

Someplace Warm

A Novel about the Kindness of Fate
by Annie Katz

Meg's Goodbye Letter

Meg supposed he would find a way to make her final act result in abundant attention for him. How could she expect anything different? Even if she'd included a clause in her letter stating her decision to end her life had nothing whatsoever to do with Gary, everyone would take it as protesting too much, which she'd been accused of many times. Maybe it was true. Maybe killing herself was about Gary. She didn't care, as long as she ended up where she needed to be.

Now she wished she'd been a completely different sort of wife, perhaps the kind who yelled back when their husbands yelled at them. But her time had run out, so it was no use speculating about what might have been. She couldn't let Gary influence her decisions in any way from now on. He had taken himself out of her picture.

Which was fine. The wound of his betrayal was hard and shiny now, a black marble in her heart. Thinking about him didn't even hurt. Now she was free to live or die as she pleased. And nothing she could imagine would please her as much as dying in the right way at the right time. Her death would be perfect.

She'd planned every detail and rewritten her goodbye letter half a dozen times until she was satisfied with every word of it. She imagined her suicide note might be saved. Her older daughter Christine might keep it in a jewelry box and pass it on as part of the family story for generations.

Jimmy would be the one who would most likely grow up to marry a girl who would keep family histories alive. Johnny was more like Meg's younger daughter, his aunt Teresa, restless, not apt to settle down. That is if the new religion hadn't already turned them into junior deacons or monks or something worse.

Meg was afraid to hear Frank and Christine's new philosophy on the role of children in God's plan. Christine insisted Meg call them James and John now, and she wouldn't allow Meg "unsupervised visits," as if all of a sudden a grandmother was a threat to their spiritual welfare.

Johnny would probably make a break for it as soon as he got old enough. James was too much like Meg and Christine though, the older child, the one who tried to be good and please everyone.

Maybe it all came down to birth order in the end. If Meg had been born second instead of first, maybe she wouldn't have written a goodbye letter, much less slaved over getting every word perfect and copying it over until the penmanship was flawless. And if her brother had been the firstborn, he'd be the one to jump off a bridge on his sixtieth birthday. The thought made her laugh. At fifty-five, her brother had everything to live for, a beautiful new wife with new blonde children, a thriving furniture business, and a vacation condo on the beach in Maui.

His annual phone calls made Meg nervous though. His happy exterior could be hiding unfathomable despair. Maybe Meg was just projecting her own unhappiness onto him, or maybe all his running around accumulating pretty new families and fancier homes really was camouflaging hopelessness. How could she know? She'd never once had a heart to heart conversation with him. Even when he was a boy, he never let her inside his tough outer shell enough to glimpse his spirit. Meg's brother was an unopened package to her.

Maybe when she was dead everything would be clear. Maybe heaven was the experience of having all your most important questions answered, even the ones you'd never dared ask out loud. Maybe everlasting life included infinite knowledge and wisdom. Meg hoped for the best.

Meg feared her carefully composed goodbye letter would end up in the trash. She would be lucky if anyone even read it through once, much less kept it in a perfumed box for future generations to admire. *This is the last thing Great Grandmother Margaret Compton ever wrote... Lovely penmanship. A lost art.*

The goodbye letter was not really important in the grand scheme. The important goal was oblivion, and Meg knew her jumping off point. The gateway to her final destination was a particular bridge, an ordinary country road bridge across the mouth of a river that emptied into the Columbia from the Washington side. Most Columbia Gorge traffic was on the Oregon side on Highway 84, so the Washington border road was mainly used by local residents or Sunday drivers enjoying the view.

Meg remembered the first time she'd seen the bridge, when the girls were still children riding in the back seat of the station wagon. They'd stopped just beyond this particular bridge for a picnic, and while they were eating chocolate cupcakes with melting pink icing, Teresa had said, "I wonder how many people jumped off that bridge?"

Her question disturbed Meg, because it was another in a long line of morbid questions Teresa had been asking. Teresa turned eleven that summer and seemed fixated on death in a very unhealthy way. She carried a paperback copy of *The Diary of Anne Frank* with her everywhere and occasionally underlined big sections of it or scribbled frantically in the margins. Meg tried to ignore most of Teresa's odd behaviors, but this time, because she'd been wondering exactly the same thing when Teresa posed the question, Meg said, "What do you mean, dear?"

“I mean jumped off the bridge, to kill themselves, to die, Mother. And I’m not a deer. Stop calling me that.”

“I’m sorry,” Meg said, wondering when she had started beginning every communication with her family members with “I’m sorry...” It seemed pathetic and she vowed to stop, but it was as habitual as calling her loved ones dear or sweetheart. It was how she talked.

Meg took a breath and tried again. “I don’t think anyone would come all the way here to jump off a bridge. It’s so out of the way.”

“That’s why it’s perfect,” Teresa said. “No one would see you, so no one would try to stop you or even know you were gone.”

“Oh my,” Meg said, her hand on her chest. She suddenly saw herself standing alone on the bridge in the middle of the night ready to jump. It felt like a waking dream, and it shocked her, because the feeling in her was exhilaration. What complete freedom! To jump once and release everything that had mattered so much.

“Stop talking that way,” Gary said to Teresa. “You’re upsetting your mother.”

“Everything upsets her,” Teresa said. It wasn’t exactly true, but close.

“It’s okay,” Meg said, smiling at Teresa and reaching out to pat her hand. Teresa pulled away from her and tossed her half eaten cupcake over into the brush near their picnic table.

“Go pick that up,” her big sister ordered. “You’re polluting the environment.”

“Pick it up yourself,” Teresa ordered back. “Some poor chipmunk will probably die eating chocolate if you don’t pick up my trash.”

Christine glared at Teresa then retrieved the cupcake and threw it in the garbage can near where their car was parked.

Teresa smiled, blew on her fingernails, and polished them on the hem of her shorts. “When I grow up, I’m having servants.”

“Stop taunting your sister,” Gary told her. “One of these days she’s going to haul off and pop you one if you don’t keep your mouth shut.”

“She wouldn’t dare,” Teresa said, running to Meg and wrapping Meg’s arm around herself. “Mommy will protect me, won’t you Mommy.”

Meg smiled and hugged her, enjoying the closeness, even if it was just part of the girls’ constant warfare. She inhaled Teresa’s scent, a combination of shampoo, honey, and sunshine.

“Mom can’t even protect herself,” Christine said, and the rage in her voice stunned them all. At fifteen, she was snarling one moment and weeping the next. Even so, Meg had no idea her older daughter felt such contempt for her. Was it true? Was she so helpless her daughters could joke about it to upset each other?

And what did they see she needed to protect herself against? Was Gary adulterous that early in their marriage? When the girls were still living at home? Did they know about it even though Meg didn’t? Surely not.

But it would explain how the girls treated them. After she was ten, Teresa refused to go to her father’s dental office, and Christine avoided dropping in there. If Meg asked Christine to take a plate of cookies or cinnamon rolls into their dad’s office before her tennis lesson, she’d say, “You go in, Mom. Let them see who’s baking their sweets for them. You go.”

At the time Meg thought Christine truly wanted all the ladies in the office to get to know her as a person, but now she thought Christine wanted to make everyone feel guilty for knowing what was going on when Meg didn’t.

That’s the most horrible thing about a husband’s infidelity. It makes you review every single moment from the first day you met him until the day he divorced you, and everything is irrevocably contaminated by the knowledge he lied, he cheated, he slept with other women, he let you be blind and loving and giving, and he cared so little for you he took everything you offered and gave you leftover scraps in return. Gary had stolen forty years of decent memories and now he was gone.

There was nothing left of her life except an empty house, a suitcase full of her favorite clothes, another of childhood mementoes, and a purse full of cash.

Meg knew if she were twenty or thirty instead of sixty, she’d be okay. But her youth had fled decades earlier, taking all her optimism with it.

Meg had never worked outside the home. Even though she was a baby boomer, she’d missed the sixties and seventies and all the other awakenings people her age had been through. She simply wasn’t that kind of a girl.

While others were dropping out, turning on, coming out, sitting in, spacing out, and breaking up, she’d been collecting recipes, sewing school clothes for her daughters, and knitting baby layettes for charity. She was a boomer with fifties values and nothing to offer the world in the twenty first century. Escalators made her nervous. Computers and cell phones were beyond her.

Even telephone answering machines and computerized help desks overwhelmed her. She’d listen to all the number choices over and over when she dialed the bank or the library, but she could never choose and always ended up driving there to get the help she needed from a person or at least a sign on the door, something she could relate to.

Maybe she was a visual learner instead of an auditory one. That was probably it. Christine had explained all the different learning styles to her a few years earlier, before the new religion, when she and Christine still had areas of common ground. Christine was worried Johnny had attention problems and was considering having him tested at school.

Meg tried to reassure her Johnny was a normal, active, healthy boy. He probably got ants in his pants when the teachers made him sit through too many boring lessons. He needed to be out in the sunshine, climbing trees, floating rafts onto ponds, doing whatever kids do when they play outside for hours. Meg couldn't convince Christine, and finally all the educational experts suggested Johnny be tested by a medical specialist, but Frank refused, saying, "No kid of mine is going on drugs. Period. What kind of crazy doctor would give drugs to a child? Johnny's fine."

Meg never thought she'd find herself so solidly on the same side of the fence as Frank, but there it was. After that Christine dropped it, Johnny got a new teacher, and learning difficulties were never mentioned again.

Anyway, Meg had learned about different learning styles and that explained why the computer age was difficult for her. She needed to see people and hear their voices and read things printed on paper she could hold in her hand. Trying to communicate through numbers and keyboards and voice machines was too much for her.

For instance, she'd never tried using a cash machine, because it didn't seem right to take money out of a slot in the wall. It was unnatural and probably dangerous in so many ways. People could grab the money out of your hand before you got it all filed away in the right compartment of your handbag. People could spy on your personal number. Or you could forget it, which could annoy people in line behind you. And what if the slot in the wall didn't work at all? What if it ran out of money? Who would you talk to about it?

Meg was old fashioned about nearly everything. She wanted to hear human voices and see human faces. She wanted money to actually change hands when it changed hands.

They'd been so nice to her at her banks. At the first one, when she asked to cash out her savings account, the clerk brought in the assistant manager, a lovely young woman who wore a very pretty lavender jacket with a fitted black skirt and heels. Bank ladies dressed the way ladies used to dress for church. Maybe it was a sign money earned more respect than God did nowadays.

Meg wondered how Christine dressed for the services in their new religion, if they even had services and if women were allowed to attend. There was so much she didn't know about her children.

The bank manager was sweet as well as stylish. She'd checked Meg's driver's license and passport carefully. Then she'd asked, "Are you planning to relocate? We could transfer the funds to your new home town."

“No,” Meg said, smiling her warmest smile. “I’m taking a long holiday for my sixtieth birthday, and I need plenty of cash in my purse.”

“Traveler’s checks then?” the manager asked.

“Cash is best if you don’t mind,” Meg said. “I’m perfectly safe.”

“Very well,” the manager said, returning her smile and nodding to the clerk who fetched her in the first place. “Get Ms. Compton everything she needs,” she said to her, and with one final wave to Meg, she said, “Bon voyage!”

At the second bank, they didn’t question anything. The clerk just checked her IDs and handed over the cash from her savings account. She’d left her checking account alone, because the household bills were paid automatically from it and Gary’s alimony payments were deposited there monthly.

While emptying her safety deposit box, Meg was struck by the irony of all the ways she’d tried to be safe while Gary was endangering her every time he touched her. She’d heard about the horrible diseases going around now, and all these years she’d believed she and Gary would never have to worry about those because they were virgins when they married. Now she imagined thousands of microscopic germs leaping onto her skin every time he had reached for her. He probably even lied about being a virgin when they met. All the time she felt safe she had actually been drenched in danger. She was a fool.

Right after the divorce, Christine convinced Meg she needed a job. “Not just for the money,” she’d said, “though you’ll need that in a few years, but for your self esteem. You need to get out of this house every day. You need a reason to get dressed every morning.”

Sitting at Meg’s kitchen table one Sunday afternoon having coffee and cookies, they’d combed the Sunday paper for ideas about how Meg could earn money. Most things involved small children, which she no longer had the patience or energy for, or computers, which were out of the question. Even cash registers were terribly complicated these days, so sales jobs would be too stressful. Besides, she didn’t know how she’d get used to standing on her feet eight hours a day.

She could bake cookies and keep house and drive all over town and arrive five minutes early for every appointment, but those skills didn’t seem much in demand, at least not from the want ads in the papers. All she’d ever done was raise two healthy daughters and make a beautiful home for her family. Who would pay a sixty-year-old woman to do that?

“A nanny!” Christine said. “Nannies are big now with young professional couples.”

They found several ads for nannies wanted, but they all required licenses and local references. How in the world did a person get a nanny license? And who could she cite as a reference? The ladies in Gary’s dental office she’d baked cookies for all those years? Christine?

Or better yet, Teresa, if they could track her down? Meg wasn't even nanny material, and it was the best idea they'd had so far.

"You can't make it on what dad left you," Christine said.

"But he left me the house and money in the bank," Meg said, horrified at the implications of what Christine was suggesting.

"You'll get some benefits when you turn sixty five, but that will just cover the cost of keeping the house in good shape, not much more. I told you to get more alimony, Mom, but you felt sorry for Dad, remember?"

"I did?" Meg asked.

"Yes, and that stupid lawyer of yours was one of Dad's poker buddies."

"Your father plays poker?"

Christine shook her head. "Don't worry, Mom. You can live with us when you run out of money. We'll sell this house and build a little cottage in our backyard. That way you can have your own space and be near us. Sound good?"

It sounded ghastly, but Meg was too stunned to say anything, so she just nodded and ate another chocolate chip cookie. That's when she seriously began considering suicide as a tidy solution to the problem of what to do after your marriage and your useful life are over.

Sully's Parting Words to Susan and Her Cat

Sully had suffered from road rage until he hit upon the perfect calming exercise. It never failed. Whenever some Dufuss in front of him went thirty in a forty-five zone or looked both ways twice before inching out into an intersection when the light turned green, he'd take a deep breath and imagine ways to leave his current lover.

He'd thought up about a hundred ways to leave Susan already – they'd been together that long. Nearly a year. Considering his past, Sully knew it wouldn't be long before he ran.

The cat did it. Not the cat itself. He had nothing against cats. He'd never hated them on principle the way some guys did. He just had no use for them.

He wasn't in a position to forbid her to get one. Susan had never been the kind of woman you could boss around. If she'd kowtowed to him, he'd never have stayed with her this long. He admired a woman with spirit.

Susan was a good woman, hot in bed, independent, good looking but not one to spend hours primping or fishing for compliments. He'd been lucky with her. It was her apartment, she

bought him a six pack on her way home from work every Friday, and she was keeping up the payments on his truck while he waited for another union job to open up. She was good to him. Everything was fine until she brought home that mewling black and white fur ball. She even went so far as to name it Sir Robert, because of its tuxedo markings. Then it was Bobby this and Bobby that, Bobcat Baby, and Roberto Love. The woman had gone bonkers.

Susan said Sully was jealous, but no. He was annoyed, yes. She spent hours combing fleas off the kitten, massaging him with warm rags, and feeding him chicken broth with an eye dropper, so maybe Sully was irritated by all her fussing, but jealous of a cat? No. He would not waste another moment of his precious time on a woman so silly she preferred holding a kitten to going out dancing with him.

The last straw was the dishwasher deal. They'd had a good dinner, Sully was able to keep his mouth shut about the cat sitting on Susan's lap purring the whole time, and after dinner he'd started loading the dishwasher while she'd gone to collect coffee cups from the bedside tables. When she came back with the cups, she said, "Where's Bob? He was with you when I left."

"How would I know?" Sully said, finishing the last of his beer and rinsing out the bottle before putting it in the empty carton under the sink. Susan liked to recycle, and he respected that. He closed the cabinet door and turned around to face her. "He shadows you. He's probably in the bedroom waiting for you to carry him."

"You're jealous," she said. "Listen to yourself. You're consumed by jealousy."

"You're nutty," Sully said, trying to laugh it off, even though he could hear the sullenness in his voice she labeled jealousy. Why did women always have to psychoanalyze men? Why didn't they just take things for what they were? He was pissed, not jealous. Pissed! And he had every right to be. Why'd she go adopt a stray kitten? He'd never realized what a soft-hearted pushover Susan was. He should take off and live in his truck for a while. See if there was any work in Boise.

Susan called, "Bobby, Bobby, where are you baby?"

They heard a tiny meow that seemed to come from under the kitchen counters.

"He's trapped," Susan cried, pushing Sully out of narrow kitchen. "He's trapped and scared." She carefully pulled open the lower drawers in the kitchen, calling to the cat.

"What did you do with him?"

"I didn't touch him!" Sully said. "I didn't even see the stupid thing! Why are you blaming me?"

Sully wished he hadn't given up cigarettes. He could really use a smoke about now. Maybe he'd go out and buy a pack.

“No!” Susan screamed, clutching her throat. Then she stood up and opened the dishwasher. “Oh my God!” she said. “Sully, you locked him in the dishwasher!”

That brought Sully back into the kitchen, and sure enough, the kitten’s head and left paw were stuck in the wire rack at the bottom of the dishwasher between the plates and the salad bowl. Somehow it had gotten under the rack and was trying to climb out.

By then Susan was hysterical, so Sully pushed her out of the way. “Stop screaming,” he said. “You’ll scare it to death.”

Sully unloaded the rack and tried to lift it up, but it was on tracks and had to be pulled forward to come out. He had to push the kitten’s paw down first and finally maneuvered the struggling creature enough to get its head poked back down through the wire slots.

“Stay!” he yelled at the kitten when it tried to climb back up, and then he pressed his hand flat over the wires and managed to pull the rack out enough to free the kitten. The tiny handful of struggling fur bit Sully hard on the soft web of flesh between his thumb and forefinger as he lifted it out of the washer and into Susan’s waiting arms.

“You little devil,” Sully said, laughing at the balls on the critter. “I rescue you and you take a chunk out of me.” He sucked the blood off his hand and examined the puncture marks.

“You nearly killed him,” Susan said, hugging Bob to her chest. “How can you hate something so innocent and sweet? What’s the matter with you?”

That did it. “Susan, you’re insane. The cat’s fine. You’re fine. The only blood shed was mine!” He waved his wounded hand at her.

“You almost killed an innocent kitten,” Susan said, kissing the cat’s head. The cat was purring like crazy and kneading her sweater with its front paws. It was so happy it was drooling on her.

Sully walked into the bedroom, threw his stuff in a pillowcase, and came back in where Susan was still loving on the cat. With the loaded pillowcase over his shoulder, he edged around them into the kitchen and grabbed the bottle of brandy Susan kept in the cupboard above the refrigerator. On his way out of the kitchen, he hoisted the bottle, bowed at Susan, and smiled like a prize winner.

“So long, darlin’,” he said. “Thanks for taking me in and treating me so fine.”

“Wait! I know you didn’t mean to. Wait!”

“May you and Bob live happily ever after. Adios amigos.” One last bow, and Sully got out of there for good.

He had plenty of gas, so he could go more than two hundred miles before he had to stop for anything. Susan's gas card was in the glove box, but he wouldn't use it now. Only a loser would spend a woman's money after he was gone.

The bite on his hand burned and he sucked on the wound. He laughed at the vision of the kitten's head caught in the wire. He was glad the little sucker hadn't killed itself. He thought back over how he had loaded the machine. The rack was pulled out while he rinsed and stacked the plates, so that must have been when the cat jumped in the bottom part, and then when he pushed the rack into place, the kitten was trapped underneath. He was glad he'd waited for Susan to bring the coffee cups before putting in the soap and turning it on. What a mess that would have been! He might have had to run for his life.

Sully sipped the brandy and sucked on the wound again, thinking the alcohol would kill any leftover cat germs. That varmint had needle teeth.

Sully looked back over his curtain call and judged it somewhere between a seven and an eight on a scale of zero to ten. When he was younger he had poor scores in ending affairs.

He was always smooth in the beginning, knowing just how to look at a woman to make her notice him, the right blend of charming, confident, clean, and sexy. He seemed to have been born scoring high in starting affairs.

His first few exit scenes were disasters though – yelling matches, broken dishes, police one time, really stupid stuff. Now he could pretty much count on himself to move in smoothly and exit just as smoothly. That was class. “You're one classy dude, Sully,” he said to himself.

“One classy dude on the road again searching for adventure.” He turned on a country music radio station and cranked up the volume. Susan was classy too, which was probably why they had lasted so long. She told him straight out she hated country music and refused to ride with him if he insisted on playing it. That was so much better than women pretending to like something because they thought he did.

Honest was better than phony, any day. He appreciated women who told it like it was. What you see is what you get. If he was lucky, he'd find another good woman soon enough in the next town. He vowed to move out the second the next one brought home a puppy or kitten though. Next time he'd get a solid ten on the departure as well as the arrival. Life was good.

He was just getting into the swing of riding the highway, remembering all the words to the radio songs, and thanking God for his life, when the announcer said, “Only two more hours until October, folks. Goodbye Indian summer, Hello harvest moon.” Then he played another my woman done me wrong song and it struck Sully his birthday would begin in two hours. On October first, Sully would be thirty years old, and with luck, he'd be in another state by the time the calendar flipped over.

The thought of spending his thirtieth birthday on the road by himself made Sully happy. He'd always had an abundance of good luck, and the timing of this new adventure seemed to