

MARGARET MACINNIS

BEING MARGARET

. . . *this is a doomed ship, and her name is the Coffin!*
—Charles Dickens, *The Uncommercial Traveller*

May 14, 1961 [Mother's Day]

Worcester Sunday Telegram

Girl Killed in Fall from Car on Curve

Manchaug—A 19-year-old¹ East Douglas girl was killed and another girl seriously injured yesterday afternoon.

According to witnesses, the police found the East Douglas girl's mother at the girl's grandmother's house. Upon receiving the news, the girl's mother ran upstairs to the bedroom of her childhood, opened wide a window, and tried to jump.

DEAD—MISS MARGARET McINNES² of "A" Street. Dr. John Ward of Worcester, medical examiner, said she died of a fractured skull.

Despite her daughter's shattered skull, Margaret's mother insisted on an open-casket wake. According to those in attendance, the funeral director did "a fine job" on Margaret.

"Considering."

INJURED—At St. Vincent Hospital—MISS CAROL KEELING, 17, of Pascoag, R.I. A hospital spokesman described her condition as "good."

Margaret's parents wished Carol, too, had died. If she had, perhaps then they could have forgiven her.

1. 18 years, 9 months, and 9 days.

2. The last name on Margaret's death certificate reads *McInnis*. All other documents read *MacInnis*. According to the author's research, the accurate spelling of the family name was *McInnis*. The author has chosen to carry *MacInnis*, the name her late father used.

DRIVER UNINJURED—According to police, Judith Bates, 19, of 9 Faulkner St., North Grafton, was the driver of the car. She was not injured.

Those who were born and raised beneath the bare branches of Margaret's death did not hear of Judith Bates, only Carol. As happens in family lore, facts reconfigure; three girls meld into two—Margaret, the fallen, the fractured; Carol, the one who let her fall.³

The three girls were sitting in the front seat of the car as it rounded a sharp left turn of the narrow road, police said.

They were on their way to buy Mother's Day gifts.

Police believe that the right front door opened and the McInnes girl fell out, striking a cement post of the rail guards at the side of the road. The Keeling girl, in trying to reach Margaret, also fell from the still moving car, police said.

Margaret was sitting closest to the door, and when it opened, Carol tried to pull her friend back into the car but could not hold her. They say Margaret MacInnis died on impact.

Margaret's parents barred Carol from the wake and funeral services and refused to see or speak to her again.⁴

DOOR DEFECTIVE—MORTON A. CARTER, inspector for the Registry of Motor Vehicles, said the door of the Bates' car was defective. Carter, Sutton Police Chief George Patterson and Patrolmen Rollin Mansfield and Fred Hughes investigated.

Miss McInnes was born in Newton, daughter of John and Rose (Saviano) McInnes, but lived in East Douglas most of her life.

She was graduated from Douglas High School in 1960 where

3. But that's not how it happened! Is no one willing to review the facts?

4. But Carol fell, too, fell trying to hold onto Margaret. Will no one consider this girl's burden?

she was secretary of her class. After graduation she was employed as a nurse's aid at Pine Harbor School in Burrillville, R.I.

After her graduation, Margaret, no longer willing to patrol the minefield of her parents' marriage, left their home on "A" Street, dividing her time between the dormitory at Pine Harbor and the home of one of her maternal aunts. As soon as she left the house, her barely-sixteen-year-old-shell-shocked brother enlisted in the army.

Besides her parents she leaves a brother Pvt. John McInnes stationed with the Army at Fort Dix, N.J.

"Private MacInnis, pack your bags. You're going home. There's been a death in your family."

"Who died?" the sixteen-year-old asked.

"They didn't say."

From New Jersey to Massachusetts he made his way by bus without knowing who had died. Inside an uncle's car, when he asked—*Uncle, please, tell me who*—the answer stunned him to silence.

Witnesses say he was wordless for days.⁵

Witnesses also report that when he walked in the door to his mother's kitchen, he saw her slumped over the table, surrounded by her sisters, her face cradled in her arms.

"Here's Johnny," one sister said.

When his mother raised her face from her arms, she looked at the boy and said, "It should have been you."

The funeral will be held at 8:45 a.m. Tuesday from the Dermody Funeral Home, East Douglas, with a High Mass at 9 a.m. in St. Denis Church. Burial will be in the parish cemetery.

5. In time the words came back, minus *Margaret*, though when his young pregnant bride asked him what he wanted to name their baby, he said, "Margaret." Eager to please her new husband, she nodded, yes, yes, of course, Margaret. "What if it's a boy?" she asked, her voice, a lilt, a tremble. "It won't be a boy," he said. "I don't want a boy. I mean it." Because she believed in Heaven (and Hell and Sin) and a God who granted wishes and favors on whim, her late-night-behind-the-closed-bathroom-door-on-her-knees prayer began, *God give me a girl, God give me a girl*. She got her girl. And John got his Margaret. It would take years, however, for his parents to call her by name.

One afternoon in 1975, when I am seven, my father tells me that we're going for a ride.

"Just us?" I ask, because lately I haven't seen much of him. He has recently joined Alcoholics Anonymous and is busy attending the prescribed ninety meetings in ninety days.

"Just us."

I float to the car, wondering what I have done to deserve my father's undivided attention. I make a mental note to somehow find out (without asking), so I can be sure to do again whatever it is I have done. "Watch your hands," he says before closing the passenger door.

I know the routine: Watch your hands. Is the door closed? Lock the door. Is your door locked? Double check it. Don't lean. Slide over. Closer. Closer to me.

At the stop sign my father points out the house where Carol lives with her husband and daughter. I nod. I know the house. I would not know Carol, though, if I saw her on the street.

We turn left off Main Street, passing the funeral home on our right and "A" Street on our left. We both turn our heads in the direction of the MacInnis house, and then turn back to the road in front of us. As we pass St. Denis, my father makes the sign of the cross.

Just beyond the church, we turn left into the St. Denis Cemetery. Although we have driven past the gates innumerable times, this is the first time we drive up the hill together; this is my first visit to the cemetery. At the top of the narrow drive, where the road flattens out, my father parks the car and sits staring for what feels like hours. I squirm, restless in my seat, restless everywhere. What exactly are we doing here? Finally, he pats my hand and speaks. "Come on. Let's get out."

I open my door and slide out of the car, shadowing my father. I stop when he stops and points to a headstone that reads *MacInnis*.

"That's us," he says, closing his eyes and making the sign of the cross again.

I don't move. I don't speak. I am waiting for my father to do something, to say something. He moves his lips but doesn't speak. He is talking to God the way I sometimes do when I think no one is watching.

Glancing at my feet, in an attempt to give him and God some privacy, I see a flat stone marker sunk into the ground. It reads *MARGARET*.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

I didn’t mean to, but I must have gasped. My father has tears in his eyes. I have seen him cry only once before, and I do now what I did then. I start to cry. He wipes his eyes with the back of his hand, and I imitate the gesture.

I point to the stone marker.

“Margaret my sister,” he says.

“Was she nice?”

“Yes, very. You’re a lot like her.”

I am not sure what he is looking at, not sure what he sees.

Before I have a chance to ask, he says, “What, Margaret?” And something in the timbre of his voice, as he speaks my name, silences me.

I am thirteen when my father wants to surprise my grandparents for their anniversary, so he commissions an AA friend to draw a pastel portrait of Aunt Margaret, modeled after her senior portrait, which my father keeps in a frame on his bureau. The size of the completed portrait surprises me; it would take up a substantial part of any wall in my grandparents’ living room.

I don’t know if the portrait resembles Margaret or not because it is wrapped in brown paper when my father brings it home. I will have to wait until my grandparents remove the paper.

Inside my grandparents’ living room we gather around the wrapped portrait, which my father has set on the couch. He holds it steady with one hand while my grandmother examines the wrapping. I have never seen my grandparents willingly stand so close to each another, nor have I ever seen them touch. In what is a shocking display of tenderness, my grandfather touches my grandmother’s shoulder, and says, “Go ahead, Rosie. Open it.”

“Turn it around,” she tells my father, shrugging off my grandfather’s hand. My father obeys, and she begins working her way down the taped seam. When she reaches the end, she pulls the paper away, takes a step back, and exhales.

“Margaret.”

My father nods. I watch my grandmother's chest rise and fall. "It's so beautiful, Johnny." She turns to my grandfather, who is backing away from the pastel image with his fist over his mouth.

My younger sister⁶ starts to follow him to the kitchen, but my grandmother tells her to let him go. My sister obeys, but I—the one destined not to let anyone go—must follow my grandfather to the kitchen, where I find him up against the fridge, his face buried in his arm. What could I do? What could I do except reach for him? I lay my hand on his back, and he turns from the fridge. He grabs me suddenly, scaring me. Without being told, I know what to do. I put my arms around him and hold him as he shakes and cries without making a sound. And in this moment I am sure I have been holding him my whole life. And when I think it's over, when I'm ready to let him go, he starts to chant, and I hear it, cannot turn away from it, and will never know exactly what to do with it—the lamentation, the invocation, the way his voice grows louder each time he says my name.

6. Jessica was named after a soap opera character even though a relative had requested she be named for a deceased uncle. *Jack* could easily have become *Jacqueline*. My mother said she was sorry, but she would not name another child for the dead.