

Kiss the Babies Goodbye

Marilyn Livingston

Characters:

Walt, middle forties
Nancy, early forties

Setting:

A suburban kitchen. The set can be as minimal as a table and refrigerator.

Time:

Present

(As lights go up Walt is seated at the table. He is wearing a dress shirt and slacks. His sports coat and tie are draped over the back of a chair. Nancy is cooking dinner.)

Nancy: We have to go to the funeral.

Walt: I don't see why.

Nancy: He's dead.

Walt: I know he's dead. So's Janis Joplin. And I didn't go to her funeral. And at least she could sing.

Nancy: This is no time for jokes, Walt. Kevin grew up with him. They were friends since before kindergarten.

Walt: Then tell Kevin to go to his funeral. I don't like to go to funerals.

Nancy: I can't tell Kevin anything.

Walt: So you didn't tell him?

Nancy: You know I didn't tell him. How can I tell him? I don't have his phone number. I don't even have his address. He's in San Francisco someplace. Practicing alternative lifestyles.

(A beat.)

And I'm stuck in Ottumwa.

Walt: And I'm struggling to keep his tuition paid. *(Sighs deeply.)* Yeah, kids have to go find themselves. But I wish they'd look. . .well, I wish they'd in look in places that are a little more comfortable for me.

Nancy: What do you mean?

Walt: I can't go to the funeral.

Nancy: We have to. We just have to, you know. The Donavans are Catholic. Catholics believe suicide is a mortal sin.

Walt: Baptists believe that homosexuality is a mortal sin. I hope that we don't have to have a funeral for Kevin.

Nancy: We're not Baptist. We've never been Baptist.

Walt: But there's only two churches in town. One of them is Baptist. Half the people in this town are Baptist.

Nancy: Don't be ridiculous. There's more churches than that. Besides what do churches have to do with anything?

Walt: The religious people in this town belong to those two churches, don't they? Did you ever see a funeral at a bowling alley? Or on a golf course? Or how about—

Nancy: Shut up. Just shut up, Walt. Our friends don't have to know anything at all about Kevin. There's none of them that we could talk to about this anyway.

Walt: So. We don't know anything about Jeff either. Except that when he ran away, he did it permanently.

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Nancy: What are you saying?

Walt: Suicide is a permanent solution to a temporary problem. Isn't that the clever quote they gave us? Remember that meeting we went to when Kevin was in high school?

Nancy: Oh. Yes. I remember.

Walt: I remember thinking if life is a journey, is suicide a shortcut?

Nancy: That isn't funny.

Walt: I know. It just popped into my head. I tried to push it out, but it stuck. For no good reason.

Nancy: I'd forgotten. Almost.

Walt: I never figured that meeting out. Other than that clever quote they never told us anything except to watch our kids. Good God!

(Laughs and paces.)

We were supposed to watch them for drugs. Watch them for suicide. I felt more like the CIA than a father.

Nancy: Oh, come on. It wasn't that bad.

Walt: I don't go to funerals.

Nancy: Walt. You can't be serious. It's Wednesday. At eleven o'clock. St. Ann's on Oliver. Visiting hours start tonight.

Walt: How do they know it was a suicide? Did he leave a note?

Nancy: No, he left without a word.

(A beat.)

Well, I don't think so. But maybe. His family probably wouldn't tell anyone. . . Would they?

Walt: I doubt it.

Nancy: It's not something you can ask. How could I say, did Jeff leave a note? Do you know why he did this?

Walt: There's damn little you can ask. What happened?

Nancy: He hung himself.

Walt: How? Where?

Nancy: In the garage. He threw the rope over a rafter and jumped off Joe's work bench. What does it matter?

Walt: I guess it doesn't really matter. I just thought if I talked about something else you would forget about me going to the funeral.

Nancy: So do you want to eat? I made this incredible eggplant stew.

Walt: Does it have cheese in it? I love stuff with cheese in it.

Nancy: It has tomato sauce. And I'll add some feta. Does that count as cheese?

Walt: Feta's fine. Why do you suppose he did it?

Nancy: I don't know. I just don't know. Does anyone ever know. My cousin, Jim, committed suicide. He seemed okay one minute and then the next he was dead. Except that—Well, once we were at this Christmas party and he said to me, "Help me. I just can't do it anymore." But all of us had been drinking.

Walt: Except you.

Nancy: Yeah, except me. And to me it just seemed like another crying jag. You know how some people feel sorry for themselves when they've been drinking for a while?

(A beat.)

So I patted his head and said, "It'll be better in the morning." And then he blew his head off a few weeks later with a shotgun. It wasn't exactly better.

Walt: It wasn't your fault. You couldn't know. Every day people say I can't do it anymore. And they get up the next day and they go on. That's life.

Nancy: No. It was my fault. I should have listened harder. I should have paid more attention. The Ratatouille. It's almost done. Do you think we need a salad?

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Walt: People always say it's their fault when someone dies. I'll make a salad.

Nancy: We have some Bibb lettuce. Maybe some Romaine.

Walt: Romaine is so much greener than Iceberg. What else do we have?

Nancy: Well, I picked some swiss chard from the garden. That might be good. Did you ever personally know a suicide before? Like my cousin, I mean?

Walt: Swiss chard? Good idea.

Nancy: I can turn the kettle on. Do you want some tea? Or a beer? Before dinner.

Walt: Nah. This will make a great salad.

Nancy: What makes a great suicide?

Walt: I guess I never knew anybody. Not close. Only a couple of guys I was in the service with. They committed suicide a few years later. After we were all discharged.

Nancy: I have some green onions.

Walt: So saute them. You know I hate onions in a salad.

Nancy: Onions are good for you. They prevent cancer. They are on the list ...

Walt: Okay. Give them to me. I'll put them in.

Nancy: You can always pick them out. So how did you feel about those guys?

Walt: I felt bad for them. I remember them being like me. Eager to get home. And having hopes and dreams. I've always wondered what made them do it.

Nancy: I have some cucumbers. I always wondered that about my cousin. But now. This is ...

Walt: I guess it's a shame. About Jeff. He had his whole life ahead of him. Same age as Kevin. Only twenty years old.

Nancy: Kevin turned twenty one in October. Remember?

Walt: Oh. Yeah. That's right. It's a shame. A real shame.

Nancy: Oh, lord. It's worse than that. Remember them playing together. As kids? They both had such marvelous imaginations. Always inventing their own games.

Walt: Hmm. Have anything else for the salad?

Nancy: They were so cute. I remember one day standing out there on the porch watching all the neighborhood kids playing some game. Watching those babies, and I thought if the statistics are right then one day some of you will go wrong. They were just little bitty kids.

Walt: What do you mean by wrong? Winding up in jail? Not making lots of money? Not being part of corporate America?

Nancy: I don't know. I don't know, but that day looking at two and three year olds—I suddenly felt sad. Now with Jeff. I can't even tell you what I feel. I just can't. It seems so worthless. So out of control.

Walt: Well. Jeff. And Kevin. And everybody else in the world. . . We all have demons. And we face them in our own way. Or we don't. What about Endive?

Nancy: Check the fridge. I'll set the table. What demons?

Walt: Oh, you know. Not having the right job, not driving the right car, not having the nicest house. All the things that society expects of you. Being normal. Whatever that is.

(A beat. Holds up Endive.)

Kind of limp. I won't use very much. I still don't want to go.

Nancy: And it's expected of you?

Walt: What?

Nancy: Being normal?

Walt: Shit yes. Being normal. Having demons. It's all part of the American way. And you too. It's expected of you too.

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Nancy: And Kevin? And oh my God, Jeff?

(A beat.)

We'll never know will we?

Walt: Do we want to? Could we stand the consequences? There must be consequences for truly knowing who other people are. What they feel? How they think? What gives them pain so deep they can't breathe?

(A beat.)

How's Cecile taking this?

Nancy: Hard. I took her a fruit salad earlier. The house was filled with people, but Cecile wasn't there.

Walt: Where was she?

Nancy: Oh, she was there physically. But. Well, I'm not sure she even recognized me. And she kept crying, "Jeff didn't do this. Jeff couldn't do this." Joe just sat in his chair rocking back and forth with his head in his hands.

Walt: Do you think it's harder because they're Catholic?

Nancy: I think it's harder because he was their child. We always want our children to have it easier. To have a better life than we did. We don't ever expect to bury our children.

Walt: Especially not like this. Grab the French dressing will you?

(Walt serves the salad. Both sit down, but neither do more than pick at the food.)

It's a good salad.

Nancy: Yes. It's a good salad. You always make a good salad.

Walt: But I don't go to funerals.

Nancy: Does that mean you won't go?

(A beat.)

I'll have to go alone then.

Walt: You don't have to go either.

Nancy: I have to go. Cecile and Joe need us. They need people around them. They need the support.

Walt: Nancy, they need Jeff. He's dead. None of the rest of us matter. They won't even know who's there.

Nancy: Pass the salt.

Walt: I thought you gave up eating salt. Your high blood pressure?

Nancy: Tonight, I eat salt. If I was a drinking person, I'd get drunk. I'd drink a whole fifth of something. Then maybe I would be numb. Or I wouldn't remember.

Walt: (*Laughs.*) You'd probably just throw up and have a headache in the morning.

(*A beat.*)

I feel numb now. I don't know if people can feel any more numb.

Nancy: Damn it! I'm so angry! I don't think I've ever been this angry. Or this helpless.

(*A beat.*)

Do you think that we did anything? Do you think that we could have done anything that—that would have changed it?

Walt: Changed what?

Nancy: Changed anything. Changed life? For Jeff?

Walt: Are we involved? Are you asking me if we're involved in this? Of course, we are. We're involved in this in the same way we're involved in Kevin's decision. In the same obscure way that all parents are involved in their kids' decisions.

Nancy: But how? What did we do? What did we do wrong?

Walt: I don't know. Maybe we didn't do anything wrong. Maybe they both needed something different. Something none of us knew how to give.

Nancy: Kevin's decision to—to. . . It isn't the same as Jeff.

Walt: I know it's not.

Nancy: Jeff is dead.

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Walt: I know it's not. But we may have lost him all the same. We don't understand his choices or his lifestyle. And. Well, if we aren't careful. If we don't try hard.

(A beat.)

And maybe even if we do all that. Kevin may be just as lost to us.

Nancy: But we love him. We love him no matter what.

Walt: Love isn't always enough. Or maybe sometimes it's too much.

Nancy: I wish I knew. If I only knew. Why would Jeff do such a thing? Did he seem different to you?

Walt: No, I talked to him Thursday night. Just about his classes at State. He seemed very pleased with computer technology. Said it was the perfect field for him.

Nancy: Maybe he didn't do it. Maybe someone else did it. Maybe he was really murdered.

Walt: Someone else hung him?

Nancy: How could he do it?

Walt: You have to kiss your babies good bye. Some go to California, some commit suicide, others just move across town. They're still gone.

Nancy: What?

Walt: We don't own our children. They're given to us as gifts. We can't protect them from life. We can't save them from death. We have to let them go. They have to become their own people.

Nancy: I miss Kevin.

Walt: I know, honey. It's a loss. Life is about loss. Sometimes.

(Walt rises, picks up sports coat and tie.)

Nancy: Where are you going?

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Walt: To a funeral parlour. Didn't you say they have visiting hours tonight? Come on, ole girl. We've all got our own demons. Come help me fight mine tonight.

Nancy: (*Hugs him.*) Does that mean you'll go to the funeral?

Walt: (*Grins.*) Don't push it.

(*Lights down.*)

THE END