

Remembering Margaret ©

JK Savoy

Inspired by a segment from my memoir, 'Somewhere In Brooklyn'

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“Damn it to hell! She did it again?” I shouted as I threw the public phone booth’s receiver down and ran to my VW minibus. Fearing the worst, I raced to the job site, the soon to be completely renovated Brooklyn’s Hotel Margaret, where my relocations crew was tying up loose ends in a luxury suite. As I arrived, Joey, my foreman pulled me aside whispering, “Boss, if I don’t watch her every step, she’s gonna set the friggin’ place on fire! She got all mixed up again an’ blew her lit cigarette outta the holder an’ into the trash heap. Maggie jest ain’t with it!”

Squinting at her blurred image in a vintage serving plate, my silver-haired, transferee said, “Well hello, Kenny! This is a lovely surprise. Since you’re here, please have your boys take extra care packing away this set of fine china, it was Granny’s. As you know by now, much like me, those dishes haven’t aged a day.”

Maintaining a smile I said, “Margaret, just like you, your heirloom china is hardly rough around the edges.” Pointing to a vintage ashtray, I added, “But, perhaps it’s time to leave some old habits behind, right? You know, a new start?”

“Of course, flattery does and will get you somewhere, Kenny.” After taking a long drag from her empty cigarette holder, she threw it to the trash heap while saying, “Since I’ve been confusing exhale with inhale lately, what may be next? ... Okay Kenny, let’s try it your way: A new start!” Gazing at her cabinetry, she went on to say, “I know, I must have said it

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to you many times: I'm ninety-four years old, so you can only imagine the age of Granny's dish sets and bric-a-brac or that table, or whatever! I guess, five or ten times stated is better than having never being said at all. Oh, that's merely an excuse for my ... you know."

"Margaret yes, many times said is far better than hardly ever mentioned."

"Oh Kenny, you've been so kind since the day you first arrived. I wish that I had a granddaughter for you, but ... Oh well, details! And by the way, it's been so nice of you to treat me to having lunch with you and your men every day!"

"The fellas and I consider you as being a part of the crew just as do I, so let's enjoy our time while we're still here!"

"Oh you ... Kenny! One day, I'll figure out a way to repay you for all of your kindness and consideration during this ordeal ... Just you wait and see!"

"Margaret, the realtors who hired us pay me plenty. So please, just enjoy the devil's food cheesecake I got for you from Junior's, and as always, it's on me."

"Random acts of kindness are never forgotten... and one day, you'll see."

"As we have already seen. And thank you for all of the Pepsis and cookies, Margaret." To which, she simply smiled. Since hers was the last of many forced relocations from The Hotel Margaret in Brooklyn Heights my upstart moving enterprise had been contracted to do, she didn't have to do anything more. I had lost my ninety five year old grandmother a few months earlier, so buying her a cheesecake and doing our best work was my pleasure as it was the crew's who referred to her as Maggie, although never to her face. Our

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much-loved tenant's proper title was Miss LeJeune but she chose to be called Margaret just like the residential hotel she lived in all of her life, and in whose name she was honored. The historical building was slated for conversion to luxury co-ops, of course priced beyond most of the lifelong resident's means. According to New York City's landmark rules, the outer facade could not be altered but there was nothing in writing about the wreckage of the many lives whose only home it had been. As for Margaret, rather than litigate her remaining years away, she decided to accept the buyout and allow life to take her where it must. She saw it as: *"My long overdue chance at change, forced upon me as it has to be."*

While Margaret strolled reminiscingly around her one and only home, she pointed to an antique sofa and said to Joey, "It was way back in 1884 when I was born right there; right below that very window and on that very same divan where I'd enjoy the warmth of the sun! Although The Margaret officially opened in 1889, since Daddy was one of its early investors, we had a head start." She gazed across the East River to the Manhattan skyline while stating in her hauntingly, childlike voice, "Mommy, rest her dear soul, often told Daddy, *"Baby girl was born right here, the moment the sun rose over those buildings, but I know that I will die as it sets far from here. She'll be known as Margaret, so she will always remember where life had chosen to set her path."* Margaret smiled, displaying her reassurance in us as her movers when Joey showed extra care in packing her classic Flora Danica dinnerware.

A realty syndicate was relocating Margaret from the Brooklyn Heights hotel where she lived her entire life to

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Newkirk Avenue in Flatbush where she had spent her summers during her childhood with her aunt who owned a turn of the century mansion there. As an entry level moving company, mine was chosen for The Hotel Margaret's relocations because, as a fledgling enterprise without the excess baggage of more established movers, I was able to lowball Brooklyn's more bloated companies. Margaret LeJeune was the last of the hotel's residents to be bought out, packed and then hustled to the streets on the realtor's dime.

After gazing at a Baccarat crystal carafe, she gently handed it to Joey saying, "These days, it's so much louder in Flatbush than I recall it as being when I was a young girl. Way back then, it was so quiet you could almost hear the parasols spinning in the hands of young ladies as they walked along the pathways with their suitors to Prospect Park. Do you know, The Brooklyn Dodgers are named after riders who dodged the streetcars as they jumped on or off?"

"No, I didn't know that, Ma'am. But hey, my dad's still a real big Dodgers fan, even though they left all of us hangin' when they moved to LA back in '58; so he'd know all 'bout stuff like that."

"Well Joey, as you young people would say: *'The times they are a 'changing!'* Now aren't they? My goodness, I will so miss that glorious view of the Brooklyn Bridge and how it seems to frame The World Trade Center towers." She leaned on the windowsill saying, "I was just three or so, but I can still recall the hoopla the day that bridge was opened! It and those towers, though many years apart in age, do go so well together in an eclectic way. It's like, it was meant to be ..."

"Yeah lady. Back ta Flatbush: These days you old folks gotta

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learn ta be real careful there, what with all the muggin's an' stuff, not ta mention the gun ...”

“Joey! Be sure to double wrap all of her china. It's heirloom and the realtors didn't buy the extra insurance!”

As if oblivious to Joey's gun remark, Margaret said, “Oh Kenny, Joey's doing such a fine job. I rarely cook, so if something breaks, it breaks! I take most of my meals at the restaurant here at The Margaret. So, I suppose I'll be able to do the same where I'm... Oh! don't pack those dishes Joey, I promised them to a very dear friend.” Giggling, she added, “Perhaps I should tell her I did that?”

Weird how she made us feel right at home as she provided endless Pepsi Cola, Lorna Doon cookies and stories of her beloved lifelong home at The Hotel Margaret. Even more weird, considering that it was not my business to say anything about her surroundings to be, I listened as Margaret went on to say, “When I went to see the new apartment, I couldn't even distinguish its address. But I did find it fascinating how people actually spray-paint drawings and write profanity and other things on their buildings these days! It's so true, the times certainly are changing. I guess that I'm just going to have to go along with the changes, oh well ...” Eyes swollen, clutching a small handmade cloth doll, she looked down to the divan and then toward the rising sun, adding, “Maggie and I will certainly miss those warming rays of the sunrise. Oh well, as change is the only constant in the Universe all things must and will change, and then pass on.” She kissed the tiny figure, handed it to me and said, “Kenny, please keep Maggie. I made her all by myself a long, long time ago... she'll be something for you to remember this old lady by, as I'll recall your

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kindness during my time of need.”

She sat on her divan, then went on to say, “I’ll never stop thinking of this hotel as my entire world wrapped around this very spot, where I always sit. So many memories... some are so very vague, yet others are as clear in my mind as if they happened yesterday ... Or, just moments ago!” While she nestled into the divan’s well-worn groove, a tear rolled down her cheek as she slowly looked around the room. After being sure that Joey was busy packing in the kitchen, she pointed toward Wall Street while saying, “Please excuse the ramblings of an old woman who’s about to be whisked away from the only home she has ever known, but something deep inside of me ... Well, it’s much like a voice telling me that not only will you understand ... but you might feel compassion for another human being who simply has to get something off her chest ... Oh, Kenny! Now I’m so terribly embarrassed! Never mind that I said all of that.”

“Margaret! You are absolutely right about my sense of understanding.” As I plopped down on an easy chair, I locked my fingers behind my head as I said, “Now, I beg of you, please tell me what you feel that you must say. I have nothing but time, curiosity and concern.”

Eyes shut, she went on to say, “No! I’m not going to go to sleep, or ... and no, not that! So, I was going to say, way back in ninety-three; that’s eighteen you know ... well, never mind it couldn’t be nineteen because that hasn’t happened as of yet! Oh anyway, Daddy went to the market, the stock market that is. Daddy would often remain there all day, and sometimes into the night since stocks and bonds were his passion. But that day, he came home shortly after noon. I always sat right

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here, right where they said I was born, waiting for his return. Anyway, that day, Daddy came home very frantic and slammed the door shut! I never saw him acting that way ...” Her eyes swelled and tears began to form.

“Margaret, if it hurts you so much, you don’t have to go on.”

“No! I do, so that I may move on! You must know about that ...” Then out of the blue, she giggled and said coquettishly, “How fitting: I’m telling a striking, young moving man that I must move on when if I weren’t moving on, why is a handsome young moving man right here in my suite?”

“Uh, that’s very interesting and I’m flattered, Margaret. You were saying?”

“Yes, I was saying: Daddy was very agitated if not very angry! Immediately, I felt guilty wondering what I had done as he went on to say, *“Margaret! Go to your room and close the door!”* I felt relieved that I hadn’t done anything wrong when he said so very compassionately, *“Please don’t be upset, my dear Margaret. Daddy simply needs this place to put an end to some very bad ... business! But I promise, I won’t be here too much longer.”* As always, I heeded his instructions and went to my room. Soon after, a cold chill raced along my spine when I heard horns blowing and people shouting from the street! When I opened the door to check on Daddy, I saw that he was more than just gone ...” Wiping away a tear, she said, “He left only an open window and a note pinned to ... *my divan!*”

“Shit! The market crash of 1893.” Whispered Joey. Relieved that Margaret’s eyes had remained shut and that she was unaware of his presence, I hustled him away while asking, “You knew about a stock market crash that I never even heard of? How?”

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As he walked away, he said only, “You do ask too many questions, boss.”

With Joey back in the kitchen, slowly Margaret rose from her special sofa, leaned on the windowsill, looked at the roadway below and said ever so plainly, “Ahem! In the days to come, I guess they will call The Margaret a co-op or that new word...”

“Condominium.” By the way, what happened after your father passed?”

Returning to sitting, she replied, “Yes Kenny, “condominium”, or something else like that. Oh yes. Daddy’s passing on did result in something decent, yes ... it was very decent of them!” She drew a deep breath, then went on to say, “Since Daddy was one of the partners in The Margaret, the others allowed Mommy and me to stay here forever ... or, so they said ...”

“Oh?”

“Yes, forever! They say that The Universe has no end, that is until one day they, whoever they are ...” She rose, looked to the sidewalk below and went on to say, “They must hit the brakes or, fall off the edge!” Looking away from the world below, she wiped a tear from her eye as she pressed her palms together.

Before I could say, ‘*Shhh!*’ Joey walked back into the room and asked, “So, what about your mom?”

“My mom? Ha! The film, Gone With The Wind, didn’t arrive in theaters until 1939, but Mommy sure as all heck made her exit long before that!”

“How did you, I mean, who ...”

“Took care of me? Ha! The Wizard of Oz came out that same

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year, but long before that I had my own Scarecrow, Lion and Tin Man in The Margaret's staff who cared for me, and as of late, their very descendants!" She looked to the windows and said, "And they'll all be well taken care of after I...This was and is a family oriented hotel, I'll have you know!" As her gaze returned to the outside view, she went on to say, "Over time, each and every one of them would say, *"Our Margaret 'is', The Margaret! And so, we as her staff will support and maintain her until ..."*

"Until? Keep goin', Margaret ..." said Joey, as I kicked his shin.

"The twelfth of never? Perhaps but that's a long, long time; and as you must know, at some point, an hourglass must be turned ... or, left to be. So here we are and sadly, all good things must and do come to an end without exception. Boys, there's plenty of lemonade in the fridge. Sorry but we're all out of Pepsi."

While she tearfully gazed at the East River's view, Joey whispered, "Kenny, fer sure that poor ol' broad ain't gonna be burnin' her britches behind her."

"Burning her what?"

"Boss, Margaret damn well knows she ain't got no way back here after she deposits their buyout check. But if ya ask me, it seems like she ain't never gonna be leavin' here an' live anywheres else. It's like ... like, she's in a weird way a part of this place. But hey, what the hell do I know, I just pack 'em and then I move 'em!"

"By the way, Joey; do you happen to remember what that slumlord dude whose tenant we moved last week called us? Somehow, I keep forgetting. it"

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“The one who tagged us as, *Undertakers fer the living?* Hell yeah, that was so cool! He really nailed your ass with that!”

“Joey, stop it! Now I really can’t shake that undertaker image from my head.”

“Yeah fer sure boss. Hey, ya know, those ‘gentravayshin’, uh gen...”

“The word is “gentrification”, Joey. What about them?”

“Yeah, what you said. Them home bustin’ gangsters like that fat dude, who we do these basket case jobs fer, have a ‘devil make hair’ attitude about the stuff they do to folks. I mean, they’re loaded up to the flab under their chins, but if you ask them fer a nickel to help kids by sponserin’ youth centers or sports teams, they all cry broke! Total scumbags!”

“Like Margaret said, *“Change is the only constant in the Universe.”* Who knows what’s up with anything, anyway?”

The grand lady of The Hotel Margaret presented a generous tip to Joey and his crew. She reminded me to always hang on to Maggie, her tiny doll that she made in the image of her as a young girl, as something to remember her by. With certainty, she said, *“You must place this very special image of me where it will always know the warming rays of those many sunrises to come!”* I did and hung it from the rearview mirror of my VW minibus: The very van with which I began my moving business, and used for many years as I would a car. Hey, commercial plates allowed me to park just about anywhere in this city!

I parked near my office and set the hand brake while the doll continued to swing back and forth. As if spellbound, I wondered, ‘Much like coins for Charon, the fabled ferryman of Hades, was her relocation settlement a token gesture to

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relieve Big Real Estate's conscience? Was the weight of the pennies covering her eyelids blinding her to the river she'd been sold down?' Margaret was but one of the many senior citizen residents who either were, or were about to be scattered all over New York City by salivating gentrification opportunists. Their grand renovation design for landmark communities did not include the people whose lives gave places like The Hotel Margaret a feeling of being a home for so many years. Dammit, I *had* become the undertaker for the living! My moving vans were to be like the lanterned chariots that would float along the River Styx, albeit Atlantic Avenue, and bring yet so many more souls to their reward.

The landmark hotel which overlooked New York harbor and sheltered those who sought to spend their remaining years waking to glorious sunrises, framed by Manhattan's steel and glass towers, had its own time of infamous spectacle: One night, people driving along the FDR Drive looked across the East River only to see Roman candle-like bursts of flame rising from The Hotel Margaret as it ceased to be, consumed within a smoldering black cloud of mystery. Sadly, the charred remains of our Lady Margaret were found upon the very sofa where she was born so many decades before. Her cherished divan, that Margaret had instructed the movers to leave behind, as always, faced the East River and those many sunrises yet ahead.

A few months after Margaret's death, I parked my minibus on Prospect Park West in my home community of Park Slope. Ever so gradually, Margaret's cloth doll swung to a stop in the August heat as it hung from the VW's mirror: Exactly where

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she told me to place it. She did have her quirks, but respecting someone's wishes, as mysterious as they may seem, is respect in and of itself. Although Margaret may have been amongst the wealthiest of Brooklynites, I chose to see her hand-crafted muslin wrapping, with its drawn on facial features, as an expression of how she indeed viewed herself. It was as though the humble Maggie allowed Margaret to place her sense of being beyond the trappings of turn of the century luxury that had been The Hotel Margaret's, and the lifestyle of its patrons. Missing her charisma, sense of humor and how she had always been grateful for upfront, honest human connection, I would gaze into her alter-ego's time tattered eyes, remember Margaret and often, I would hear the sound of her voice telling tales of way back when. Her influence on me made me more empathetic toward my clientele whose destiny was in the hands of the flood of real estate conglomerates that had been replacing the soul of my cherished Park Slope neighborhood with the spiritual void of those whose battle cry was, *"It's all about the money!"*

From what I understood from her obituary, Margaret had inherited a fortune from her mother's death as a passenger aboard The Titanic in 1912. It was comforting for me to learn that Mommie Dearest didn't leave her completely on her own while in search of better things. Fortunately for Margaret, while Mamma was seeing the world, she fell into the loving arms of the hotel staff who, for the most part, raised her. The gossip throughout Brooklyn was: Margaret was so wealthy she could've bought the hotel many times over. That aside, why didn't she just walk away from her divan, marry one of her suitors and live the life of the grand-dame of Brooklyn

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that she would have become? The answer to that and many other mysteries had gone up in smoke.

I was hit by a blast of heat when I opened the door to the VW. Sitting in my Bavarian furnace, I noticed that the intense temperature from many hours in the summer sun had caused Margaret's doll's fabric body to unfurl. In a vain attempt to re-wrap what gave the effigy its form, the opposite occurred. As I removed 'Maggie' from the rearview mirror, she quickly unraveled as a note fell next to me. It said, "*Dear Kenny The Mover, choose your attachments wisely. Don't allow anything to weigh you down when the time comes to move on.*" Gazing into Maggie's button eyes, I reflected, 'Some of us make our intentions loud, clear and weighed down with falsehoods as we bloviate throughout our lives. Like Margaret, others show kindness, consideration and compassion throughout their days, and beyond.'

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