

"The River that Flows Both Ways"

Remembering Margaret

by Joan Johnston

As I sit in my back yard, I look at the "river that flows both ways" and I remember Margaret.

The last time she sat here was a day much like this — a day of steamy heat, 30° and very humid. She was surrounded by friends. It was July 19, 1986 — her sixtieth birthday party.

It had not been the happiest of years for either of us. My father had died following a long illness; Margaret had just got word that her brother out west was dying, and the "book banners" had been at work again. We needed something to lift our spirits — hence the party. We had such fun planning it. The guest list, the food, how many hours we would "entertain." I remember panicking when her guest list reached fifty, but knew that we could accommodate that many, and more, if it didn't rain. What gave the party an extra fillip was that Margaret and I had saved letters, newspaper clippings, audio tapes of radio broadcasts and video tapes of TV coverage about the "book banners," sold the 'package' to York University, and used the money to pay for the party. We both chuckled to think that the fundamentalists were, in effect, buying the food and drink for Margaret's party.

Margaret had set her birthday as the deadline for completing the first draft of her memoirs, "Dance On The Earth." She had decided to keep a journal for a year, starting on her sixtieth birthday, so she wanted the memoirs in first draft by then. She finished it one week before her self-imposed deadline.

For her birthday, I gave her the first two (of what were to become seven) blank journals. And sure enough, she started writing on July 18. She worried, at first, that perhaps it would be a "nothing year," that nothing worth writing about would

happen; she had even decided that, occasionally, she would simply list what had come in the mail on certain days. She said that she didn't plan to write in the journal every day, but would bring it up to date when she felt like writing.

She didn't start the first typescript of the memoirs right away. She was busy with day-to-day activities, and she went west to visit her brother for the last time. She had also decided to have her house re-decorated. So we made a few trips to Peterborough, shopping for clothes for her trip west, picking out paint and wallpaper, and material to have her chestfield recovered. Margaret didn't enjoy shopping very much, and her goal was to finish as quickly as possible, then have lunch at her favourite Italian restaurant, with a martini, straight up, as her reward for getting the shopping done. Really, though, it was a treat to shop with her, for she always knew precisely what she wanted, and didn't waste any time "shopping around."

By the end of August, we knew that she was dying. It seemed so sudden and quite unthinkable. She was admitted to hospital August 22 with breathing difficulties, and a week later was diagnosed as having lung cancer. She requested three things when she got the verdict: half a pack of cigarettes, half a bottle of Scotch, and her "office." She set up a work place in her hospital room with her typewriter and paper and the first of the many handwritten scribbles of her memoirs. When I'd go to visit her, I'd hear the typewriter from down the hall. She was completing five typewritten pages a day and felt that, if she remained well enough, she could complete the first typescript in two months. That was her goal — a typewritten draft to be edited by her daughter.

However, after about twenty pages, she called me one day from the hospital, quite depressed. "I'm never going to get it done. I find it too tiring to sit at the typewriter, and I know I'll never finish it." Because, as well as typing, she was editing and rewriting as she went. A lot bigger chore than just typing. I knew how important this project was to her, so said, "No problem, Margaret, we can get a dictaphone, and as long as you are able to dictate, I'll be able to type."

I know she didn't really have a great deal of faith in this idea, and she was very reluctant for anyone else to see her work in its present state. However, it seemed the only answer. As soon as she was released from the hospital (and what a performance that was with all the paraphernalia she had gathered while there —

I thought we might need a truck to bring her home), we started to work. Margaret had a portable radio/cassette recorder, and she started to dictate. I rented a decent typewriter and a transcriber and we were in business. It was quite exciting, really, if one could forget the reason I, not Margaret, was doing the typing. Many phone calls — "Oh, kid, I've finished another tape — this is just swell." And, in my determination to keep her thinking it was a satisfactory alternative, I was typing almost as fast as she was finishing the tapes. She was delighted to see how quickly we were getting along because, on September 11 when she began, she said "it is so depressing to realize how much there is" (I think nine handwritten scribbles). We were averaging twenty typewritten pages to a tape.

Margaret telephoned September 16, exuberant. Almost impossible to believe that someone whose life was measured in months could be so happy, but nonethe-

less, she was. Her son and daughter-in-law had told her that they were moving from San Francisco to be with her and would live in the small apartment at the back of her house. This news was, in large part, the reason she was so happy. But there was another: "I've finished two more tapes." We were going much faster than she thought possible, and she was writing in her journal, as well. She was to tell me that the journal had become her "buddy," that things she couldn't talk about to anyone, she was writing about in her journal. She said that she found it very therapeutic and that, someday, perhaps, it might be a help to others in her position. She said that she still had a lot of things she wanted to say and was leaning toward publication of the journal at some later date. The final decision would be her daughter's to make and, "it'll need lots of editing, of course."

Through this whole period, Margaret's biggest worry seemed to be that she wouldn't live long enough, or be well enough, to finish the memoirs. That was her whole focus. On October 3 she finished the taping. I arrived when she was

taping the last few paragraphs, a very emotional time. She was totally drained. And then the doubts. Perhaps it shouldn't be published — "probably just a lot of garbage" — but felt that, even if that were so, she was glad she had done it, if only for "the kids." She couldn't believe that she had finished, having just started taping September 11.

I completed the typing October 6 and took the last pages to be photocopied on the 7th. Margaret phoned at 5:00 p.m. that day to say that she'd got all the pages together, in triplicate, and had started to edit! She did the editing, and I completed another typescript. It was a joy for me. Usually, when a loved one is dying, the feeling is one of complete helplessness. But in this case, I could help, and helping Margaret went a long way toward helping me.

Of course, the other areas of her life didn't stop. Phone calls, tons of mail, flowers, friends coming to visit. Margaret found herself in the position of comforting others about her own coming death. And she did that. She remained the loving, caring friend she had always been, and

continued to be interested in and concerned about what was happening in the lives of her family and friends. She was, truly, "a respecter of persons."

She had an appointment for further x-rays and examination on October 17, my birthday. She was horrified to think that I was going to spend the day schlepping her around to the hospital and the doctors, and had sent me fifty-three roses, one for each year. When I picked her up that day, I suggested to her that now she had the memoirs as far as we could go with them, perhaps she could ask the doctor if there wasn't something that could be done. I feared that perhaps she may have refused treatment in order to get her work finished — her all-important work. Margaret said, "Oh, kid, you've seen all the flowers and cards and letters. I'd be too embarrassed not to die now."

The world has lost a great voice. Many of us have lost a dear, dear friend. But she emphasized that we were not to mourn her death, but to celebrate her life. We try to do that.

JANICE KULYK KEEFER

Past Reading

The book, remembered, fits my hand, root
through rock to that time
when reading was a door into blue
distances, turnings
round each turning. Not escape
but inscape, a painless orphaning
till you were nobody's child but your own.

Needing no longer the good aunt's hand
in yours. Knowing the Grandfather,
this air so clear it makes your skin sting —
strange and necessary. No lessons,
or clucking tongues — you kick
the bundle of your stiff and prickly clothes
clear off a mountain ledge; climb
to sleep into a hayloft, pale straw
tickling your legs, the stars so close
you can taste their points with your tongue.

And love between you
and the Grandfather grows complete,
sure-footed as wildflowers seeding
in sheer rock; fluent in winds
that blow from the beginning of all things.

You remember, too, captivity below,
endless winter with Clara
and Fräulein Rottermeier. In spite of silver-
papered bonbons, organ-grinders
in the courtyard, even Clara's spongy love,
turning you pale as the damask on which you will eat
nothing —. Still, this passion for opening
windows into city night; searching
by Alpine light for fierce
blankness of snow, sweet discordancies
of cattle bells. Like a rock
grazing your skin, the Grandfather's voice —

She returned, but you never could,
that *Heidi* on a shelf
unreachable as your own childhood.
The books you read now —
mere doors into a room so large
you hardly know it's locked.
World of past reading, intangible,
fragrant as pine needles
rubbed in the winds's hands.