

Being with Margaret

by Anne Corkett

We were four grade eleven schoolgirls who had doffed our school uniforms, donned civvies, make-up, and headed for Bloor Street where we went to a bar called, if I remember aright, “The Gay Paree,” across from the Royal Conservatory of Music. Nervous, daring, definitely under-age, we ordered and consumed a ‘Pink Lady’ each. No sooner had we accomplished this than we headed to the street and safety. Back on Bloor one of us, Barb Avison, squeaked “O no, here comes Aunt Margaret!” We froze. Along came a severely elegant woman distinguished by her light, buoyant walk. She was a high stepper. Drawing near our shame-faced group she cast a benevolent smile over us. She said clearly, “Eat an orange,” and swept on. She never broke stride.

Barb was a great friend of mine. Her father, Ted, then vice-president of the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, was an old friend of my father’s, so I knew that branch of the Avisons well and eventually met Margaret again. She invited me for tea at her flat at Avenue Road and St. Clair where she lived with her mother, Mabel. We began meeting for tea, peppermint always, once a week. At first I was unprepared for her extempore prayers but they were fluent and interesting, so unlike anything I’d ever heard that my curiosity kept my intimidation at bay. She was quite unintentionally intimidating. She decided we’d read Ezekiel. We did, slowly. By the time we’d wheeled on to Revelation, she and Mabel had moved to an apartment on Lascelles Boulevard where I joined her Bible study to which an eclectic group of souls came and went. We continued to meet for tea and extracurricular events. She was determined to show me the Toronto I knew nothing of—concerts, poverty, Evangelical born-again Christians. The Evangelicals were by far the most discomfiting. Knox Presbyterian was all right but then consumed by rather fierce politics. In my mild, intermittent Anglican background I was naively unaware that churches had politics. The world widened.

My world had extended from Lawrence Avenue to College Street, bounded by the Royal Ontario Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario, reaching from Avenue Road almost to Bathurst Street. That was it. So the summer I spent working with Margaret at Evangel Hall was a radical shift, one which lifted an abysmal ignorance.

Once as we were sitting on a sunny patio near Bloor and Avenue Road, when Yorkville was still full of rooming houses and hippies, a long-skirted, long haired and bangled girl stopped and asked Margaret to buy some poetry for a dollar. Margaret agreed and was handed some smeary mimeographed sheets. The girl moved on. Margaret read but then shot out of her chair in pursuit of the girl, caught her and said, "I gave you a dollar. You gave me nothing." She came back with her dollar minus the messy mimeographed sheets.

After I showed her three pieces I had written about Nova Scotia, she gave me a copy of Elizabeth Bishop's poems and we began to read poetry. My knowledge of poetry was as limited as my geography. That began to change. Her long black hair was worn in a neat, big, low bun and when the regulation 'pepmint' was brewed, armed with mugs, we moved to the living room where she sat in an oaken Mission armchair. While we talked, she would absentmindedly unwind her hair, removing little pieces of paper on which she had jotted the day's scraps of thoughts and observations—the day's notes for poems. These went into a big shoebox that waited for a cold or flu, bad enough to stay home, not bad enough that she couldn't think. This was her ultimate idea of a holiday.

Food didn't interest her, though she had one or two indulgences. Campbell's Green Pea soup was a favourite. Mabel ate earlier with her companion, so if tea and talk went on longer than usual and we were starting to get peckish, Margaret would open a can of her favourite. She liked it cold and I always suspected would have eaten it straight up from the can. When I was there, it was heated and we split it, unadulterated, standing in the kitchen. Supper dispensed with, we went back to mugs of peppermint tea.

She had given me a copy of W. H. Auden's *Commonplace Book* along with a copy of Gilbert White's *Selborne*, and we were talking of both one evening. She was very ticked off that time, having wasted the afternoon with a graduate student who had come to inform her that the dominant image in *Winter Sun* was winter sun. The student had found this to be incontrovertibly so by running all the images in the book through a new rudimentary computer. Margaret was not just ticked off; she was incensed. She said there was no money in poetry. You just got a lot of very stupid questions, and the world was going to be full of computer 'x-perts' and the rest of us would run scared. My memory always pairs this reaction with her comment on leaving Scarborough College: "there comes a time when you know you have to leave blood and bones behind in the machine." And these mingle with comments about her stint at Western University as writer-in-residence. She hadn't known what she was to do but the students

expected her to read their poems, not for comment, or discussion, but to find them a publisher which she had no intention of doing and thought impossible anyway. Or thought it should be impossible.

Whenever she was about to make a pronouncement or pull together ideas, she would draw up her long straight back, placing her hands, palms down, on her lap before she spoke. Her posture was always beautiful. She was indeed an elegant figure. She was exceptionally tactile. Her sensual appreciation of the world was very strong and I wondered about men in her life, finally getting enough nerve to ask. She told me about her five engagements, four of which she'd cancelled, but the fifth one had dumped her. The educated guessing was that he was John Frederick Nims. She told it as a wistfully funny story and added that she never regretted not marrying. She regretted only not having children.

When Ted died, she was for a while tormented by the thought that he had not come to Christ. Eventually she came to think that she could not know what he believed in his last hours and perhaps during that time he had been changed. She would not know. The knowing was not to be hers. So be it.

Who she was, what she is, remains so alive for me going back and back to her poems, so immediate, so present. Few I think have been so blessedly given such a friend, such a mentor.

I remember: "Move your tongue along a slat / Of a raspberry box from last year's crate" ("Thaw," *AN* 1.92).

Or, "eat an orange," and she's here.

Now. Never not not-there.