

## Nostalgia: A Haunting of the Heart

by Anne E. Beall

*Nostalgia (Noun): a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition—Merriam-Webster.com*

Dear Nostalgia

Lately, you've been visiting a lot. You slip into my life uninvited, then vanish before I can confront you. You wait for the perfect moment to latch onto me and pull me backward. By the time I realize what you've done, you're already gone.

And I have some things I need to say to you.

You're a collector, Nostalgia. You gather my life's most fragile moments, carefully cataloging them like artifacts. But you don't preserve them to cherish—you sharpen them, turning them into weapons. Then, at the worst possible times, you wield them against me. A song, a photograph, a familiar scent—it's all you need to strike. What might seem small and harmless becomes unbearable in your hands, as you remind me not just of what I've lost, but of how I'll never get it back.

Last month, you crept up while I was loading the dishwasher, my hands submerged in warm water as I rinsed a mucky plate. My thoughts wandered idly to the brown water stain streaking the cream-colored stucco of my neighbor's house, the way it stood out like a tear track on an otherwise pristine face. I was glad we'd removed those rust stains I found on our home last month. I thought about how thankful I was for my husband's dinner that night as I scraped the remnants off our plates. Scallops and mussels sautéed in garlic butter, served over spaghetti. The richness of it still lingered on my tongue.

*Isn't life good?* I thought.

And then, without warning, there you were. You didn't announce yourself. You never do. You simply appeared, sweeping me into a memory of my daughter when she

was seven. I was no longer in my kitchen but walking hand in hand with her. She was gazing up at me, her eyes wide and bright, the way they were when she was young. She had a lovely, optimistic way of seeing the world, as though every day held a secret waiting to be discovered.

She always smiled when we walked down the street, skipping slightly to match my stride. Her sticky fingers gripped mine with a trust that brought an ache to my chest even then, though I didn't fully understand it. She took comfort in my presence, in having her mom close, and that simple bond was the foundation of her world.

But you didn't stop there, Nostalgia. You never do. In a blink, you whisked me away to my bedroom years later. She was older, perhaps thirteen, and we were sitting on my bed, watching *Little Women*. The movie flickered across the screen, a sweet story of mothers and daughters, of love and loss, and we were both drawn into its world as if we were part of that family.

She clung to my arm during the saddest parts, her head leaning against my shoulder as if to protect herself from the ache of it. At thirteen, she was on the cusp of independence. But just then, she was my little girl. I wanted to freeze that moment, to hold onto the warmth of her against me, knowing it wouldn't last forever.

My suitcase waited to the right of the TV screen, a reminder that I had to leave for a business trip later that afternoon. I tried not to look at it, tried not to let its presence steal the moment from us. I hated leaving her, even though I told myself it was necessary. Duty called. Work demanded it.

As the movie played, we both cried when Beth died, as though we, too, were mourning the loss of someone we knew. I remember glancing at her through my own watery eyes and wondering how I'd ever gotten lucky enough to have such a wonderful daughter in my life.

"I hate to leave you today," I said softly when the movie credits rolled across the screen.

"Oh, Mom, you'll be back soon." She wrapped her arms around me, holding on as if to anchor me before I stepped out into the world.

And then, just as suddenly, I was back in my kitchen, my hands still wet from the warm water. But the moment lingered, as sharp and vivid as if it had only just happened.

Her confident, reassuring look remained etched in my memory, but now it felt bittersweet. Because now, years later, I know that moment was fleeting, as they all are. My daughter—my little girl—was gone. Not to school, not to a friend's house. Gone. A grown woman now, with her own life, her own world, no longer needing me in the way she once did.

The weight of that realization settled heavily in my chest. You, Nostalgia, stole my contentment and left nothing in its place. I took a deep breath, but it felt hollow—like the wind had been knocked out of me. The rest of the evening passed under a heavy pall, everything muted and gray, as I tried to reconcile a past long gone with a life that now feels so different. The lightness that had filled my rooms had vanished.

For a while, Nostalgia, I didn't hear from you. But then, out of nowhere, you appeared again, as you always do. I passed an old photo of my father and me taped on the basement refrigerator. I must walk by that fridge dozens of times each week, but this time you made the photo sting. Memory rushed back. The picture was taken on the day of an awards ceremony. I'm standing next to him outside the university president's house, the sunlight catching his grin. His glasses are off because they darkened in the sunlight, and small red marks on his nose remain where the heavy frames usually rest. He looks happier than I'd ever seen him. His smile couldn't be any wider.

Later that day, we went to a fancy restaurant that my father had promised we'd visit. We sat in the soft glow of dim lighting, surrounded by white tablecloths and polished silverware. My parents had dressed up for the occasion: my father in a tweed jacket, my stepmother in a navy silk dress. My grandparents were there too, leaning in close to tell me how much they would miss me.

I remember the pride in my father's voice as he spoke. "So, you're going to Yale for graduate school," he said, almost as if he couldn't quite believe it himself. "You've really done it."

He rarely said he was proud of me. Those words never came easily, but I knew he meant it.

But now, decades later, he is gone—dead at sixty-four from lung cancer, although he never smoked a day in his life. And once again, you yanked me back into the

present, Nostalgia. You remind me I'll never see his big, crooked smile again—the one where one of his front teeth slightly overlapped the other. I'll never hear his tenor voice or feel one of his rare meaningful hugs, the kind that conveyed what he did not say easily: that he loved me.

You make me relive the joy of that day, only to remind me that it's out of reach forever. Because now, no matter how hard I try, I can't go back to that restaurant or see the pride in my father's eyes. All I can do is remember and feel a terrible longing.

You never stay long enough for me to tell you that you're selective—that you only ever show certain moments. Your scenes aren't a true reflection of my life. You curate memories, offering only the highlights: friends on the front stoop, drinking and laughing in summer; long dinners with people I love, where the conversation stretches late into the night; the thrill of unwrapping the exact gift I'd hoped for on Christmas morning. You show only those fragments of joy, gilded in hindsight.

Last week, you took me back to a department store with my mother when I was a teenager. She told me I could choose anything I wanted, and she would buy it. But she didn't want to visit any other departments—we were in housewares. I wandered the aisles, looking for something I might want. On a shelf, I spotted a small kitchen timer with an orange flower on its face. I didn't cook, but maybe one day I would. She bought it for me, and that little timer became important. It felt like her way of saying: *I care about you.*

But you never stay long enough to remind me how rare those good moments really were—how strained our relationship was most of the time. You leave out how she left my college graduation early, and how I waited by the large boulder outside the auditorium where we agreed to take pictures.

I stood there in my cap and gown, under the hot sun, but she never showed.

"Where is Mom?" I asked my sister.

"She left... said it was hot in there."

You never show me the way she favored my younger sister: the money she gave her, the airline tickets, the frequent visits. Visits where she flew in with live lobsters. Even up until the day she died, it was clear: I was never the priority.

Your curation is so good, I sometimes question my life decisions. You conjure my ex-husband, leaning toward me in a dimly lit bar, his voice low and earnest as he whispers, “I’ve never loved anyone as much as I love you.” Vulnerability pools in his brown eyes, and for a moment, I feel his love—tremendous, overwhelming—and remember how certain I was that we were meant to be together. I’m there again, bathed in his affection, warmed by the sincerity in his voice.

And then you vanish, Nostalgia, leaving me alone with the sharp sting of regret—for all the ways I failed him. I find myself wondering how I could have left someone who loved me so deeply. But you’re a master of illusion. You take moments that were messy, complicated, even painful, and airbrush away the struggles, the flaws, the chaos, leaving only the shimmering highlights.

Nostalgia, you never show me how my ex-husband and I could never agree on how to parent our children. How we fought over his embarrassing jokes, the ones he kept telling even as shame flushed my face. You leave out the flirtations with other women—“just joking around,” he would say. You skip over how he quietly undermined my relationship with our children, how he always seemed to take more than he gave. You don’t show how he emotionally flattened me during our divorce, or how he walked away with the bulk of our assets. You erase the nights he shouted “Shut up!” when I asked a question, making our meal in the kitchen while he sat in the next room, surfing the Internet.

I go for a walk to escape you, Nostalgia. But, of course, you follow—I can never seem to leave you behind. I glance at a house that vaguely reminds me of one I used to live in, and suddenly I’m not on the sidewalk anymore. I’m standing inside *that* house, the one I bought when my children were little.

It seemed like a dream house back then—over a hundred years old, with sturdy gray stone walls and an air of history. But you, Nostalgia, take me back there in your usual, selective way. You cast a warm glow over the place, as I stand in front of the huge picture window overlooking the old tree-lined street—the towering oaks arching above the rooftops. You show me how deeply I loved that home, and all the happy moments tucked inside its walls. You bring back the dinner parties with close friends, laughter rising over pizza spread across our long wooden table. You remind me of

family dinners—the kids swapping school stories, gossiping about who went where for spring break, all of us gathered around home-cooked meals. You show me how much love lived in that house—and how much of it I still carry with me.

What you refuse to show is the chill that crept into that house as my marriage unraveled. You don't show how the home shifted from light to shadow, or how the warmth drained from the walls once I was alone. I tried to keep the feeling alive, to restore what the house once held, but it was futile. By the end, it felt ice cold, and I could no longer bear to live there.

Nostalgia, you taunt me with the realization that I no longer think or feel as I once did. Recently, when I heard a song from my college years, you whisked me back to my dorm room—one quiet afternoon when my best friend Jeff and I were talking about the future.

Jeff, full of energy and drive, was a brilliant math major who only had one notebook for his entire four years of college. "I'm gonna design supercomputers—machines that'll solve problems we can't even touch right now," he said, his eyes sparkling.

I nodded, swept up in his conviction. "And I want to do research on gender stereotypes—stuff that actually helps women."

Back then, optimism filled me completely. I believed in our dreams—wholeheartedly. You reminded me how I used to see the world: with boundless curiosity and deep trust in my professors and mentors. I truly believed life would unfold beautifully and steadily, if I just worked hard enough.

I remember sitting in the campus cafeteria with Jeff, complaining about the state of the world.

"We'll be running things one day," he said. "Think of all the crap we're gonna have to fix."

"Yeah, there's a lot," I said. "But we'll get it right."

Nostalgia, you showed me that bright, hopeful version of myself—and reminded me that she's gone.

I know what you're up to now, even when I can't feel you nearby. You're cataloguing everything: every laugh, every walk, every seemingly ordinary moment I take for granted. You're storing it all away, filing it under *to be used later*, ready to unleash it on me when I least expect it.

Take the walks I share with my husband, the man I found later in life—my soulmate, the keeper of my happiness. We stroll through our neighborhood, talking about his research or my latest writing project. It feels so simple, so unremarkable. Just another part of our life together. But I know you're there, Nostalgia, watching with that calculating gaze.

One day, when I can no longer walk with him, when I can no longer hear his voice as he shares his thoughts or laughs at mine, you'll fling these moments back at me. What feels ordinary now will one day feel extraordinary in its absence, a painful reminder that the smallest details of life hold the most weight.

That's your trick, isn't it? You force me to see what I didn't fully appreciate at the time: the conversations I can no longer have, the people I can no longer hold, the laughter I can no longer share.

But the truth is, you collect what time might otherwise erase. You store away the smallest, most fragile pieces of my life. The sticky hands I once held, the heart-spilling conversations, the laughter that once echoed around my dinner table. You preserve these, cataloging them with a care I do not.

And yet, you do not protect these memories out of kindness. Your purpose is not to comfort me but to confront me, to make me ache for what I can never have again. In doing so, you also ensure that none of it is lost. You are a record-keeper—one who safeguards what I can no longer touch, who carries the weight of my life when it feels too heavy. That is the gift within the ache: the chance to recognize what truly mattered.

When you arrive, you remind me of time's fragility. You make me keenly aware that this moment will never come again. And because of that, I savor it just a little more. I see the faces of those I love with clearer eyes, knowing they are still with me, and I hold them closer. You show me the lives and loves I have lost, but in doing so, you sharpen my gratitude for what remains.

Nostalgia, you remind me of what I still have—the people I can still reach out to, the moments of happiness still within my grasp. When I play a game of Yahtzee with my older sons, I resist the pull of distraction and the work that seems to call me away. When I walk with my husband or talk to a good friend, I feel lucky because I don't know what the future holds. This could be the last time. And so I cherish it more. I am not rushing the way I used to. Because of you, Nostalgia, I am making my time matter.

And your presence, for all its sorrow, is proof of how fully I've lived, how deeply I have loved, and how many beautiful experiences I have had. You remind me that my life has not been just a blur of passing days, but a collection of meaningful memories. The people I miss mattered—not just because I loved them, but because they loved me. And if their absence still aches, it is only because I was lucky enough to have them in my life, no matter how briefly.

So, thank you, Nostalgia.



**Anne E. Beall** is an award-winning author and social psychologist who writes about the emotional undercurrents that shape our lives. Her creative nonfiction has appeared in literary journals such as *The Write Launch*, *Minerva Rising*, and *The Raven's Perch*. She holds a PhD in psychology from Yale and is the founder and editor of *Chicago Story Press Literary Journal*.