

Gail Anderson-Dargatz



No Return  
Address

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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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# ONE

THAT THURSDAY MORNING, I woke up feeling sad. It was exactly one year since my mother had died. The sun was shining. The lilac bushes in my front yard were in bloom. It was one of those June mornings that usually puts a spring in my step. But my sorrow only deepened as the morning wore on.

I tried to shake the feeling on my daily walk down to the village. I took in the cloudless blue sky and breathed in the scent of the

wild roses growing along the rural road. But that didn't help. By the time I reached the post office I felt real grief.

I must have looked sad too. As I pushed through the door the postal clerk asked, "You okay, Rhonda? Something wrong?"

"I'm fine," I told Susan. "Just a little tired, I guess."

I dodged more questions by opening my mailbox. Then I sorted my mail at the small counter, putting most of it in the recycling bin. Other than bills and advertising flyers, I didn't get much mail anymore. People sent emails from their computers instead. Going for the mail was mostly an excuse to get out of the house.

My mother used to send me letters, though, even after I moved to this lakeside village where she lived. She said emails were impersonal, just words on a screen. Handwritten letters, on the other hand, were a gift. I didn't understand why

she kept sending me letters when I lived just up the road. But now that Mom had passed away, I missed getting them.

As I thought of my mother's letters, a new wave of grief washed over me. But I didn't want to cry in front of the postal clerk. I wiped my eyes and tried to focus on sorting my mail.

Then I came across a delivery-notice card. A package had arrived in the mail for me. That was strange. I hadn't ordered anything online.

My birthday wasn't until fall, so I knew the parcel wasn't from my aunt. And in any case, Auntie Lisa lived in the area. She would just bring her gift over to my place. My brother, Doug, also had a house close by, but I hadn't seen him since Mom's funeral. Mom had been the one to bring our family together, for Sunday dinner at her condo.

I handed the delivery-notice card to the postal clerk. Susan paused as she took it. "Are you sure you're okay?" she asked.

I shrugged. “I just realized it’s one year today since my mother died.”

“Oh, honey, I’m so sorry.” Susan squeezed my hand. “I loved your mom! Meg was such a dear woman. We talked here just about every day.”

In her final years my mom had lived in a condo only a couple of blocks from the post office. After my marriage ended I rented a house just up the road from her. I was glad I did. Mom had retired from her teaching job. She often took care of my son when he was too young to stay at home alone. And when Mom got the news from her doctor that she had breast cancer, I was there to help her out. As I thought of those final years with my mother, I started to tear up again.

“You and your mom were very close, weren’t you?” Susan asked me.

I nodded. “She was always there for me,” I said.

“I know you were a big help to her when she was sick.”

“She helped me through a rough time too,” I said.

“Your divorce?”

I hesitated before answering. I imagined my mother had told Susan about that. Mom wasn't always discreet. She sometimes told strangers, like Susan, about my life. Mom had also stuck her nose in my business, giving me advice even though I was a grown woman. But after her death, I would have given anything to have one last chat with her. I often wished for her guidance now, especially her tips on parenting my son, Cody.

“I don't know how I would have gotten through my divorce without her,” I said. “She took care of Cody when I needed to deal with—” I stopped there. Now I was giving Susan too much information. I could see why my mother had befriended Susan though.



She *was* easy to talk to.

Susan waited a moment to see if I would continue. When I didn't, she waved the delivery notice. "I'll get your package," she said.

I took off my glasses and wiped my eyes as I waited. I was glad I was the only person in the post office. It had been a year since my mother's death. Why was I crying *now*?

"Here you go," said Susan. She set a small box on the counter in front of me.

"This can't be right," I said.

"Wrong address?" Susan asked.

"No, it's addressed to me. But this package is from my *mother*."

"That's impossible. Like you said, Meg has been gone a year." Susan peered at the box. "And why do you think it's from her? There's no return address."

I ran a finger along my own address, written on the brown wrapping. "I would know my mother's handwriting anywhere," I said.

I looked up at Susan. “Did she send this *before* her death? Could this package have been lost in the mail for that long?”

Susan scratched her head. “I suppose. Stranger things have happened. I once read about a letter that was delivered forty-five years after it was sent.” She took a close look at the postmark. “But your package was mailed this week.”

I felt a shock run through me. *Could* my mother have sent this parcel? Was she still alive? I shook my head at the foolish idea. When my mother passed away I was right there holding her hand. “I don’t understand,” I said. “Who sent this?”

Susan shrugged. “I guess you’ll have to open it to find out.” She looked down at the box as if she wanted to find out too.

While I liked Susan, I didn’t know her that well. I wasn’t about to open the package in front of her. Who knew what was inside?

Still, I couldn't wait until I got home. I carried the box back to the counter by the mailboxes. There I used my keys to rip the tape on the box. I tore off the brown paper wrapper and opened the flaps. "Oh!" I cried, because I couldn't believe what I found inside.

# TWO

I WAS HOLDING a handwritten letter from my mother. Tears blurred my vision. This couldn't be happening. My mother had been gone a year. Who had sent this?

“What is it?” Susan asked. She had heard me cry out. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said. “Everything’s fine.” That was a lie, of course. I tucked the letter back in the box and closed the flaps. I knew if I tried reading it here in the post office

I couldn't stop myself from crying. I had already embarrassed myself enough.

I kept my back to Susan as I stuffed the brown wrapping in the recycling bin. Then I picked up the box and hurried out the door.

"You take care," Susan called after me. She sounded concerned.

I held up a hand, but I didn't turn my head. My mind raced as I walked back up the country road. Why had my mother arranged to have this package sent to me a year after she died? Who had put it in the mail for her? The letter would have to be important. Otherwise, why would Mom go to such lengths to get it to me on the anniversary of her death?

When I got home I put the box down on the kitchen table. But I felt nervous now and didn't open it right away. Did Mom have a secret she had kept from me? Was the letter a confession of some kind?

I paced back and forth by the table for a bit.

Then I rearranged the bottles in the spice rack, lining them up neatly so their labels all faced outward. Cody had cooked supper the night before and put the bottles back in the wrong order. When I was anxious, little things like that really bugged me.

Finally, I sat at the kitchen table and opened the box. My hands shook as I took out the letter and read it.

*My dearest Rhonda:*

*I know you think I'm very old-fashioned for writing letters. You're always telling me to send an email or text message instead. But we don't have Wi-Fi or cell service in the afterlife. Reception here is lousy.*

*I hope that small joke makes you smile rather than cry. I've developed a dark sense of humor now that I'm facing the end of my life. Yes, I am writing this just before my death. My doctor has told me I likely have only weeks to live. So, I'm*

*wrapping up loose ends and making the most of every day.*

*First, I want to say that living close to you and Cody these past few years has meant everything to me. I loved being a teacher, but being a grandma to Cody was even more fun. I hope you know you gave me a gift on those days when you asked me to take care of him.*

*Then, when I got sick, you took care of me. You held my hand through my doctor's appointments and treatments. You and Cody made me meals when I didn't feel like eating. Cody cheered me up when I was feeling down. You took me to the cancer clinic and helped me pick out a wig. You applied my makeup so I'd feel pretty.*

*And you did all this just after your marriage had ended and as you started to rebuild your life. I hope that now, a year after my death, things have finally settled for you.*

*I have another favor to ask of you. In this box you'll find your brother's green yo-yo. I know you'll*

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*remember it from your childhood, as you often stole it from Doug's room. You tried and tried to do those yo-yo tricks that seemed to come so easily to Doug. Then you got mad at your brother when he showed you how to do them! You would have learned if you'd listened to your big brother. Maybe now that you're a grown-up you can let him teach you a trick or two?*

*Please take this yo-yo to your brother and hand it to him in person. Don't leave it on his doorstep or mail it to him. Don't even bother to phone ahead. Just knock on Doug's door when you know he's home, and hand him the yo-yo. That's not too much to ask, right? Or perhaps this task is too much to ask of my shy and stubborn daughter. Do it anyway. For me.*

*That's it for now.*

*I'll love you always. Hugs and kisses,*

*Mom*

I put the letter down and wiped my eyes. Then I reached into the box and pulled out



a wad of wrapping paper. Inside I found my brother's old yo-yo. It was pretty beat-up, but the string was still intact. I stood up and tried it out. It rolled down the string and back into my hand on the first try. Memories of watching my brother do his yo-yo tricks flooded back to me. He could do all kinds of fancy moves with the yo-yo, things I was never able to do.

I put the yo-yo on the table and read my mother's letter again. Mom's request didn't make sense. Why had she sent *me* the yo-yo? Why hadn't she just sent it to Doug? And why had she sent it to me on the anniversary of her death? I had expected the letter to be about something big. Instead it was about a yo-yo.

Then again, maybe the letter *was* about something important. Mom had been a teacher at the high school until she retired. She always said her real job was to help students figure things out for themselves. Maybe that's what

she was up to here. But what did she want me to figure out?

I read the letter again, looking for clues. She had called me her “shy and stubborn daughter.” I looked in the full-length mirror that hung by the kitchen door. My own sad face stared back at me. I had just turned forty. A few strands of gray hair stood out in my brown curls. Lines had formed at the corners of my eyes. I didn’t bother to dress up or wear makeup, as I worked at home. I looked—what was the word Mom used to describe dull, timid women? *Mousy*.

Is *that* how my mother had seen me? I didn’t think of myself as shy, but I *was* private. I kept to myself for the most part and worked from home, where I ran a bookkeeping service. Most of the time my only company was my teenage son, Cody. And he would head off to university in a year.

But stubborn? I’d never thought of myself as headstrong, or willful either. It *was* true that

when Doug tried to teach me to use the yo-yo when I was a kid, I got mad. He was my older brother, always telling me what to do. That had bugged me. So, I tried telling *him* what to do. When we were kids, he called me bossy. But we were both grown-ups now. I wasn't like that around him anymore, was I?

I thought about that for a minute. The last time I had talked to Doug was at Mom's funeral. He had wanted to stand up in front of the attendees and tell everyone about the funny things Mom did. I told him I didn't want him to. It was a funeral, after all, and Mom's antics had often embarrassed me. When I was a kid she had once picked me up at school wearing a duck costume. She'd thought it would make the kids laugh, but I was humiliated! I had slid down in the car seat so the other kids wouldn't see me with her. But they all knew my mom.

When Doug told that story at the funeral, everyone laughed and looked at me. I slid

down in the church pew, embarrassed again. At the funeral reception I had to smile politely as everyone made jokes about Mom's duck costume. Smiling was the last thing I wanted to do right then. My mother had just passed away. When Doug came up to me while I was in the church kitchen, I told him off. We hadn't spoken since.

Even before the funeral, though, things hadn't been all that good between my brother and me. We had been distant from each other since my divorce. My brother was still friendly with my ex-husband, Glen. I didn't like the fact that they still hung out together, especially when I rarely saw Doug anymore. I was also mad that Doug hadn't helped me with Mom's care after she got sick. But that didn't make me stubborn, did it?

I scanned the letter. What did Mom mean when she wrote *Maybe now that you're a grown-up you can let him teach you a trick or two?*

Did she really mean I should learn to play with this yo-yo? It was a child's toy.

I carefully folded Mom's letter and picked up the yo-yo again. I tried to do a trick called Rock the Baby, holding the string with both hands to make a triangle. The yo-yo was supposed to hang in the middle of the triangle and spin to look like a rocking cradle. But my fingers got all caught up in the string. I tried again, but I just couldn't get it. I wound up the string and put the yo-yo on Mom's letter.

I sat for a time in my neatly ordered kitchen, trying to make sense of her letter. I kept my house uncluttered because seeing everything in its place made me feel calm. But my tidy house didn't offer me peace of mind now. Even a year after her death, Mom was still meddling in my life. But what was she up to exactly?

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

*No Return Address* was inspired by my own Canada Post story. Continuing a tradition from childhood, my mother gave my sisters and me an Advent calendar every Christmas. Mom did this even after we were grown and had families of our own. The Advent calendar my mother mailed to me always arrived at my rural post office at the end of November.

In the spring of 2007 my mother passed away. As you can imagine, our family grieved for her all that year. When December approached I felt a new wave of sadness as I walked to the post office. I knew I would never receive another Advent calendar from my mother.

But when I opened my post box, there was a delivery notice waiting as usual. And when I took that notice to the postal clerk, she handed me a package with a shape I recognized

immediately. I pulled the brown paper off and there it was, my Advent calendar.

There was no note. For just a moment I wondered, could Mom have sent this? No, of course she couldn't have. And then it occurred to me to look at the return address on the wrapping. My oldest sister had sent me the Advent calendar. She continues to do so every Christmas.

And there you'll find the idea behind this short novel. A mysterious package arrives in the mail, bringing with it a voice from the past. In this case, though, the sender is someone who has passed away. In trying to figure out how this is possible, the woman who receives the parcel finds it is a bigger gift than she could ever imagine.

I hope the story will inspire you to send your own letter to family or friends. Perhaps, as it was for the character in this book, that letter will be the first step toward a reunion.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I offer my heartfelt thanks to my oldest sister, who sends me an Advent calendar every Christmas. That act of kindness is the seed that sprouted into this short novel.

Check out the *National Post* story titled “Canada Post takes 45 years to deliver letter to Calgary woman living just 215 kilometres away from sender.” You’ll find it on the *National Post* website.

For a discussion on why brother-and-sister relationships are so important, go to the *Globe and Mail* website article “Adult siblings are seeking therapy together to heal old wounds and to strengthen their bond.”

Here’s to our brothers and sisters and the impact they have on our lives. May we keep them close.



By the age of eighteen, Gail Anderson-Dargatz knew she wanted to write about women in rural settings. Today Gail is a bestselling author. *A Recipe for Bees* and *The Cure for Death by Lightning* were finalists for the Scotiabank Giller Prize. She also teaches other authors how to write fiction. Gail lives in the Shuswap region of British Columbia. For more information, visit [gailanderson-dargatz.ca](http://gailanderson-dargatz.ca).