

# Never Letting Go

Written by Katie Horner

“GOOD MORNING, WOLF PAC CAMPERS!”

“GOOD MORNING, BETSY!”

Every day, these words echoed through our camp room, just as they reverberated through my mind on our last day of camp.

\*\*\*\*\*

I skipped, ran and jumped all at the same time ... if that's even possible. My heart was leaping and my face was beaming with light. I could not wait! It was a hot, sticky, Friday afternoon in August, when the air feels like you could drink it, but I didn't notice. My sight was set on a sea of lime green shirts. I was doing my skip-run-jump motion down the sidewalks of Lancaster Avenue in Suburban Square . The rhythm of my feet was set to distant Latin-American music, “*thump thump thump, beat beat, thump thump thump, beat beat.*” I whirled past shops, people and parked cars until, finally, I got to the waves of the lime green ocean and I hurled myself into it. In all of five seconds, I had made contact with all twenty people of the mob. I heard shouts of, “Katie!” and, “You're here!” and even a sarcastic, “Finally!” I received hugs, pats on the back, and I felt peoples' hands brush me as I smacked the ground.

“Oof!” my complaint was muffled by, “Oh, I'm so sorry!” and, “Are you okay?” and, “Smooth, Katie.”

Everyone nearest to me helped me up and above the ruckus I heard, “Guys!” a chuckle, “You're supposed to bring people over here, not bowl them over!”

‘*Betsy!*’ I thought eagerly.

I took that moment to examine my surroundings ... or ... surround-ers. Everyone was smiling either impishly or just happily. All of my friends. There's freckly Colette, oh, and two-braided Mira, bespectacled Kira, too. Robin's braces made her face even brighter, and Lucas (the little twerp) was poking me for something to do. Many other familiar faces welcomed me, but I couldn't see them all because the person who had spoken was barreling through the crowd as much as her petite body would allow. Yes, it was Betsy. She had her lime green shirt on, too, and her little face was glimmering brighter than the sun. Her brown eyes sparkled behind her glasses and her brown hair was pulled back. Betsy could be your mother, your sister, and your best friend all combined into one. She will give you encouragement and make you feel better about things, much like a mother. She'll joke around with you, like a sister. And she will sometimes just talk, exactly like a friend would. Overall, she is *the* best counselor.

"Katie Horner! How are you, darling?" she smiled and winked as she approached to give me a hug.

"Awesome!" I grinned back as I returned the embrace. When she went back to what she was doing, I struggled to keep my breathing steady. Excited breath fluttered in my chest. I bounced around my friends, pushing off of their shoulders; my Gatorade had kicked in.

After a few minutes of greetings, we all flooded into the store that we would be performing in front of in a short time. The store was called Nurture. There were baby clothes, toys, and accessories everywhere. It smelled so strong of baby powder, I could taste it ... not a pleasant taste. We could hear the soft cradle music of a mobile. I walked

up to a display of baby robes and brushed my hand over them. They felt like a baby's hair, soft and smooth.

While waiting for something to happen, I galloped around the store with my friends. I whizzed by smiling counselors: Elyse, Alison, Tim, Ashley, Jenny, Jeremy, Marissa, Betsy, and ever-so comically quirky Gabe. Gabe's half-inch thick glasses were pushed up on the very top of his protruding nose. Gabe might look peculiar to any stranger, but he gives new meaning to the cliché, "Don't judge a book by its cover." He could make anything or anyone smile. He's not only an amazing counselor, but a playwright. An award-winning playwright at that!

Gabe was observing us with an immensely amused expression decorating his face. Watching thirteen-year-olds leap and yip around the store *must* have been humorous.

When the counselors were certain that all of us were in the baby store, they called us together. We were doodling on the chalkboard in the back of the shop. It was littered with things like, "Brooke wuz here ♥," and, "☺" or, "Lucas wuznt here!"

We stopped mid-graffiti when we heard a monstrous, "*QUAAAAAAAAAAAAACK!*" of a quacker from the Philadelphia Duck Tours, followed by, "GOOD AFTERNOON, WOLF PAC CAMPERS!"

My friends and I were the Wolf PAC campers. We had been members of the Wolf Performing Arts Center camp for a total of two weeks, and during those weeks, we had been working on a performance that we had performed for the first time earlier in the afternoon. We were in the baby store preparing for our final performance on First Friday, when people perform on the sidewalk of Lancaster Avenue for the first Friday of every month, and we were performing our show.

“GOOD AFTERNOON, BETSY!” the campers’ voices reverberated as we gathered around Betsy, awaiting her directions.

“You guys have been awesome in this store, very respectful. Bravo!” she praised, “So, are we ready to put on our final performance?!”

“Yes!”

“... I’m sorry, what was that? ARE YOU READY?!”

“YES!”

“ALRIGHT! While you’re performing out there, guys, be loud! This isn’t an enclosed space, it’s outside, so you have to be *loud*. And just remember: this is the last time you will be performing with this group of people. Sad, right? So let’s make this the best performance *yet!*”

“Whoo!”

“Alright, if everyone could gather in this alley over here,” she motioned to the right side of the store, “that would be awesome. Okay, we are ready!”

“Yeah!” We all streamed out of the store, some of us brushing more baby clothes on the way.

The alley was sandwiched between the baby store and an Italian restaurant. The scent of garlic bread, pasta sauce, and wine wafted out of the restaurant and wound down the alley. My mouth watered, developing a sudden craving for pasta with red sauce. The wall of the restaurant was slowly being claimed by unripe grape vines except for a walkway leading up to an “employees only” door. Most of us perched on the concrete rail, either on the concrete or on somebody’s lap who was on the wall. My legs were squished under Colette and Sarah Marks. I tickled Colette on her stomach, causing her to

dump Sarah on the ground just as Colette accidentally elbowed me in the stomach.

Colette and I started howling with laughter while Sarah glared at us, but she grinned and started laughing, too.

“Jeremy’s songwriting workshop, you’re up!” Betsy shouted over the chattering. Sarah, Tori, Robin, and many more of us hopped up and strode out of the alleyway, into the streaming sunlight. A miniscule segment of the sidewalk was surrounded by people. Lots of people. Many people of different races. I suddenly became aware of the butterflies in my stomach, but I just followed my mom’s advice: use that excitement to give you that extra *umph* in your performance. So, I sang the song I helped create.

*“There’s a place that we all love, we have fun and make new friends. It’s a place we’re dreamin’ of, too bad it has to end.”* Our voices made passers-by stop and listen. Everyone around us was smiling, even the counselors who had heard the song many times. I took a breath, but instead breathed in fumes from the passing cars. My eyes started to well-up, and I let out a short cough from behind my raised elbow. The=2  
0people around me jumped, it was as if someone had fired a gun in their ear. I blushed, giggled, but kept singing.

A few honks from cars sounded, but other than that, it was only our voices that could be heard on Lancaster Avenue. *“It’s time to go, I can’t say why, I know I can’t say how. All things must end so to you my friends, I say goodbye for now. I say goodbye for now. I say goodbye,”* we slowed, *“for now.”* As our song ended, applause erupted from the crowd. We smiled and leaped back into the alley, only to come back out, and get into formation for our opening number. All of us were pinched against each other, but none of us minded.

The piano started, as did we. *“Another openin’, another show, from Philly, Boston, to Baltimo’, a chance for stage-folk to say hello, another openin’ of another show!”*

Not only were our voices in unison, but also our bodies. We danced our hearts out; ducking, weaving, and doing stationary movements looking like cheerleaders. We performed songs, dancing, singing, using our acting skills to let people know just how much fun we were having. We – were – invisible.

I was overwhelmed by it all, in my little corner of the world. I heaved a sigh. This was where I belonged. Beside some of the best friends I could ever have, singing, doing what I love, sharing with others, *showing* people that this is what I love. What I was feeling then was, and still is, indescribable. Unbelievable. My head wasn’t in the clouds, it was miles above them.

We came to a quiet song, which was when I could have cried. All of the memories came flooding back. *“I’ll be your candle on the water, ‘til every wave is warm and bright. My soul is there beside you, let this candle guide you, soon you’ll see a golden stream of light.* While we were singing, I spotted a chain of white umbrellas above the heads of our audience. I cocked my head and followed them until they got to a part in the crowd. This was when I saw that the umbrellas were being held by a group of ladies dressed in white. They moved as one, slowly, smoothly, yet stiffly. Every few yards, they would stop and arrange themselves into a sculpture of frozen women and umbrellas. While they froze, they would watch us perform. Most of us noticed these people and started glancing around nervously. I stole a look at the audience members, who were admiring them. I met Colette’s eye. *“I’ll be your candle on the water,”* we were singing, but Colette’s eyes were wide with anxiety. They were flicking from me to the women in

white. I nodded lightly to say, "I know." She grinned insincerely and sang between gritted teeth, *"I'll be your candle on the water, who are these people staring at us? They're really starting to creep me out!"*

"*Same with me,*" I subtly sang back, trying to suppress giggles. We eyed them as they serenely floated by. I watched as they claimed people's eyes all the way down the street. I chuckled and paid attention to my dancing and singing.

\*\*\*\*\*

*"We're for each other like a wop ba-ba lu-mop a-wop bam boom! Just like my brother is sha na na na na na yip-pit-y dip de boom. Chang chang chang-ity chang shoo-bop, we'll always be together ... wa oooooooh yeah! We'll always be together! We'll always be together! We'll always be together..."* and we all skipped, ran, and jumped back into the alleyway. The crowd was still clapping in rhythm with us as we came out for bows. We all clasped hands, lifted them up, and took the praise.

Now for the part we've all been dreading: the goodbyes. Nobody cried, people just hugged. I hugged everyone. I made it a priority to not skip anyone, even the counselors. Betsy and Gabe, too. Gabe, the big "man" wasn't crying, but even he was getting emotional. I hugged him and was suddenly surrounded by the rest of the counselors. Then, I realized it wasn't just me hugging, we were all hugging each other. *"I'll be your candle on the water, this flame inside of me will grow. Keep holding on, you'll make it, here's my hand so take it. Look for me, reaching out to show, as sure as rivers flow. I'll never let you go. I'll never let you go. I'll never let you go..."*

We parted, and with practically everyone's instant-message address or email, I walked over to my parents and sister. My sister was staring at something across the street,

which made me feel fine and dandy, but my parents smiled and offered me my Gatorade. I quickly took a mouthful of the light blue drink. I had hoped it would get rid of the sour taste in my mouth. I recognized it as the taste of regret, sadness, and maybe even loss.

“Ready?” my dad asked, gesturing to the car. I made some sort of noise which I guess meant to my dad, “yes.”

So, I strode away from two weeks of sheer joy. I still keep in touch with all of my friends from Wolf PAC, we share memories. I also keep in touch with Betsy and Gabe by doing their shows and musicals. I honestly never felt the way I did that day again. It was those moments of my summer that I remember the most ... it goes to figure. A feeling like that doesn't come along too often, and friendships don't form that quickly. I will always remember you, Wolf PAC campers and counselors.

I'll never let you go.