

Post Office Collection Box by Eliana Lisiecki

(High school age group, Cedarburg resident)

Dear Katherine,

I don't think we truly understood what it meant to say goodbye. When you're young enough to confidently walk around with bruised knees and untied shoelaces, the idea of never seeing someone again doesn't feel very real. Back when you lived in the house with the bunny-eared television and the rickety swing set, it seemed our biggest fears were snakes hiding under the bridge, not leaving everything we knew.

As the years go by, my memories of our summer escapades slowly start to fade. One of my most persistent fears now is change: life changing, and forgetting how it used to be. I don't want to forget to do my laundry or misremember the quadratic formula, and on a more sentimental level, I don't want to forget the sunny mornings we spent eating honey sticks at the farmer's market and the evenings playing ghost in the graveyard. But honestly, I don't think I could forget the feeling of having a partner in crime. There's a reason that you jumped to my mind when I decided to write these.

And there's something so bittersweet about childhood memories. You still exist to me as that girl who dreamed of being an Olympic figure skater, who loved sketching Star Wars comics, constructing impressive card towers, and inviting me to build blanket forts with her. The same smile, the same voice, is now a snapshot forever preserved in my mind. I wish I could write one more letter to you that wouldn't inevitably be lost in the mail. Only elementary students would forget to ask for an address, right? Up until you moved away, all I ever needed to talk to you was to walk the route from my house to yours.

Dear Safiyah,

These past few years, I've realized that great people can be right under your nose without realizing it. While we always had a good time together in middle school gym class (despite my notoriously poor athleticism), I never thought we were that close. That is, until a couple years later when things got real and we learned who our true friends are. Old wounds are never pleasant things to dwell on, and you know the details just as well as I do, so I think we can leave it at this: when certain people left me, belittled me, and made me feel worthless, you showed me that I still deserve to have people I can trust.

From being my shoulder to cry on to letting me be the beta reader for your novels, you've taught me that a true friend is someone who has your back in spite of circumstances. When we mess up with other people, and even each other, at the end of the day, you're someone I can come back to time and time again. It doesn't matter whether we're laughing over past drama or crying over the phone about family strife; everytime I talk to you, you bring me up from the darkness of my own moods and into the light.

I wish I didn't have to move away last year, but knowing you, I doubt we'd spend any less time chatting on the phone wherever I lived. By now, I think I've accepted the fact that I don't live in the same town as you anymore. I like the swirling of falling leaves and sparkly snow that we simply don't get back in Texas. Doesn't mean I want to see you any less; I'll be waiting for you to visit one of these days. You'd love the ice cream parlor downtown.

Dear Leo,

I've spent quite a bit of time with you this past year, drifting through trails and meadows outside of town. Who knew that you could become so close to a stranger so fast. Sitting across from you in Spanish class, slushing through wintery woods, reading Russian novels on my floor, I can't even begin to count how many times I've turned and seen your face. Maybe we were never really friends in the traditional sense (I liked you the moment I set eyes on you), but I'd say what is a relationship if not a friendship of some sort? A flash of the eyes and a smiling laugh can be found in any bond.

Remember when we'd cook dinner in my kitchen, and all those times we danced to music in the basement until we were exhausted? I can't wait for those days to come back. For now I just count down the days until you're back from college, 500 miles and counting between us, waiting for the moment I can see you next to me once more. Now, I won't pretend that we're always on the same page; there's a certain Romeo and Juliet aspect of our lives that's been projected onto us. Distance only amplifies our disconnects, a stew of longing and frustration that pours itself out over phone calls. But despite all of our flaws, deep down I'm sure we can get through life together as long as we remember why we are friends of some kind in the first place.

The lesson you've taught me, and are still teaching me, is that friendship is more than just focusing on what we agree on; it's necessary to dig deeper than the surface level and find out how we can see eye to eye on the hard things. We're real people, not faceless devil's advocates or straw men. Whatever life throws at us, I know we can

learn to hot potato it around between each other until it cools off. To be friends, you need to be able to improvise, to communicate, to work as a team, to get past the hurdles and keep on running that marathon. We have to take the good times along with the bad. I know I'll be ok with running as long as I've got you beside me.