

# Margaret, Pleased

by Diane Vivona

"It's getting grey again," Margaret thinks to herself, half wishing she had said something out loud.

*And all the bells on earth shall ring,  
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day*

Grace looks at her cell phone. It had been about a week since her Aunt Margaret fell, slipping gracefully down the stairs and pulling her shoulder out as she grabbed the banister, her hand caught in the holiday streamers spiraling down the railing. Everyone is uncomfortable with what is to follow. Everyone has to take part in managing the recovery.

Clarissa watches her husband. He is talking, as he has all week, to friends and strangers. Their words are a network of similar stories. She listens to each one, retold in his words over dinner. Eric doesn't have to love his mother; he lets the words of each call saturate him with the tenderness others feel. Clarissa knows that this is best. Eric needs more to take in, to fill the gaps. She believes in his progress. And his mother believed in her friends'. That's what he recalls, that was the part of their stories that matters. His mother's faith had kept this friend practicing her piano, had motivated that friend to travel, had encouraged another to change schools and yet another to leave a difficult marriage. His mother is generous. He comes to believe this with increased conviction.

The slate tiles in the hall make Margaret's bare feet cold. She is grateful to be going upstairs where her slippers are waiting, tucked beneath her bedside table.

*And all the Angels in Heaven shall sing,  
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day*

Selfish. It is selfish to think about clothes and candlesticks and Margaret's prodigious shoe collection. It is also practical. Her nieces are only in town for a few days and they may want to have some of these items. Certainly it is better than giving them all to charity. Or maybe it isn't. Grace doesn't know. She wants to be proper. She is concerned, of all things, about being proper.

Ungrateful. Eric feels unappreciative of the things Margaret has given him, the schools she has sent him to, the tennis and baseball and chess lessons he has attended, the travels she has planned. He wanted more. Instead of gaining affection, he has learned to hug with a nice pat pat pat, to follow a sniffle with a crisp clean handkerchief pressed gently into a hand, to stop the cup that dare runneth over. It isn't awkward. Her kindness is her heart pressed open as far as it can go. It has a crisp clarity, like the latch click on the brass frame of her patent leather pocket book.

Margaret's Methodist manners are a favorite subject for Dickie. He has known Margaret since grammar school and has teased her for as many years as he can remember to talk about. His favorite subject encompasses Margaret's table manners as well as her etiquette in places of learning and worship, and at public spaces from banks to shopping centers to the cinema. Items like her abhorrence of chewing gum ("like cows chewing their cud") and her distaste for dancing without a partner ("bottom stomps") were top targets. Still, Margaret is his choice for many adventures, even though she once hinted that Dickie had never been romantically

inclined toward the ladies. He had replied that the gradient of his inclines were far too steep for any proper lady to travel.

Margaret's house was full. The long-standing family celebration of carols brought friends, partners, husbands, wives, nieces, nephews and their extended coterie.

*And all the souls on earth shall sing,  
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day*

Every year Margaret gave a year-end gift to her alma mater. Evelyn and she had been in the same class, and now Evelyn worked in alumni relations. Evelyn made sure Margaret was invited by the president to come on special donor weekends, and they caught up then, telling each other of things both intimate and unremarkable — things that mattered to them as women, even if not important in scale or to wider circles. Evelyn feels better about herself after her lunches with Margaret. So much of how she lives her life mirrors Margaret's decisions and choices. Margaret's son, Eric, is also a graduate of the college, so she calls from her office to send her condolences. His wife, Clarissa, answers. Evelyn is grateful for her softness, knowing of the son's difficulties and addictions, which Margaret spoke of often.

"Family is important," Margaret whispers, though no one was there to hear. Tomorrow, maybe. Tomorrow someone might drop by. Satin and velvet ribbons weave in loose red and gold loops down the hall staircase. The banister beneath her hand slips gently against her palm as she climbs the stairs.

*Then let us all rejoice again,*

*On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day*

Dickie had meant to call on her after the caroling party, to see if she needed help getting the house back to order. He was just so tired and it was cold outside and he is afraid of the black ice. Even with a cane, which he felt he didn't carry off with the kind of aplomb it took, he feels unsteady, especially on the driveways and front porches. He opts to stay at home and now, well, now can't be then. It can't be forgiven.

Margaret's husband, Robert, died over 15 years previous. He is happy to have her finally with him.

*Then let us all rejoice again,  
On Christmas Day, on Christmas Day  
Then let us all rejoice again,  
On Christmas Day in the morning.*

