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Peggy

Joseph Finkleman

Short Story # 2

It was late afternoon, the kitchen dinette was small without a closed in feeling, diffused by lace and gingham, the light was generous as it slipped around Maggie's shoulders. She was big-boned and rangy. The single-wide mobile home where Maggie lived was tucked back into the wooded gentle slope, up the mountain. It was thirty some odd miles north and south respectively from the nearest two towns. Inside Brad's head there was a constant replaying of different memories. He remembered the first time he had met Maggie. She had carefully explained how it was at least an hour's drive door to door from her place to either town, and that was in good weather. Because of the big mountain the weather often was unsettled.

It was at that first meeting when Maggie explained to him how she disliked the drive, how she disliked the towns, as small as they were, Maggie preferred to have lots of space around her. But it was at that first meeting that Brad had heard Maggie mention Peggy. Maggie said to him about driving to either town. "Brad, I don't much like how people crowd together, it's not healthy. Besides," She further said. "I don't like the hypocrites that towns seem to breed. They treated Peggy so poorly." Brad remembered asking Maggie "who is Peggy?" Maggie had just made a face, indecipherable, from Brad's point of view. She shrugged and murmured "a friend."

Brad was back in the valley. dominated by the big mountain, he thought that visiting Maggie would be nice. It didn't occur to him to call, instead he left the motel that he had rented for the night, it was late-morning, he had had his breakfast, checked in with the office and assured them that he had sales calls to make all day long. The excuse was belied by the dearth of sales that Brad made, but he was just reliable enough that the company kept the commission only salesman on the books.

Brad had changed jobs so often that he couldn't remember which company he worked for when he had met Maggie. He thought that he could remember what Maggie had done before her

retirement, but at that moment in time he simply could not conjure up the memory.

As he drove up the lightly graveled road to her home he was struck once again how many trees were on her property. She had placed her home among a grove of old growth Valley Oaks. Scrubby looking trees, perpetually dusty looking, covered in forest grime and oak mold. On her acreage, she had carefully placed flower beds and a big vegetable garden in and among the sparse patches of sun. The rest was dirt. The dirt was shaded and well swept. One of Maggie's virtues, as Brad remembered it, was that she swept the yard every day. Her old hound, a Heinz 57 if there ever was one, flopped from one patch of dirt to another, following Maggie wherever she went. Sitting in the car for a moment before switching off the engine, Brad looked at some of Maggie's efforts. She had already been outside and apparently had swept and raked all of that country detritus into well ordered and tidy piles. She had cleaned all vestiges of chaos from her walkways and gardens; carefully separating the cultivated beds from the walkways by laboriously placing borders of river rocks around each bed and along all of her many walkways.

Power rocks, she called them. Maggie told him once that "These rocks call to me. When I walk along the creek, some of these rocks speak to me, tell me stories of long ago. We have become friends, these rocks and me. They have sent me the secret signal that they will protect me from all harm. So I scoop some up every day on my walk, and place them in communities along my walkways." She had said this with a great deal of pride and Brad could see she was not joking.

Brad had accepted her vision of these rocks with the same equanimity that he accepted his life and lot. Stoically, with indifference. Brad further thought about a short conversation he had had with some locals, years earlier. He had stopped for some snacks and a coffee at the small market in the town of Bliss. He knew he was but thirty miles from where Maggie lived. After asking about the weather and such, he had mentioned he was off to see Maggie, and did they know who she was? The older guy behind the counter replied " Maggie, of course everybody

knows Maggie. You're visiting her you say?" Brad nodded. "You were friends with Peggy then?" "No" Brad explained, "never met the woman." That was when Brad noticed a sly smirk from the older guy towards the younger but still old guy, stocking the shelves with all of the energy as a diesel out of fuel..Brad didn't think much of hillbilly locals, so the remark went by him nearly unnoticed. But today for some reason he had recalled the conversation with , for him, startling clarity. It was like awakening from a dream, it was that kind of clarity.

Maggie walked out of her single-wide and greeted him. The old hound had wuffed and snuffled his leg for a good minute or so before heavily flopping onto the dirt. Maggie invited him inside and told him he was in time for tea. Except by now he had gotten the oft told joke. Maggie detested tea. Only uses tea had was that used tea leaves made a good compost, and brewed sufficiently strong, tea was good for a sunburn. That was it, certainly no one would drink the vile stuff. But she liked the idea of a tea, so she would invite whomever over for a late afternoon chat and say that "Tea will be served." Then in her quiet mirth, Maggie would whisk out the coffee pot and commence to pour.

Brad and Maggie were drinking their coffee. She asked "how are you?"

"Fine." He replied. "You?"

"Fine." She replied. The conversation lapsed into that comfortable silence that is rare with people.

Brad had been drifting from job-to-job for a number of years. In his life he saw fewer and fewer opportunities and at this point, drifting was all he had. He had never mentioned anything concerning his life with Maggie.

Maggie then asked " why is it that you visit me, Brad? It is so irregular and , well, almost spontaneous. Yet I know so little about you."

"Not much to tell. I really am not much." Brad was uncomfortable speaking about himself.

"Oh. I don't think that is true. What were you selling, what was it that brought you here the first time?"

"I don't actually remember who I worked for back then." Brad admitted.

"You aren't still selling rubber roofs?" Maggie seemed surprised.

"No, it has been awhile since I did that. Expensive TV antennas for awhile, now, it's water purification units." Last year it was solar, I was thinking of going back to solar. I didn't like the rigid sales structure, but now I think I liked selling solar, pretty much that's it. There is nothing to me, Maggie, you know everything that matters." Brad was exhausted, emotionally he was drained.

"No, I want to know, were you always a salesman?" Maggie could be very insistent and not easily deterred.

"Well Maggie, I was once a photographer." Brad thought that was sufficient.

"And?" Maggie said.

"And" Brad sighed, " and, I had a normal life, A wife and a business, then a divorce and a bankruptcy. A small stint in prison, death threats, a normal life."

"Oh my." Maggie said "There is much more isn't there?" And then it came out in a non-stop torrent.

Brad's face in the indistinct light of the small banquette where he and Maggie sat, his features flowed softly through different memories as he told her about the day, the day that was the start of a change in his life that he could have never predicted. "I owned this small studio, nothing fancy, just a lucky find in an old recently renovated building. It had been an old brick warehouse, but over time it had been used as a restaurant, a bar, an hair salon and now his studio.." The ceiling was his secret pride, though. Twenty five foot ceilings, with big wooden rafters, and a skylight someone had carefully cut in made this a studio to envy. He had installed an industrial strength set of tracks to place his continuous and intermittent studio lights. Brad

had happened to come across some antique studio portraiture equipment and incorporated these antiques into his marketing and sales spiel. Traditional glamour, confidential intimacy, Brad worked every advertising trick, from key words like these to a pricing policy that guaranteed a flinch in every prospective customer. He was expensive, exclusive and successful, and at the time confident.

"But then, it went away." Brad sipped his coffee. "I offered a unique portrait that was elegant and timeless. I had a regular clientele, I was doing well. Then one day one of my customers had made an appointment for a special portrait of her and her two daughters. It seemed innocent at the time and it was, of course, innocent. At least to me it was and still is innocent, but after listening to the Prosecutor and my neighbors I really don't know much about innocence anymore." The children were seven and nine respectively. Brad could see nothing wrong with some well shadowed nudes of the children and a tasteful partial nude of the mother. It was for her husband, she had said, a surprise. Well, there was a surprise, but not what Brad had expected.

Her husband's mother, a late-in -the-life strict evangelical, had come across the portraits one afternoon, shortly after the prints were delivered to the clients home. The clients father-in-law a sitting judge and their other son, the younger son, was a U.S. Attorney. The mother-in-law affected that she was scandalized over the images. One thing led to another and Brad was charged with child pornography and sentenced to prison. The client and her husband ultimately divorced. The photos were used to prove that she was an unfit mother and she lost all custody to her children. She had been damned in the modern equivalent of the Salem Witch trials and by extension, Brad had been damned also. His wife couldn't take the pressure and left him. His neighbors burnt effigies on his front lawn, charring the grass into recognizable anthropomorphic objects of hate. He had to change his phone several times before getting rid of it altogether, the death threats at first alarmed him. Eventually they became boring after the fifth or sixth one.

"Guilt can be a companion, you know? Being in prison wasn't hard, it was getting there that is humiliating. It was the aftermath that I feared the most. I hadn't wanted to leave prison."

Brad paused for a moment.

Maggie arched her eyebrows with that 'I am listening and want you to continue' look. "I just sort of drifted from job-to-job. After the divorce and the bankruptcy, just everything went away, Maggie, everything, even me, I went away. I wish I could have been an alcoholic. Instead I found myself to be, a former workaholic who had stopped caring. As long as I had the fiction of working, especially on the road, I really like being on the road. No need to keep up with friends who were embarrassed by being with me. I kept getting these nothing jobs, that go nowhere. I make a couple of sales a week, get paid on a deal or three and make enough to go back on the road. I am future-less, and as long as I don't think too much about it, I am fine."

Maggie had been fun when Brad first met her. She was middle aged, older than Brad by at least ten years. Not particularly attractive, but nice. Brad felt like one of the girls with Maggie. He could just be himself, accepted by Maggie, Brad could imagine that he too was a decent man. As long as he could keep the anger buried deeply he was content with most any feeling. Perhaps drinking would have been better, Brad thought for the countless time again. Brad thought that if he could just hit bottom, then, and only then he could shake this cloud of dread and self-loathing that followed him everywhere he went. Maggie was fun when they had tea. She would place doilies out for the cups. The cups themselves looked like English tea cups, but with impossibly large handles, more fitting an over-sized mug rather than these dainty cups with an English Hunt scene emblazoned in enamel on the outside of the cup. Brad thought "the fox will win another day." he looked at the frozen hunt and indeed it looked to him that the fox smiled a little at the thought of escaping his pursuers yet one more time. Brad felt a kinship with the fox.

Maggie had painted the cups herself with these quirky little animals. It created both a

feeling of femininity and whimsy. Quaintly she served coffee cake. Freshly baked made with Bisquick, he was charmed by her. She was a no-fuss person, self reliant and truly did not give a damn what others might think. Later Brad found that Maggie had been hurt by what others thought. But it was more for the memory of Peggy that Maggie cared not so much for herself. We never did do any business, Brad thought, but he really liked seeing her. He didn't know why either. He would drop in unexpectedly every so often. One time when he drove up, Maggie greeted him and told him she had no time today for a visit as Peggy was coming over. That was another mention of someone he had never met. But over time Maggie had mentioned Peggy, and the locals certainly knew about Peggy.

"Maggie, now you know about me and prison, I just want to say I liked prison. It was like being an ascetic in a monastery. I studied and read every day, taught classes in prison and helped people. I mattered, even just a little bit, at that point in my life I was pretty down." Brad sipped his cooled down coffee.

Maggie put her cup down. "I found him lying in the dirt, obviously dying" Maggie referred to Peggy as a he not a she, and Brad was confused. Apparently Maggie referred to Peggy in the pronoun that the memory was attached to, it was confusing for Brad, but he struggled to keep up. Maggie spoke further "I didn't even recognize the obituary, 'Arthur' she had told me to call her Peggy. 'Arthur P' now I wonder what the 'P' stood for." Her coffee cup was in midair, and a cloud had moved in-between the sun and her window, as the indistinct light grew dimmer. The light was both living and dying as the intensity waxed and waned. She went on "I found him in the yard, helped him into my bed, made him comfortable, he was dying." Maggie put her cup down, I looked at her features, perhaps for the very first time, Brad thought. Brad hadn't picked up a camera since prison. He was too disgusted with it all. But the eye doesn't leave, want it to or not. He was looking at this sturdy man-sized woman as if he was seeing her for the very first time. This woman, this female, the light flowed across her bony brow,

spilling, coursing really, down her nose, cascading across her lips. her cheekbones more prominent at this moment than any time that he could remember. Maggie had that kind of pleasant mid-European peasant face, that was becoming rarer with all of the genetic melting pot going on in the world. A face more classically English with stolid Saxon forebears. She was much more attractive, Brad thought, than I had remembered her, maybe it is the story about Peggy that is transforming her? If he were to take a portrait of Maggie, this is how he would do it, his heart raced a little. It was odd, but Brad could have sworn that he felt something. He had had these thoughts while Maggie had said, "he was dying."

"You see" she said, in that matter of fact voice of hers, "up until then with Peggy it had always been 'her' and 'she'. But that was when I found out. Not that Peggy ever told me herself. Maggie lapsed between genders as her memory unburdened itself. It looked to Brad that whatever feeling Maggie had for Peggy at that time got linked to the particular gender reference. So sometimes when she spoke she referred to Peggy as a she and at others a he. "She had wet herself and I was going to clean her up.. It sounds strange to me, Brad to say he or him when I speak about Peggy. Peggy was a woman I admired."

Brad started to make some supportive statement, but Maggie was in full spring melt, the words just flowed. When the dam breaks, people just need to talk, Maggie broke into a canter, speaking a bit more rapidly. "She could do anything. I met her when she was mining for gold. She had come over and asked me if she could dredge the creek behind the house here. Peggy confided in me right away. She was honest as the day is long. It's rare you know?" Maggie looked directly into Brad's eyes. Brad wanted to agree with her. But in his heart he knew that he had turned into a liar, every day, every sale, he even, reflectively realized, that he lied to himself every day, He could only nod in agreement.

"She confided in me right there that she thought the creek was full of gold, and if I would let her mine it, she would work out an agreement with me for part of the profit. Brad blurted



out, "Did you have the mineral rights?"

"Oh sure." Maggie nodded. "But I didn't care, Peggy was so friendly and trusting that I told her to keep track and we'd work it out. Besides I didn't think it would be worth a hill of beans, so what difference would it make." Brad couldn't hold back any longer "Was it worth a hill?" Maggie smiled a smile that Brad would have described as sly. But what transfixed him was that she glowed roseate and her mouth when it opened was scarlet. "

Maggie finished smiling and said "She pulled out fifty grand, just like a good fishing spot, that's what she told me, just like an old fishing hole."

Maggie was full of pride and her bosom swelled, for a moment Brad felt Victorian. "The deuce you say!" Brad said out-loud. He felt so foolish, she was clearly taken aback. Brad wasn't even sure if that was a Victorian phrase, it just came out and lay there like exuberant spittle. The pause was not refreshing., but Maggie went on in a more controlled manner. Brad had clearly affected the mood. He knew he had always been a bit inappropriate, but as he deepened his isolation it had become much worse.

Maggie continued., "we would fish together in the evenings in a pool that Peggy had left undisturbed just upstream from here. We would laugh that we didn't need any man to bait our hooks." The coffee had cooled so that there was no longer any steam rising from our cups. that in the back-light of the small alcove added to the delicacy of the moment. Brad loved coffee, and being served coffee by this woman in her home was nearly erotic, the way cream shoulders its way into the mysterious depths, the bouquet diving deep into Brad's nose. Brad was feeling close to Maggie after sharing these intimate details of their lives. He wondered how he might get closer to her.

"Do you still fish?" Brad asked. He thought he might offer companionship. She merely shook her head to his question about fishing. Maggie opened her lips devoid of any thing but her natural color.. She started to say one thing, but then a brief but visible softening preceded a

change in the conversation.

"One winter Peggy repaired my truck for me. She just tore the engine down and put it back together. She fixed it better than any man, that's what I told her. Then I teased her a little and told her that she would make someone a fine husband, except that she was better than any man, that's what I told her." Brad smiled at Maggie and the way she had just spoken. She relaxed a bit more and Brad could see that he had regained a little ground. Brad decided to keep his mouth shut. Something that he found harder and harder to do. He must have looked like he was going to say something, because Maggie looked at him in that expectant way people have in order to encourage a conversation. In order to hide his awkwardness, Brad shoved the cup to his lips and sipped some coffee. Maggie picked up the conversation again.

"Of course the joke was on me, I just didn't know yet. Maggie's face clouded up a little. "She didn't curse, I hate men and their cursing. Peggy was a lady, very gentle and tender, very tidy. Men and their messes, I hate that, even with their sex men leave their messes." Maggie noticed my cup was empty and picked it up for a refill. We both looked at the big drops of coffee and cream on her table, we both looked at the crumbs dribbled around the saucer, on the saucer, down my shirt front, Brad hurriedly tried to clean the crumbs up. Maggie easily reached into the sink and pulled out a dish rag and cleaned up my place at the table, brought me a fresh cup of coffee and refilled the creamer. Again there was steam from the cup filling the space between us glowing and dimming as the clouds took turns with the afternoon sun.

"Peggy and I would exchange Valentine's Day cards. I felt funny her being a woman and all, the Bible's very strict. I went to Church my whole life, I believe in the Living Word. At least until last year, now I don't ever want to see those church people again. If I would have known about Peggy, I would have married her in a heart beat. What disturbs me the most is that I think that I loved her more as a woman than I ever could have loved her as a man."

Through the open window Brad could see littered on the ground where Peggy must have

lain, autumn leaves as yet un-swept. She must have swept everywhere but there, he thought. "He had wet himself and he was dying. I've seen them die before, I was trying to make her comfortable. That was when I discovered..." Maggie just let that hang in the air., her face helpless for that minute. "When I looked at that woman that I loved, for the moment, I was washed with anger. Not for her deception, I could understand that. But for all of those wasted years. When I undid his clothes, he was all shriveled up and delicate looking. When I saw that, when I saw him, I knew we could have been together, Peggy and me. It was at that moment I realized that I loved her and that I would never have the chance to tell her that. She was unconscious, she was dying and I never got to tell her that I loved her."

It was then that Brad saw the Valentine's Day card on the window sill signed, 'Love, Peggy.' Brad was uncomfortable intruding, even the notice of it was profane at this moment. In the little alcove where Brad and Maggie sat it was light. But behind Brad was the living room that was much more subdued. The woodwork was varnished, suitable for a coffin, the room was dark, like in a dream how light plays tricks with our senses.

"Sometimes I forget and set two cups of coffee on the table." Maggie said pointing past Brad's shoulder to the coffee table that used to be where they often sat together. The table held a sober looking black bound bible open. Strangely Brad and she had never used the table, always instead sitting in the alcove. Brad stood up and walked over to the coffee table, the book was open to the passage of mercy where Jesus prevents the stoning of the woman. Seeing Brad look at it, she commented. "I don't go to church anymore. At the funeral service people made coarse comments, especially when it turned out that Peggy had fathered four fine sons. Not one of them would even speak to me. They acted like they were too embarrassed that Arthur P. had the right to be Peggy, just bury him and get it over with. That was how they were."

In the silence the coffee cooled again, Brad decided to leave, he knew he would not come back.

