts, Old Lady Joan who tended the flower beds by the church breathed her last.

Sophia stared at the empty streets through the window. She stared at the empty trees. She stared at the empty hearth by the sofa and the empty kitchen table. She stared at the empty Old Lady Joan, lying on the bed, still and cold. Sophia wondered where all of the life was, the life that was supposed to have settled playfully in the crisp air along with the nipping frost. All she could find was silence.

She took a deep breath and held it in. She closed her eyes, thought about nothing, and then let the breath out. Then she got up and walked over to the bed. Old Lady Joan was still there, still unmoving underneath the plush covers. Sophia stared. Old Lady Joan's grey hair was smooth and soft and her wrinkled skin even softer yet. Her face was peaceful and her body more motionless than Sophia had ever seen it, more motionless than she had ever seen anybody. Sophia decided it was time to go and visit Mrs. Baker.

Along the grey cobblestones leading up to the old schoolhouse there were tiny dried up flowers poking through the small spaces in between some of the stones. They were brown and stiff, and they weren't growing anymore. Sophia wasn't either, she'd been small for a while, and she thought maybe she'd stay that way forever. This year winter seemed like it would never leave, even though it'd barely begun, and Sophia wondered if she would be like the flowers and like Old Lady Joan and never grow again.

When Sophia entered the schoolhouse, Mrs. Baker stood from where she was sitting by the desk and smiled.

"Well hello there, Sophia! I was beginning to wonder if you were going to come for your lesson today. The hot chocolate I brought isn't so much hot anymore, though it's still chocolate."

Mrs. Baker walked towards Sophia cheerfully and bent over to hug her. Sophia stood stock-still. Not as still as the town and the winter and Old Lady Joan but very still all the same. A little crease formed between Mrs. Baker's eyebrows, and her smile went away.

"Is something wrong, Sophie?"

“Old Lady Joan has died.”

Sophia didn't recognize the voice as her own, and she was surprised at the words the voice had formed. She supposed that Old Lady Joan really had died, though she hadn't been thinking of it quite that way. Mrs. Baker breathed in sharply, and her face crumpled. Her hands fluttered about Sophia's form, smoothing her hair on her head and her coat on her shoulders.

“Alright. Why don't you come with me to Mr. Baker's store, and I will go fetch Reverend Jones.”

Sophia nodded and followed after Mrs. Baker when she grabbed Sophia's hand and led her out of the schoolhouse and towards Mr. Baker's store. When they got to the store, Mrs. Baker met her husband at the counter and whispered something in his ear. He looked at Sophia with a sad expression. She didn't like it at all.

“Stay here with Mr. Baker for a bit, okay? I'll be right back.”

Sophia nodded at Mrs. Baker's stiff smile and watched as she walked out of the store. Mr. Baker said she could have a piece of candy if she wanted, but she didn't want. She wandered the store and looked at all of the items up for sale displayed on tall wooden shelves that smelled sweet and fresh. She felt Mr. Baker watching her from the shop counter.

After a little while, Mrs. Baker came back into the store and put her hand on Sophia's shoulder again. Sophia suddenly did not want to be touched, or smiled at, or offered candy. All she wanted was to be led back to the small cottage at the outskirts, where Old Lady Joan who tended the flower beds by the church would make soup for Sophia and tell her stories and tuck her in before she went to sleep. But Mrs. Baker didn't take her back to the cottage. Instead, a strange man who Sophia had never seen before walked into the store behind her and stopped when he saw Sophia. He looked very young, but his eyes were kind, and he was dressed neatly.

“Sophia, I'd like you to meet your uncle. He's going to take you home with him now.”

Sophia did not want to go to a home that wasn't Old Lady Joan's home, and she did not want to meet her uncle. She didn't look at Mrs. Baker as she ran out the doors of Mr. Baker's shop and down the empty cobblestone streets. She didn't stop running until she had run off of the cobblestone streets, into the forest and onto the banks of the creek that ran through the old oak trees. Then she sat down on the bank and cried.

Soon she heard footsteps behind her, and she knew it was her uncle, but she didn't turn around. She just picked up a rock and threw it as hard as she could into the cold water rushing past her. Her uncle sat beside her on the bank of the creek. He picked up his own rock and threw it into the stream. He was quiet for a minute.

“I know you don’t remember me, but I have a job now, and a wife and a house. You can have your own room and go to real school with the other children. We have a cat. Her name is Mittens.”

Sophia stood up and faced her uncle, glaring at him.

“I don’t want to go to a new home! I already have a home, and I don’t need a cat because I have Old Lady Joan!”

He was quiet for a while after Sophia stopped yelling. He looked at her, and he looked sad. He didn’t smile or offer her candy. He didn’t put his hand on her shoulder or pat her head. He just looked and thought.

“Sophia, you know that Old Lady Joan was very old. She was your age once, a very long time ago, but many years passed between then and now. That’s why it was her time to die. She had already done all of her growing, and she saw many winters and summers pass. You are still very young. You haven’t done all of your growing yet. I haven’t done all of my growing yet either, and both of us still have a lot of winters and summers left to see. That’s why I’m asking you to come and live with me. That way my wife and I don’t have to be alone in our house, and you don’t have to be alone here. We can do our growing together. Will you come with me?”

Sophia wiped at her eyes and thought about staying by herself in the empty cottage at the outskirts, and she thought about how there would be no one to tuck her in and about how she didn’t even know how to tend the flower beds by the church yet. Then she thought about a house with an uncle and an aunt and a cat. She thought about a room all her own and a school full of children. She took a deep breath and nodded at her uncle. She would go.

He smiled then and held his hand out to her.

“We’ll be a family, all of us together.”

Sophia took her uncle’s hand, and it was warm. He smiled at her as he led her through the trees, up the cobblestone streets and to his car. In her chest, underneath her ribcage and between her lungs, Sophia felt something small begin to grow. All around her, as the little car rolled up the hill and out of town, Sophia saw things start to move. When she looked closer, she realized that the trees were still very much alive. Their springy branches were swaying tranquilly in the chilly wind. The winter had taken all of their leaves, but now, when the spring came around once again, the trees would all grow fresh leaves until they were lush with green. As the sky darkened, Sophia watched those old, bare trees disappear behind them in the car’s mirrors. The first snowfall was a silent salute to the new beginning.