

# Letters to My Sister

by Jeanna Kadlec

July 7, 1949

Dear Ginny,

I'm sorry I left. I miss you so much. I got pulled over on the road for swerving – the cop took one look at my face and said that I'd best get it all out right here before I kept driving, and then he patted my arm and called me a little lady and gave me a warning.

Well, it's not all out yet. I don't think it ever will be, because I wanted to leave home, but I didn't want to leave you, and you always tell me that I can't take care of you forever but Ginny, I wish I could. But right now, I'm in the middle of Pennsylvania with no idea where I'm going because there's no way I'm going back to Mother and Daddy, and I need to figure something out, somewhere far away where no one's ever heard of us. I don't want to get pinched by the cops because Mother and Daddy are trying to round me up.

Better keep driving. At least I took Daddy's pocketbook. You know, the one for all of his "emergencies." I'll tell you about those later.

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July 24, 1949

Dear Ginny,

Chicago. I'm in Chicago. Well, I went further, made it all the way to Davenport, Iowa, but I took one look around and drove right back.

I rented a room the first night here and went to the market to get some food. I asked about jobs but had to tell everyone that no, I don't have any work experience. They all went back to what they were selling without a second glance.

What I saw, Ginny – you have to go to South Boston to see what's on the main streets of Chicago. Homeless people. Lines stretching around whole city blocks when the churches serve free meals. It would break your heart, seeing mothers with young children waiting and waiting, stepping forward inches at a time towards a hot meal. The charity balls that Mother hosted don't seem that charitable anymore.

By the third day without a job, I was nervous and scared. I didn't want to go back home and I wasn't about to call Mother to beg for money. I walked up and down the streets all day, just hoping I'd find something, but having no idea where to look. I put my hair up in a hat to hide how greasy it was getting. The water is rust-colored in that dirty rent-by-the-night place, and I did not want to wash in it.

Yesterday, I was walking along East 55th Street when I saw a bookshop. The shop is a lovely place, with big bay windows that let all the morning light in. The books are arranged by what type of book they are (have you ever heard of such a thing?) and so there's a section for mysteries and a section for instruction manuals and histories and classics. Each section has chairs that you can sit in and oh, it's just wonderful. There's artwork, too, all sorts of paintings on every wall. And everything is wood – the floors, the counters, the bookshelves, the railing to go downstairs to where there are magazines and more furniture. It's called

Aunt Jo's, which sounds like a restaurant, but it's actually been run for several generations by women in the family, all with some form of the name Jo. The current Jo is actually Joan, a very curvy lady with an angular face, big green eyes, and a big smile. I met Joan when I walked into the bookshop.

She came out from behind the counter and asked if she could help me. I told her that I was just browsing, but it must have shown that I'd never been in a store like it before.

She proceeded to walk me around and give me a tour of the shop, explaining to me what all the sections were. She told me that her name was Joan, or Jo, and I told her my name (Bets – I am not going by Elizabeth here), and she asked if I was new in town. She pointed out that I was wearing a hat on one of the hottest days of summer and that I looked like I had been traveling. I still didn't understand what she meant, so she sighed and said something to the effect of, would you like a place to take a bath? And goodness, Ginny, I had never heard anyone so blunt in my life. Then she started telling me how she and her mother had been in the business of opening their home to travelers. Her mother recently passed away. And it reminded me of... well, sweet applesauce, I started to cry.

Joan sat me down on the couch, where she told me that it was all right, just cry it out, and other kind things I can't remember. The next thing I knew, she put a cup of coffee in my hands and I began pouring out how I'd been trying to find a job and I was staying in an awful place and I was going to run out of money and I didn't want to go back home and then Joan said, said how about I stay with her and help out with the shop? I didn't believe her, but she assured me that yes, she would like to hire me, and that was that.

So this is my second day living with Joan, learning how to run a bookshop. She lives in Hyde Park and her water is crystal clear and she's the kindest woman I have ever met.

I love you. I miss you.

August 30, 1949

Dear Ginny,

I told Joan about you today, and about our family and why I left. But I realized that I never told you why I left. So I want to tell you now.

You never saw it. I know that you hated the polio and being dependent on other people – how you weren't able to fully interact with society as you got older. But dearest, you wouldn't want to know those people. They were so fake, all so very fake, everyone pretending to like everyone, Uncle Frederick grabbing all the women's butts (including mine) and laughing and comparing how each one felt in public, and goodness, you would think we were with Southies, the way we acted. Rather, the way everyone else acted. I was too shy to drink, even after I came out into society, because I was so scared of the way it affected people. Including Mother.

Did you know that Mother hit Daddy? She would beat on him when she was – inebriated. I saw it once, after everyone had left the house. She was yelling about how dare he spend so much money on other women when our family was bleeding cash and didn't he know that the industrial factories were beginning to

leave town? It scared me half to death.

So the “emergency” money Daddy kept? It was for other women. I saw it one night. You and Mother and I were all staying at Granddaddy Perkins’ house but I went home because I’d forgotten something – I can’t remember what – and I walked into the house and started to go up the staircase and there Daddy was, half-naked with a naked woman wrapped around him at the top of the stairwell. I stared for a minute and walked back out the door.

I would check his pocketbook that he kept on the mantle in the den every time you and Mother and I got back from a weekend away. It was always empty.

Every time we had a party or went somewhere for a party, I would just feel my blood getting hot under my skin. I was so angry at how Mother and Daddy acted and how everyone else acted and how all the young men would whisper in my ear about what a beautiful girl I was and wouldn’t I like to take a ride in their car? – like I didn’t know what they wanted, I wasn’t stupid, at least Mother told me to watch out for them...

That night before the 4th of July, when we were all at the house in Martha’s Vineyard... I was lying on the beach looking up at the stars, the bright lights from the party flickering down on the sand, when Robbie Emerson came over and got friendly. Too friendly. Told me I was just there for him and shouldn’t nice Boston girls serve the nice Boston boys and that my parents wouldn’t mind because they loved him and he just needed someone tonight and I was the prettiest dame at the party –

When I went crying and screaming to Mother and Daddy, Daddy just looked at me and said well, then, you’re marrying him.

And I said, what about Barnard?

And Mother said that this is more important than Barnard.

December 25, 1949

Dear Ginny,

My first Christmas away from home. The start of a glorious tradition.

Joan and I spent all day yesterday making food. Joan is wonderful. She has a lot of gumption and says what she thinks. She says that’s why she’s never married. No man could take it. This is not to say, though, that Joan doesn’t have friends over from time to time. She’s very open and honest about such things. Says that just because she’s got a roommate now doesn’t mean a girl can’t have fun every once in a while.

Joan is like a big sister, or a swell aunt, I can’t decide which. I just know that I’ve never met anyone like her before, and I want to be her – to be that carefree. Joan says I’ve been through a lot in the last few months and I need to take my time getting better and to not push myself. But working at the bookshop is good for me. I like talking to customers, getting to know people. It’s a few customers who are coming over for Christmas dinner. Mr. Hallet is an older gentleman, a widower who buys every book on the Revolutionary War that Joan can find. Ms. Thatcher is coming over with her housemate, Ms. Thayer. The Ms. T’s, as I call them, have lived together for years, and Joan just winks at me and says they’re good friends. And last but not least is Jack. He’s tall and has brown hair and brown eyes and the loveliest smile. He’s an orphan but his parents were Irish, and he’s twenty years old and works in the stockyard. He walks all the way

to Aunt Jo's in order to get a good book. We always talk, and he's usually late getting back to work if he comes up when I'm working. But he's coming over for dinner. I'm excited to see him. I told Joan as much, and she just grinned.

July 6, 1950

Dear Ginny,

I haven't written you in a while. But it's been about a year now since... since it happened. I wanted to write you and tell you that I love you and that there is not a day that goes by that I do not think of you and miss you terribly. I am sorry. I am so, so sorry.

September 18, 1950

Dear Ginny,

Jack and I went over to the lakeshore to take a walk. There was a breeze, but it was a beautiful day. The sun was shining. The water was clear. There were families picnicking, couples walking, a few businessmen eating lunch – all fixed at this awkward juncture between a Great Lake and city buildings. Jack and I just walked along the shore, holding hands. We stopped at various points, taking in the sights, and so you'll understand that when I say I looked down at one point and found him on his knee, I was thoroughly surprised. He apologized for not having a ring, but he promised to love me better than anything else, and he said he'd have money for a ring soon. I interrupted him and told him that I didn't care about a ring, I cared about him, and he asked me to marry him and I said yes and he practically jumped off the ground and twirled me, we were so happy. Then I heard whooping and hollering, and we laughed, realizing that there were people around us who had seen.

I'm sorry I haven't written you much, Ginny. I haven't told you much about Jack. Let's see – he brings me flowers when I'm at work, usually wildflowers that he plucks from the city parks. He wants to hear what I think about the books I'm reading. He takes me out dancing and oh, do we tear up the floor! And then he carries me up to Joan's apartment if my feet are sore and he tucks me in bed and kisses me on the forehead. He doesn't drink around me, since he knows it makes me nervous, though now that we're getting married he says it'd be nice if he could have a few beers every once and a while, and I tell him that as long as he doesn't hit me or make me want to hit him that I think I'd be okay with that, and he just laughs and tells me that he loves me too much to let either of those things happen.

And he understands what happened last July and he says that Robbie wasn't my fault, and he'd like to kill Robbie if he can get his hands on him (and I tell him that that is not necessary, I don't want him to go to jail) and then he tells me that I need to forgive myself for what I did to you because I didn't know what I was doing and... I can't do that yet.

But I do love Jack, so I'm going to try. He says I have to grieve you and that writing you letters, even occasional letters, does not help me let go. That I shouldn't write you again until I can let go.

I love you. I miss you. I wish you were here. I wish you could be my maid of honor. But as it stands, that honor is going to Joan, even though she says she isn't a maid and she would rather not have the honor of being one again, but she's just blowing wind.

December 1, 1953

Dear Ginny,

It's getting better. But damn it, I still miss you, baby sister. I miss you so much.

I wanted to write you and tell you that Daddy found me today. Rather, one of Daddy's detective friends, Mr. Collins, found me. I don't know what took him so long. Apparently I hid well, and obviously I got married so I took Jack's name and for some reason, Mother and Daddy never thought I'd live "below my station" (as Mr. Collins put it). Also, I think that Daddy has just never been one to try very hard, with both business and family, and it's Mother that has finally pushed him to actually search the country.

Jack and I live in Hyde Park, near Joan. Jack works the business end of the stockyard now, and so we can afford it (barely). But I answered the door today with our one-year-old daughter on my hip and there was Mr. Collins. He just stared. I recovered faster than he did, and I told him that as he could see, I have a life outside of Boston and would he please go away.

And he said that he never thought he'd see the day a Quincy girl lived like a Southie, and then he told me about Mother and Daddy, which I listened to because a part of me wanted to hear it, and then he said the bit about living below my station.

I slammed the door in his face.

He said that Mother and Daddy miss me, Ginny. He said that they want me to come home. I told him that I was home and that I don't ever want to go back to that hellhole again. I wish I could forgive them, I do. A part of me feels sorry for them, stuck with each other in that big house. But then the other part of me says good riddance. I couldn't stand visiting them. I couldn't stand myself if I visited them.

One last thing – I wanted to tell you that your niece is named for you. Well, for your middle name. Grace.

January 9, 1960

Dear Ginny,

Daddy died last week. I thought you should know. The Tribune ran it in the "Notable Persons" section a few days ago. I'll copy some of it here:

Andrew Quincy died peacefully in his sleep the morning of January 2, 1960. He was a member of the illustrious Quincy family in Boston. He was a Harvard-educated businessman... (cutting to the end here, they go on a while about business and such)... Quincy and his family were the center of national attention eleven years ago when, in a tragic accident, their home in Martha's Vineyard caught fire, killing their 15-year-old daughter, Virginia. Soon after, their 18-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, disappeared. Quincy is survived by his wife, Mary...

This brought it all back. Honestly, I've been doing better. Much better. But I showed the obituary to Jack and said I thought it was time to write you one last letter. And he agreed.

So here it is. I'm sorry that I burned the Vineyard house down after that night with Robbie. I didn't know that you were in it. I thought that everyone was gone. The servants had all gone back to the main house. Daddy was who-knows-where. I thought that Mother had taken you with her, as she always did. I

didn't know that you were there. The house was dark. I didn't know. I am so sorry, Ginny. I would ask for your forgiveness but I know that you can't forgive me. I am still mad at myself for doing it and at Mother and Daddy for leaving you there. I don't know why they did. Maybe Mother was going to stay with you at the Vineyard house for a few more days. I don't know. I don't even think that they know it was me who set it on fire.

When I wrote you that first letter, I didn't know that you were dead. I didn't see a newspaper headline until a few days after.

I pretended you weren't dead. I did that for a while. Joan helped me to come out of that. And Jack has been a saint through all this. We've got three little ones now. Grace, Davy, and Anna. For some reason, being a mother has helped more than anything. I can't explain why.

Know that wherever you are, Ginny, I love you, and I miss you.

Always,

Bets