



***By Margaret Evans***

I've barely been in Beaufort this summer. First, my father-in-law's passing in early June took us to California, then we were off to our annual family get-together in Myrtle Beach; and now, I'm writing from my parents' house on the banks of the Tennessee River, near Decatur, AL, where I grew up.

I've missed a lot while I've been away. Two significant events at my church – a funeral and an ordination – made me long to be home. My daughter's dance studio closed unexpectedly while we were gone, too, leaving us both with an ache in our hearts and a sense of being too far away. Even now, as I delight in the company of my parents – and my mom's great cooking! – awaiting the second night of my 30th high school reunion, I feel homesick.

It's a feeling with which I'm quite familiar. In fact, I'm almost always a little homesick. When I'm in South Carolina, I often yearn to be in Alabama . . . and vice versa. Both places are home, but neither is perfectly, completely, 100 % home. The older you get, the more homes you have, I guess. And you can't, as they say, be two places at one time.

As I drove from my parents' house to Florence, AL earlier this week, for a business meeting with an old friend, I was struck – almost overcome – by the beauty of this green, rolling, river-woven place of my childhood. While I fully appreciate the splendor of my current home in the Lowcountry – uh, you've probably heard me mention that! – I don't think it's in my blood quite like northern Alabama. After 30 years away, I'm not sure any place ever will be. The smell of the

Beaufort River is very different from the smell of the Tennessee. As I sat listening to the latter lap against my parents' dock yesterday, I breathed in that smell – fresh water and catfish and a hint of gasoline – and I knew it was the smell of home. I sometimes feel *almost* that way when driving with my windows down over the Woods Memorial Bridge onto Lady's Island . . . but not *exactly* that way. You know?

But back to the reason I'm here in Alabama... It's a weird thing about high school reunions. I've been to three "big ones" now, and what I've learned is this: We out-of-towners get very excited and often go to great lengths to attend these functions. But the locals – those who never left town, or who left and came back – aren't nearly as enthusiastic. Many of them don't even attend. I've always been confused – and a little hurt – by that phenomenon. Here I am driving eight or nine hours (sometimes even flying!), at great inconvenience to my family and colleagues, just to lay eyes on my old high school chums . . . and they can't be bothered to drive the four or five miles from their house to the party?

Lots of folks I expected to see were missing from last night's get-together at this downtown bar called The Brick. I'm hoping to see them tonight at the Country Club shindig, but I'm not counting my chickens. After much pondering – y'all know I like to ponder – I think I've figured out why locals don't care so much about reunions. I can sum it up in one word: Nostalgia. We out-of-towners have it, and they don't. We who have long been gone harbor an idealized, watercolor image of our hometown, our high school days, and our old friends, that locals just don't possess. They live here. Every day. They see each other regularly. Or choose not to. They know what this town – and its people – are *really* like. Don't get me wrong; it's not a bad town. But neither is it the interactive Hallmark card we long-goners tend to imagine from afar.

Most of us, upon going home – if we spend any real time there – will soon discover what the locals already know: that home isn't "all that." It may be a very good place; but in the end, it's just a place – with all the problems places tend to have. And the people who live there, while lovable, are just as flawed as the people we live amongst now. It's only in our memories – and our homesick longings – that home takes on the glowing patina of fairy tale or myth.

If you believe – and I do, because Sting said so – that we are spirits in the material world, this understanding of home makes sense. From a spiritual perspective, we are all wanderers . . . expatriates searching for the motherland, but never quite finding it. "Home," then, is a symbol of that motherland, but like all symbols, it only points us to the thing – it's not the thing itself. Still, we all long for home, and we'll try anything to get there! We build houses, we buy houses, we sell houses and get new houses. We leave one town for another town, only to yearn for the

town we left. We change neighborhoods with great gusto, then drive through our old neighborhoods feeling wistful and weepy. Every time we think we've finally come home for good, reality rears its head, and we're reminded that Home is an ideal just beyond our grasp. This latest "home" is only a pit stop, not a final destination. We still have far to travel.

But, oh, those pit stops are a comfort, aren't they? It is there that we are repaired, refueled, and reminded that we are loved. From pit stop to imperfect pit stop, we are nudged – sometimes gently, sometimes roughly – along the path that points us homeward. And when we look upon these passing places with all the imagination, mercy, and love we can muster – and maybe squint a little – we can sometimes see, however briefly, that perfect home of our eternal longing.

I've been asked to offer a "reflection" at our reunion party tonight – not because I was Class President or Valedictorian or Homecoming Queen (I wasn't) – but because in a class that produced doctors and lawyers, teachers and preachers, engineers and artists, I'm the one who grew up to be a writer. I am honored and excited . . . and slightly terrified. I've been thinking hard about what to say, because my goal is ambitious. I hope to make the Class of '83 laugh *and*

cry, and I hope to make them see each other the way I see them in my dreams – perfectly young, perfectly beautiful, perfectly healthy and happy. For ten minutes, give or take a few, I hope to make us all feel right at home.

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