

For Meg—With Doubt and Faith

Karen Rosenbaum

IN TIMES OF DROUGHT, it is hard to remember times of flood. After yet *another* California winter without sufficient water, we take quick showers, rarely flush the toilet, let our lawn grow long to hide the brown. But once, how many years ago, there was a winter when the rains wouldn't stop.

That winter I came home one night to find in my basement water which, when I waded in, almost reached my calves. The green shag rug looked like little plants at the bottom of a pond. The pedal for my sewing machine, the shelf where I kept bias tape and pinking shears, the floor level of the bricks-and-boards bookcase, the piles of things I always "organized" by separating them on the floor—all were under water. The storeroom was filled with sodden soap powder, dry milk, flour—nothing but ruin. Worst of all, my journals and scrapbooks, my wallpaper-catalogue scrapbook of mementos, my boxes of letters and unmounted pictures (in dated envelopes, indexed by rubber bands)—were now waterlogged, heavy, smeared.

In the days that followed the flood, I saved what I could. I drained and blotted newspaper clippings and snapshots on rags. I put paper towels between the pages of albums and journals. I laid letters out over every dry surface I could find. What little order there was in the documentation of my life-up-to-then had been destroyed.

I am waiting for time to put it all back together.

That is why, as I sit down to write a memoir of Margaret Rampton Munk, I depend mostly on my memories. My memories seem simul-

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taneous, not chronological, so I may not have all the times right; but there are truths other than time. Yet time does matter. The friendship between Meg and me survived twenty-five years (during more than twenty-two of those we were separated by at least 3,000 miles) and survived even her death because of our reliance on those water-soluble items, paper and ink, and because of a devotion we shared, a devotion to the written word.

Somewhere in my blotched and sticky photo collection is a black-and-white snapshot taken on Chesapeake Bay the summer of 1960. You would have to be told that the seventeen-year-old East High School graduate skimming a rowboat across the water is my brother Richard and that one of the small figures perched in the boat is Meg, planning in the fall to begin her sophomore year at the University of Utah. I, a soon-to-be junior at the U, snap the picture from a boat reluctantly captained by Russell Munk, a Montpelier, Idaho, boy and a senior at Harvard. The event is a Washington, D.C. ward Saturday social; "row boating and digging for clams" is probably how the advertisement read. Attending the Washington Ward, certain westerners meet—in the East.

We are all there to work and to see the nation's capitol. Because of my father's summer assignment at the headquarters of the Bureau of Mines, my family lives in the District of Columbia that summer, in a big, unair-conditioned house that we rent on Newark Street. Meg has come east with friends to type and file "on the Hill" and to visit her grandmother. Russell has come south from Cambridge to get some firsthand experience with government.

A lot of the picture-memories that follow stick together, like the pages in my storm-rinsed albums. I can't provide a sequence. In the Ramptons' backyard swimming pool in Salt Lake City, Meg and Richard and I sing songs to one another underwater and try to guess the melodies. The Ramptons' house burns, even the swimming pool looks singed, everything smells like smoke, and everyone is wearing borrowed clothes. In Jack Adamson's Milton class at the University of Utah, Meg and I sit next to her mother, on the right side of the front row. Mrs. Rampton is the favorite student of all our favorite teachers. We are proud to sit next to her. In the *Daily Utah Chronicle* office, on heavy manual Underwood and Royal typewriters, Meg and Rich and I pound out editorials and campus news. Meg and I both send personal news to Russell, she in nicely rounded, erect letters of blue or black ink, I in smudged elite typewriter lines, marginless and single-spaced.

In June of 1961, we board a United Airlines plane for Boston with two friends and four pillows. This is my first flight. Meg has flown

before and has learned that flying doesn't agree with her. She has taken Dramamine, but she still looks sick. While I excitedly look out the window and narrate nonstop everything I see, she eyes the little brown bag in the pocket in front of her and answers questions through tight lips. We are to sublet an apartment in Somerville and to find summer jobs. Russell, who will soon return to Idaho to contemplate missionary service, is astonished to see us. We have not told him that we are coming.

We have not come to Boston to see Russell. We have come to see Harvard and Fanueil Hall and Walden Pond and stone walls. Quickly we learn how to ride the MTA; quickly we discover that milkshakes in New England are called frappes and that if we stand in long lines at Brigham's, we can have ice cream cones with jimmies—chocolate shot.

Meg's job search is interrupted before it begins; the Institute of World Affairs offers her a scholarship for a program in Connecticut. She'll return to Boston in time to fly back to Utah with us at the end of the summer. This time I'm on the aisle, excitedly talking with a high school friend who is returning home from Europe. Meg, again dosed with Dramamine, sits quietly in the center seat, keeping track of that important brown bag.

In the fall of 1962, I leave Salt Lake for Stanford. The next years will take me to New York, Paris, Israel, and back to California. Meg will graduate from the University of Utah in 1963 and, after a summer in Israel, will live in Boston, New York, Tokyo, Manila, and eventually, again, Washington. During those years, only for a few months do we live close enough to see each other. Twice I take a weekend bus trip from Manhattan to Cambridge, where Meg occupies a room in a big house and takes government classes at Harvard. Once, because I am in despair over love lost, she abandons her books and hops on a bus south to bring me comfort—and a package of cones and chocolate jimmies from Brigham's.

After the summer of 1964, when Meg returns to Salt Lake for a few months and I make plans to go to Europe, we will follow each other's lives almost entirely through letters. Letters tell me of her frustration that Russell, now returned from a mission to Hong Kong, must go to the University of Utah for a year before he can transfer to Harvard's law school. A letter from Russell arrives too; he has been carrying a Rampton-for-Governor sign around the smoky hall at the Democratic State Convention. I remember his advocacy of enlightened Republicanism and reassess his commitment to his and Meg's relationship. He must already be considering her dad a potential father-in-law.

In Paris in the fall, I vote absentee for LBJ—it is the first time I can vote. Meg votes absentee for LBJ and her father—she is still a Utah resident. I buy a little typewriter with a French keyboard and write my heart out in my tiny, seventh floor, *au pair* room. Though I have made some French-speaking friends and love the four little girls I take care of, the only people I can really communicate with are missionaries. I devour mail.

The next year, Russell transfers to Harvard. I take my typewriter to an Israeli kibbutz. I sit on my narrow bed at Beit Hashita and read blue airletters. Why, Meg writes, can't she get a revelation that she is supposed to marry Russell? The next letter warns me to expect a wonderful surprise. The surprise is an announcement of their wedding. I erupt with joy.

When I return to the United States from Israel, my parents are living in Washington, and Meg and Russell are summer-subletting a strange, stringy apartment in New York. When Meg arranges for me and a Harvard girlfriend to visit, the three of us spend the night giggling and talking in the kingsize bed, while, far down the narrow hall, Russell sleeps in the maid's room. Then I am off to California, and the correspondence resumes.

Letters tell of Meg's struggle to finish the Ph.D. dissertation. All the old Mia Maid lessons come to the surface. Why does she need a Ph.D. anyway? She wants to be a mother in Zion. Russell, however, didn't attend Mia Maid classes. He thinks she ought to finish. Maybe, she says, she'll write an article for *True Confessions*: "My Husband Forced Me to Become an Academician Instead of a Mother." Have I considered getting a doctorate?

The letters, now on thin, air-weight paper, arrive from Japan, where Russell is combining legal and language skills. Tokyo is a world with no checking accounts and small, polite men who come to the house to collect for utilities and trick Meg out of her money. She has ruined four pairs of Russell's socks by hanging them on the kerosene heater to dry. She has loved visiting Kyoto and the cherry blossoms, but her bright orange and green suit seemed too garish for the surroundings. She is teaching part time: American Government for the University of Maryland's Far Eastern Division and at Sophia University. She and Russell travel to Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, Angkor, and Hong Kong. She lectures me on the nonexistence of SuperMormon, the knight in shining scriptures that I have been waiting for. She wonders if perhaps she has been misinformed about the process by which small spirits appear. Quickly she chastises herself for her impatience. Can I come and visit? It seems so expensive, I think, but maybe someday. . . .

They move from Tokyo to Manila, returning to the States in between. Meg stays in Idaho longer than Russ, long enough to become a resident so they can adopt little Laura. I drive to the San Francisco airport so I can be with Meg and the baby while they wait to change planes. Tucked into Laura's blanket are two essential items—her passport and her pacifier. Of the two, Meg values the pacifier more highly. Laura sleeps the entire stopover, and we pat her, squeeze her, and pronounce her perfect.

Life in the Philippines is painful for Meg, whose social sensibilities don't allow her to be comfortable in the midst of poverty and squalor, but her joy in having Laura makes *having* to have a housekeeper and a cook (they came with the house and would be out of work if she let them go) tolerable. At one point both Vilma and Hilda are pregnant, and Meg spends much of her time taking care of them and Hilda's child, Bing Bing. She begins writing narratives (as therapy, she says), and we send each other stories across the wide Pacific.

When she tries to type letters, Laura climbs up to help. When she writes letters by hand, Laura, who finds plain paper ugly, takes the pen and decorates. The envelopes aren't ugly. They are covered with large, brightly colored stamps. The letters tell of teaching and traveling and once a typhoon. Then they tell of Danny. One of the girls Russ home teaches has a sickly baby, and in her father's home there is no space for the baby nor any way for the girl's family to pay for the baby's medical care. Meg and Russell and Laura make space. They see to his medical needs, and Danny becomes theirs.

Somewhere I have pictures of the children when they are small, pictures I took. At least twice during the Philippine years, I arrange my Salt Lake visits to correspond with theirs. We talk loudly over fussing children. Once we all take a long drive because Laura is calm in cars and even—usually—falls asleep. This seems to me ironic because Laura finds any confinement—including shoes—difficult. By the time I meet him, Danny is wiry and energetic. When I leave Salt Lake, I board a plane and am home in two hours. On their way back to Manila, Meg and Russell take the kids to Baltimore, New York, London, Nairobi, Addis Ababa, Bombay, and Singapore. Laura and Danny avoid jet lag by ignoring everyone else's clocks. If their bodies tell them bedtime is 3 A.M., they go to bed at 3 A.M.

There is a job in Washington and, delayed by complications in getting Danny out of the country, they at last come home. Home is Silver Spring, just a few miles from the Maryland suburb where my parents lived during their five-year stay. I tell myself I was foolish not to have managed a trip while they were living in the Far East. However, Washington is accessible, and I make several trips back to see

them and their newest acquisition—round-faced, curly-mopped Andrew. I sleep in Laura's room and follow Meg about the house as she makes lasagna or does the laundry. We talk ourselves hoarse. Once I do the laundry, and Russell's garments, which Laura calls his angel suits, come out pink. Laura is delighted.

What do we talk about? What friends talk about. About the children in her life, about the men in mine. We talk about teaching and writing and believing and not believing. The children and the neighbors' children are in and out, and we talk to them and around them and above them. The Munks have no television, a choice I admire enormously. They do have a piano. When Meg is angry with the children, she sits down at the piano and plays until she is calm. I wonder if they will associate music with the period of dread discipline.

Since the two sides of the United States seem so much closer than does California to Manila, and since we've both become more affluent, we begin to do what other Americans do: we telephone. Thrift still predominates, however. Meg and Russell call me after 11:00 p.m. their time; I call them on Saturday mornings. Still, fat letters continue to cross the continent, and she sends poems and even a play. I trade in my French typewriter for a German one with European accent marks, one that won't slide across my desk when I throw the carriage return.

Once, after she reads an essay I write on the difficulties of believing, Meg sends ten pages contemplating her own struggles to believe—struggles she has never exactly resolved but for which she has developed a degree of acceptance. She could believe more easily, she says, if more of *my* prayers had been answered. I fold up the letter and wipe my eyes.

During a regular check up, my doctor finds a lump in my right breast. I am, if such a thing is possible, a study in quiet hysteria. I don't want to trouble my parents, but I want legions of the virtuous praying for me. I call both Meg and my brother Richard to engage their worry and their prayers.

My tumor turns out to be benign, and the only unpleasant repercussions are hives that cover every inch of my body except the palms of my hands and the soles of my feet. They are uncomfortable and frustrating but pose no health hazard, and when I look in the mirror and see my jaw swollen square like Joan Sutherland's, I have to laugh. I have escaped, for now.

Then the bad things begin to happen to Meg. I can't assign dates or sequence. Our friend Kay calls to tell me of the man from the service station, the one who finds out where she lives and stalks her around the dining room table with a knife. He slashes her hand as Danny rolls himself and a telephone into a rug upstairs and calls the

police. Meg talks the man into turning himself in, then draws all the anguish inside of her. She can't talk about it, she tells me, and I say I understand, but I probably don't.

And then Meg has a tumor. She must have surgery. Everything will surely be all right, be *benign* (such a gentle word), as it was with me. We don't believe in our own mortality quite yet. The surgery might have got it all, but there will be chemo, which will be much worse than airsickness. After a while everything settles down, and she buys a wig that looks like her own hair and ferries kids around to ball games and lessons and takes food to sick people and even writes poems and letters.

Sometime in all this, I meet a man who is different from the other men. We don't exactly rush into anything; after almost a year, we quietly and nervously get married. Before the wedding, I dare tell only a few people, those I figure I'll be able to face if we back out. Meg's "oh" is so poignant that I know *her* prayers have been answered. The next spring I take Ben to Washington, where he does a smashing imitation of Donald Duck. Andrew and Andrew's guinea pig trail him from room to room. The other Munks approve of him as well.

My brothers set up my new IBM pc in the study, and I switch from my portable, manual Adler to a big, complicated machine that hums in mysterious ways. Meg never abandons her old typewriter and her blue and black pens. We don't write as often as we used to, but she sends poems. We telephone.

One night she calls to tell me she must have more surgery—in a week and a half—but the worst news isn't hers, she says. A friend is dead, an apparent suicide. We breathe out our grief in sighs. So life doesn't go the way it is supposed to go. The days slip by. I teach. I prepare for teaching. We haggle with salesmen to buy a new car, the old car having been demolished by a sporty, eighty-year-old man in a sporty blue Triumph. Never convinced of the efficacy of prayer, I pray anyway. After the surgery, I telephone Meg's brother-in-law. My prayers didn't work.

This time the chemo isn't as bad as the time before. We talk regularly on the telephone, but the letters almost stop. We are so busy living, working, seeing to our routines.

To find room for our books, Ben and I buy a new house. My father has surgery for prostate cancer. We celebrate the fiftieth wedding anniversaries of my parents and my two aunts and uncles. I type discussion notes and class handouts on my computer keyboard. We apply for an extension to file income taxes. I fret over a parking ticket.

One summer night Kay calls. Meg is skeletal, she says, her stomach bloated; she is hunched over from the pain—and now she can't keep down the medication. Should I go? What good could I do? Would I be in the way? Would I lock within me the image of her sick and not be able to remember the image of her well? That week I talk to Meg three times, to Russell once. Should I come? Come, she says.

I pack a tiny suitcase and go. I fly to National Airport, take the Metro to Silver Spring, walk to Live Oak Drive. My sister-in-law has given me a book about pain and death, and I have read it on the plane. What will I do here? What will I say? How can I help? How can I accept not being able to help?

Meg is lying on the bed. I have prepared myself so well to find her unimaginably altered that she looks better than I had expected. We smile and talk softly. She is sore where I touch her. I sit on the bed. There is something she wants me to do for her—as soon as she feels stronger. She'll tell me when. I stroke her hair. "Death," she whispers. "What a beautiful word." I was right to come.

The hospice nurse is wonderful. She has a little key that controls the pain box that Meg wears, a key that can make more pain medication come out. Meg hasn't been sleeping and is frantic right now. "Let go," the nurse says. "I can't," Meg cries, "until my little boy comes home." Andrew has been staying with Russell's sister in Virginia. So that he would go to school last month, she had promised him she wouldn't die while he was away.

That night, after family prayer in the study, she sends the others to bed and tells me what she wants me to do. In her mind she has been writing a talk that she wants given at her funeral here and the service she knows will be held in Salt Lake. She has planned her services carefully. It is important that others hear this talk. I have found one of the children's cassette recorders, and I get out my journal. She begins talking, and I flip on the recorder and scratch down what she says. Separations are always painful, she says. It is natural for her family to grieve because of that separation, but they have no reason to grieve for *her*. "All of my life," she says, "I have found it easy to believe that this life is neither the beginning nor the end of our existence. Of course, I always wondered if my faith would stand the ultimate test of death itself. I want you to know, as we gather here today, that my answer is 'Yes, yes, yes.'"

I weep as I write. I marvel that the words, barely audible, come out firmly, deliberately. "I say goodbye to you for a little while. And I love you forever and ever. And I'll see you in the morning."

I wake up the next morning in Laura's room. She breathes noisily. Three times last night she cried out in her sleep. Finally, I crawled over to turn off her radio. The house is silent now.

Meg has begun spending the night on one of the downstairs couches. Madge, a big comfortable woman from the hospice program, comes every night at 11:00 and stays until 7:00, so Russell can get some rest. Perhaps for the first night in many, Meg has slept. She has told the hospice nurse she would let go. She has written her talk.

I have little day tasks. I answer the phone. I concoct apricot nectar ices that Meg sucks from a sponge stick. I supervise the setting out of the great quantities of food that the Relief Society brings. The kids confide that they are getting tired of lasagna, so someone brings fish. The kitchen sparkles; Kay had organized all the helpless-feeling friends who wanted to do something—and they redid the kitchen and the bedroom. The rooms shine with love.

Putting together the faint recording and my practically illegible scrawls, I type up, on the old typewriter, a draft of the talk. We go over it together. Meg smiles and says very softly, "Ben spoiled my plans. I hoped if something should happen to me that Russell would marry you." I can barely hear her. "I saw us as sisters," she says. I rub her back, and she looks over to the piano. She says she fears she'll never teach another lesson nor play another piano piece. "You'll always be teaching lessons," I say.

The front door opens and the quiet explodes. Andrew bolts for his mother. She laughs and hugs him. Andrew plays hard, and he sleeps hard. In a few hours he will have collapsed on his bed.

That night Laura drives me to her basketball game. We have a small collision with a curb. Even this isn't hidden from Meg, currently situated on the family room couch, but she is in good spirits. She and Danny and I watch *Back to the Future* on the VCR. At last the Munks have bought a television set. Afterwards, I creep upstairs, and Meg gathers Laura and Danny to her. They talk until very late. Only Madge pays attention to the time in this household.

After midnight, I turn off Laura's radio. She is on her parents' bed talking on the telephone to someone, probably the boyfriend her parents worry about. Downstairs I can hear what I wanted to hear. Russ is playing the piano for Meg.

The next day I am to fly home. Meg's mom and her brother Tony are here. I type up the final draft of the funeral talk for Tony to duplicate. A hospital bed is delivered, and Danny, experimenting, folds himself up in it. I pack my little suitcase and go back downstairs. "This is going to be a hard one," Meg says, and everyone leaves us alone so we can sob goodbye. Tony takes me to Dulles Airport—

Russ's folks and Meg's sister are flying in about the time I'm flying out.

The pain medication is increased after that, and Russ or his mom tell me, when I call, that Meg is rarely coherent. Eleven days after the plane set me back down in Oakland, Meg dies. There is a kind of peace.

About six months later, a big manila envelope comes from Silver Spring. Kay, helping Russell sort through things, spots a fat bundle of letters that he is about to throw away. "Don't you dare," she tells him, "Karen would want those." "You do, don't you?" she asks me on the phone. "Of course," I say. Here they are, all in one place, my letters, starting with July of 1961, the summer Meg left Boston for the Institute of World Affairs in Salisbury, Connecticut. A first-class stamp cost four cents then.

This is the most organized part of my history, the letters in this manilla envelope. They are unwrinkled, unsmudged—having not suffered the flood-fate of most of my other treasures. As I reread parts of them, I see how much I told, how much I shared. I am sorry that Meg and I relied more on telephones in the last years—especially those last months. As ephemeral as paper is, it can be kept, can be a keepsake, can keep for us parts of a singular friendship, an acute mind, a selfless, principled, extraordinary human being.

"Talk to me afterwards," Meg said that last time we had together. "Not as if I'm a saint, but as if I'm a real person."

I do talk to her. Not so much aloud, the way I imagined I would. I talk to her when I sit down at the keyboard of my computer and watch green letters appear on the black screen, when I reread the drafts spitting out of my dot matrix printer, when I feed the changes back into the text, and print out the final copy, letter quality. I mumble over the words, and I listen, and I feel we are very close.