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Margaret's Great Depression

By André Narbonne

The Prairie Journal, 2011.

Winnipeg is the Honeysuckle Bakery on the north side of Notre Dame.

It's the last years of the Depression and the smell of baked bread, doughnuts fills my childhood. There must be other odours, but I don't know them, only the joy of being sent alone for a twenty-five cent bag of day-old bread buns and being chaperoned back home by that crusty, sweet smell. There must be car exhaust from an automobile age that pollutes freely, low chimneys on factory boilers blackening the downtown air and fanning out to the margins like spilled ink on a grey carpet; the street must smell like the sweaty hide and anus of the iceman's horse—not that the iceman calls on us. We are the only family on Simcoe Street with an electric refrigerator, not an icebox, because we own what would be a corner store were it not in the middle of the block.

My dad, Frank—a real dandy—buys it for my mother, Ruth, in 1936 at a super low Depression-era price. A steal! Ruth wants to run it herself although she is constantly bleeding—has been bled thin from the damage of giving birth to six babies, of which I am the fifth. (My mother is forever taking food away from me, a fat child, and giving it to my thinner sister, Grace.) So my dad hires a maid to help with the household chores. But we don't move into the store on Simcoe Street until Frank runs off with the maid. In 1936, our family is the proud owner of two new cars, but a year later, with Dad gone, we are poor.

Children don't know what adults do. In the middle of a Depression they know their city by the smell of the nearest bakery. The shuffling feet of starving men makes little impression unless they're told they are themselves poor—it's not until I go to school that I learn I am pitiable, that I cannot play with everyone. Until then, the sound of Winnipeg during my childhood is not the sound of anger or contempt, of the railroad, the mechanical humming of unexplained machines, doors slamming on cars, people and opportunities. It's the sound of me and my younger brother Lloyd bouncing to play in the Notre Dame Park singing,

*Oh Mr. and Mrs. John Rebeck, how could you be so mean
I told you you'd be sorry for inventing that machine.
Now all the neighbours' cats and dogs will never more be seen.
They'll all be ground to sausages in John Rebeck's machine.*

Or it's the sound of a dispute with my mother when she walks me to the Wellington School on my first day of class.

“Remember,” I tell her, “It’s Margaret. Margaret.” And I keep it up the whole way—“My name’s Margaret. It’s Margaret”—out of fear she will call me “Babesy” like she does at home and I’ll be ridiculed.

“It’s Margaret. It’s Margaret.” I continue until her pride and propriety can take no more, until she stops me with a fierce tug and snaps, “I know your name. I’m the one who named you!”

“You named me Margaret,” I reply. “Margaret is my name.”

It is my grandmother’s name, too—a woman who should never have come to this place...

A fierce, bent woman, Grandmother Margaret Short (née Roll) sailed away from her wealthy family in Cape Town to join her impoverished husband, Harry, in Winnipeg in 1910. Harry, a boilermaker, had suffered a dubious medical diagnosis. After a bad fall off a Scotch boiler left him weakened with a head injury, he got a tropical disease. His doctor tried to medicate it with hot spices, but soon told him he would have to move to a colder climate, and the coldest English settlement at the time was in Winnipeg. Margaret’s parents didn’t want her to move, but Harry was too proud to ask for help.

On the stop in Montréal, amiable strangers told Harry about the Métis and Louis Riel, so he arrived in town with a gun, but he didn’t have to use it for another four years, until the outbreak of World War One. In 1914, he shed five years off his birth certificate to fit into a trim uniform, said he was thirty-nine on his enlistment papers, and headed to Europe to get away from Margaret who had never stopped complaining since her arrival in Winnipeg. In France, Harry got the trench foot that would kill him years later. (Few guests entered the house that last month for the smell of gangrene.) He was buried with a full military service. Margaret, who never stopped hating her new home, joined him, approximately eleven years later, in an unmarked grave.

As a child I go to visit Margaret, looking for someone to love me—who better than the grandmother who shares my name and must wonder what that name is up to? Before I leave my mother draws me into the kitchen. There’s a paper bag on the table. “Reach in,” my mother tells me, “what you touch is yours.” What I touch is sticky. I pull out an apple tart covered with a thin creamy layer and topped with a hard green icing. I feel luxurious and sinful. My world has never known so great a treat. “What about the others?” I ask, afraid of my siblings’ resentment. “There were six when I brought the bag home. Go ahead.” The tart explodes with flavor. The apple filling runs down my chin onto my pinafore. I wipe my hands on my white stockings. Then I am off to see my namesake, bringing the smell of the Honeysuckle Bakery to her.

That evening while I sleep, Margaret calls and tells my mother that I am not to come back because I am too dirty.

On a turbulent planet, the swings at Notre Dame Park are my place of refuge. There are three sections: the playground, the grassy part with lots of trees which runs close to Notre

Dame, and the more open flower section, which borders on Wellington. A hedge and a high fence separate the playground from the other areas. I love it best when nobody else is around. In any crowd, the older ones will take my swing. They push me off, the bigger kids playing Sopwith Camel in a Stuka world.

Alone, I swing for hours dreaming. I love to look at the clouds and imagine myself a princess in some far off castle with no work and lots of ice cream to eat. In the winter I skate in old, wrong-sized CCMs (Canada Cycle and Motor Company) till my feet freeze. I am also enamoured of the toboggan slide put up in the park in the winter. Even if I don't have a toboggan, I can slide down on pieces of cardboard or even in my snow suit.

It is a private place safe from anyone else's opinion. In the summer, the many trees on the grassy side of the park hide the cars driving on Victor and Notre Dame. In this place I am never poor. I run and jump in the grass and nobody complains about my dirty face or worn clothes. Later the city has to cut down all the trees and bushes because bad people are doing bad things in there to the unsuspecting children. I am never hurt by strangers; it is the ones I know at home who hurt me.

At home there is always work to be done: the store to look after, wood to be brought in from the yard, kindling to get with our crazy wagon my mother built. She made the wagon very high so that it would hold lots of wood and it looks very strange with planks going this way and that. It lists comically and I hate it because of the teasing from the bullies at Montcalm School who laugh when I pull past. There are floors to wash and dishes to be done. I wish I wouldn't be so scared; then I could run away like my brothers Reg, Ray and Richard did when they were eleven and twelve. But I also know that would hurt my mother. She always says she looks after me because it is her duty. And I know she was hurt when the boys ran away.

I do have another refuge. Because of my grandmother's complaint, sometimes Ruth will let me go to the baths on Sherbrook Street, where I stay in the pool until they kick me out and then stay in the showers until they kick me out of them. Often I'm the only one there, which I like best. The water is a warm caress. I can daydream with the hot water all around me.

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And then, one day, I ask my mother if my dad ever loved me. She says, "He didn't love anyone." (And yet they had six babies.) I can't remember anything about him. In the picture taken in 1934, he seems to be very fond of me. I'm surrounded by brothers and sisters. He leans over me, helps me hold a struggling cat—sepia now, maybe patchy grey or calico then. His expression is warm; the felt cap he wears casts a brief shadow that cannot conceal his expression of pride. He wears a fine wool suit—maybe grey or brown—a vest and a dark tie. My father's great coat lies on a stairway railing in the background. The shadow in the foreground taking the picture is Mother, but I never look for her in the picture. I look for my dad.

My mother assumes that all love is fiction I learn, maybe because she has lost someone already—not just Frank but also her closest sister, Persis. At eighteen, Persis was stricken with brain cancer. My mother prayed for her recovery. She prayed at morning and night, prayed when she walked down the street, stopped at lights. But Persis died and Ruth stopped praying forever.

When I look for love in God she pelts me mercilessly with sarcasm. At the kitchen table, I give thanks and she leans forward and peers sharply, looking for error or trickery. “You’re faking!” she cries. “I can see it. You’re faking.”

“And bless this food...”

“You don’t mean any of it.”

“...I do...and Lord I pray you will bless this house...”

“You’re faking! Look at you!”

“I’m not...and bless my mother...”

“Liar!”

And so my mother came to view abandonment as the only constant of love.

Oh, but she does love, although she hides it. A shadow in the foreground, she never hugs us.

The year before he leaves home, my brother Ray falls off the roof and Ruth takes her time, finishes drying the dishes before going out to find him dazed but otherwise whole. Then she cuffs him.

One time, when we play kick-the-can I am “it.” One of the neighbourhood kids runs over and kicks the can and hits me on the head. The bleeding won’t stop so somebody takes me to the hospital where I’m staunched and stitched. Everyone feels sorry for me and sends over ice-cream and candies. When Ruth comes home she bawls me out for being outside the yard and takes everything away and complains about the cost of the taxi that brought me to the hospital. Besides a sore head I am also in my mother’s bad books.

But Lloyd and I still sing, sometimes with Grace (and while they’re with us, Reg, Ray and Richard join in):

*One day a little fat boy came whistling in the store.
He bought a pound of sausages and laid them on the floor.
And then this little fat boy he whistled up a tune
And all those little sausages went dancing round the room.*

And my mother loves. The evidence is hidden in a drawer, the letter my father wrote before he fell off the Vancouver to Victoria ferry (we were always falling, but my father did not get up—his body was never found). In the letter he promises Ruth that he loves her, begs her to sell the store and leave the children and join him in Victoria.

*One day the old thing busted. It simply wouldn't go.
So John Rebeck he climbed inside to see what made it so.
That night his wife had nightmares and walking in her sleep
She gave that crank a heck of a yank and John Rebeck was meat.*

Children don't know what adults do.

Not long after my dad left, my mother and I were caught in an old Ford in a wild storm that rocked the car and pounded against the windows. I suddenly felt very much afraid. Crying, I voiced my fears.

My mother said, "Look out the window. See the pretty pictures the lightning makes across the sky. The thunder is like a big drum."

She continued to describe the storm as something awesome and beautiful until I began to feel quite at ease with it. All my life I was never again afraid of a storm. I used to watch while my friends hid under the bed and thought them so silly.

Just before my mother died I told her how lucky we were to admire rather than fear a storm, and I recalled our wait in the old Ford. I didn't think my mother ever lied to me. She was hard at times, but I thought she would never lie. She looked me straight in the eye and said, "I was afraid."

André Narbonne