

Maggie Smith Shoots On Over

Clifton H. Jolley

ON THE MORNING THE CHALLENGER SPACE SHUTTLE EXPLODED, Maggie shot on over.

I've been thinking about both events as though they were connected, even though I know they aren't. They were separated not merely by worlds, but by lifetimes. Maggie was off-road Missouri, small-town Utah, through and through. Maggie was the past.

Still, I replay that evening news in my mind — the bright burning of half-a-million gallons of liquid oxygen and hydrogen flaming in a single moment — and I think of Maggie.

I received a call early Tuesday morning from Martha Jenkins, the youngest daughter Maggie called Marthy. "Hello, Mr. Jolley," Marthy said. "I have a message for you from Mama. She's shot on over."

Marthy knew I would understand. They were the words Maggie had used two years before to tell me of the death of her husband, J. Franklin, whom she called "Grandpa."

Maggie Smith had her own word for just about everything. She called herself "Margaret Masters" during her many years on KSL-TV. She called her daughters "The Sunshine Girls," and because of Maggie, they were. She even had a word for death. It was a quick word, an easy word. You didn't "linger" or "suffer" or even "pass away." You "shot" . . . on over.

I can only remember bits and pieces of what Maggie told me about her life — growing up "off road" on an upstate Missouri farm; moving with J. Franklin to "the city" (St. Joseph) in Missouri, and later to Utah; working first in radio, then on TV — in the early days, before "personality" meant nothing more than a deep voice.

Maggie had been a midwife, "burying and birthing," and told me once that for more than forty years she never went anywhere without clean sheets in her kit, just in case.

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And she had been in love, with J. Franklin, whom I never knew before he'd gone senile — a fact Maggie informed me of on our first meeting. "This is Grandpa," she said, affectionately introducing him. "He's senile."

She enjoyed telling people that. Not, I think, because it made them uncomfortable (although surprising people with unexpected information was one of Maggie's favorite sports), but because "senile" seemed to her to be such a good word — short, sensible, to the point. Besides, Maggie didn't attach the negatives most of us associate with the word. Senility was merely one more place to visit, one more stop to make, one more experience before you shot on over.

Marthy was sleeping with Maggie when she died. Marthy tells me Maggie took five short breaths and was gone.

When Maggie slept on her back, she didn't snore, but she did puff — a slight noise, almost a sigh, that she made when exhaling. Marthy would listen to that puffing until it became an annoyance, and then she'd nudge Maggie. Maggie would come immediately awake and ask, "Oh, my! Was I making noise? Guess I'd better turn to the trees," remembering her home in off-road Missouri where one side of the bed faced the trees, the other the road. In Maggie's bed, you could sleep on your back, or you could face the road or the trees. Those were the options, the positions of grace.

When Marthy heard those five quick breaths, she said, "Oh Mama, turn to the trees." And then she reached over to Maggie who quietly, easily, was gone.

On the day of Maggie's death, I met with her family at Larkin Mortuary. It was an open, sweetly sad, paradoxically happy, and reminiscent gathering, much as I imagine Missouri wakes to be. Maggie was laid out at one end of the room — somehow seeming a little larger and grander even than she seemed in life, her hair as white and feathery against the pillow as I remember it from the last time I saw her several months before. We all sat in a semi-circle in front of her, telling Maggie Smith/Margaret Masters/Rosie stories, remembering the many names with which she faced the world and the singular love that was her face to us.

I told about the first time I met Maggie. She called and said, "Mr. Jolley, this is Maggie Smith. I want to learn to write. How much do you charge to teach someone?" I began to tell this elderly woman, whose name I didn't recognize, that I don't teach writing anymore, that I'm too busy. I can't remember now what stopped me from saying no — an impression, perhaps; something she said; more likely the way she said it. I remember that remarkable voice and the eccentric clarity of her words. What stopped me from stopping her was the phenomenon of Maggie Smith.

The Romantics believed in something they called the "natural genius" — not so much a brilliance of intellect but a quality of soul so remarkable that its virtue and insights permeate every action and can only be diminished by the disciplines of education. I don't know what might have happened to Maggie if I had ever actually taught her to write; I suspect the effect would not have been good. Maggie Smith already had plenty of contrivances by which to

communicate; and if her written prose was a bit unmannerly, it was also unmannered, and splendid for what it understood.

I told Maggie I'd teach her to write if she'd let me talk to her, let me listen to her, let the up-state Missouri rhythms of her speaking settle in me like the throbbing of a cricket on an off-road summer night. I told Maggie I'd teach her to write. It was the only lie between us. From the beginning, I knew there would be neither time nor reason for me to teach Maggie Smith anything. I would learn from her or try to learn from her. I was a cut-purse, picking through the many pockets of a wealthy woman's shawl, finding in each of the public and secret places of Maggie's mind and soul the rich textures of language that reveal experience, the remarkable moments of experience remarkable people like Maggie recognize and memorialize in themselves and in their art.

I should probably say something about picking berries. Maggie talked a lot about that — picking berries in the Missouri woods. Harvesting what no one had planted. Picking berries, wild.

Since Maggie died, I've been trying to remember if she ever said what kind of berries they were. There are so many possibilities: *aggregates*, such as raspberries and blackberries; *multiples*, like mulberries; *accessories*, like the strawberry. But these names are words from a book, the remnants of some class I took. Maggie found her words in the woods, wild. She found them, or they grew out of her — she was the soil for both language and experience.

My descriptions won't help you to understand Maggie anymore than you can taste the sweetness of a wild berry from an academic word. To understand the magical life her language gave experience, you'd have to hear Maggie tell about her cousin who was allergic to her own husband. She had to live in town and her husband out on the farm, since whenever they came together, the woman took to sneezing. ("The miracle," Maggie told me, "was that they parented three children. Just how boggles the mind.") You'd have had to receive from Maggie instruction on the best way to harvest the seeds from a pomegranate. ("Get yourself naked in the bathtub with a knife, and have at it!") You'd have had to hear about the man Maggie went to bury, only to discover he had stopped breathing because he'd swallowed his dentures. ("Once I'd reached in and pulled them out, he came back around and lived another five years, mean as ever before.") To understand the revelation of the world in Maggie's words, you have to know: J. Franklin did not become a doctor.

"You see, when Grandpa was a boy, he had his heart set on becoming a doctor. So, he and a friend caught a train on down to the medical college to inquire after the opportunity.

"Well, so's to help the boys understand the medical profession, they were given a tour of the college, including the place where the human body was studied by cutting up corpses.

"Now, you need to understand, Grandpa was a delicate boy . . . Well, needless to say, that was the end of Grandpa's medical career."

What J. Franklin did become — late in life — was a painter. Maggie encouraged him, praising his primitive canvases, extolling the virtues of his

“uncluttered style.” And in his senility, when J. Franklin returned to his youth, he painted the scene he remembered best from his brief medical career: a college laboratory, white corpses laid in rows.

I don’t think the lives of people like Maggie Smith are more abundant or eccentric than our own. I believe people like Maggie Smith make them so, discover them to be so by their examination and wonder. Maggie once told me she might have made something with her life if she and J. Franklin hadn’t been always playing. Nothing was more important than pushing back the table and chairs in the kitchen and dancing. Nothing was more important than . . . living. For Maggie, life wasn’t to be used for *something*; life was *the thing*. She discovered all life’s permutations — age, senility, even disease — to be wonderful, amazing opportunities for the grace of God and the dignity of human beings to find place and purpose.

In all her living, she missed only one moment she had hoped for — her own senility. She used to tell me she looked forward to that, because it enlarged the enjoyment of life. J. Franklin, she said, saw things and believed things she could not. And she figured that if they were senile together, he could paint and she could write about that richer world; she hoped that through their separate talents they could again dance together.

Perhaps that hope was merely another of Maggie’s faces — comfort she gave J. Franklin, the excuse she made for herself. Regardless, Maggie didn’t need senility so much as she pretended. The world opened before the slight lunacy of her eccentricity like water parting before a prophet.

The only lie that existed between us was this: I was supposed to teach her to write; instead, she taught me to live.

When I got home from Larkin Mortuary, my wife Marcia and I talked about Maggie, about the many loaves of bread she had baked for us. Some of those loaves were perfectly golden, some slightly burned. The place Maggie baked was the same place she danced, and sometimes one occupation distracted her from the other. But whatever the condition of the loaves, Maggie gave them to us without apology. Bread was bread to Maggie; she judged it no more harshly than she judged people. You might not be perfect, but Maggie knew that however you had been ignored, however you might be damaged around the crust, at the center you were still good. She took people whole, not resenting the parts others criticized, not criticizing souls she found essentially amazing.

“I hope it’s like she believed,” Marcia said to me. “I hope you do shoot on over, just like Maggie said. I hope it’s quick and easy.”

For Maggie death was merely one permutation of the life she loved. And of all the possibilities of life, she believed death to be the briefest. Perhaps that is one of the reasons she gave much of her life to midwifery and caring for the dead — to prolong the moment of death, to enjoy it more. Not to resent it; certainly not to fear it; but to dance it — a quick and joyful dance.

And because death would be so quick, Maggie tried to prepare for the moment. She kept a burial box under her bed full of instructions and clothing — a box she always intended to “get organized.”

When the box was opened the day after she died, it contained only a holey pair of garments and a white ruffle for her neck. Everything else she had given away to friends — not while they lived, but in death — dressing them one by one in bits and pieces from her burial box.

Only the two articles of clothing and a long list of comments and instructions recorded and dated over the years were left for her own burial.

Still alive as of May 17, 1983. Ha ha!

Still alive as of January 31, 1984. Ha ha!

Each time she took out the box — supposedly to “organize” it, inevitably to diminish it for the funeral of a friend — she wrote a note proclaiming her joy in living, her triumph.

“Someone once told me I have a Pollyanna view of life,” she protested to me once. “But that isn’t true. I’ve known more than my share of suffering and hard times,” she said. “I was a midwife for forty years, and I’ve buried as many as I’ve birthed. I see the world for what it is. It’s just I see it more clearly than other folks.”

You know what to do with this pretty fluff when the time comes. Remember the day we bought it? (\$8. What fun!) Still alive February 12, 1983. Ha ha!

12/28/1985 Clean stringy white rags to be washed; to be cleaned — my long-sleeved pink dress, my long-sleeved black and white, and my light table cloth with printed flowers. Some burial instructions: I want to be buried in these garments. I’m sentimental about them, having used them a lot in the Salt Lake Temple for forty years. Don’t wash them. I want to lie in them knowing I’ve worn them and they’ve still got that earthy smell. I have plenty of excellent long white slips that I prefer for burial. Look around in the closet and drawers. The best cleaners is on 9th West and they are excellent. Send the robe, veil and sash to them to be cleaned. These are the shoes I want to wear for burial, with knee-high stockings (not panty hose.) Marthy Anne will get the contents of this container in order next time she comes. Harambee.

Harambee was one of Maggie’s words. Not invented. African. She said it meant, “Let’s pull together.” On a paper sack stuck in her burial box she had written: *Still alive as of November 21, 1985. A bit shakey.*

The shoes were not in the box, nor the burial robes she instructed to be cleaned. All had been given away. And when Maggie’s daughter closed Maggie’s bank account a few days after her death, she had sixty cents left.

Until now I’ve been unable to disconnect the memory of Maggie from the space shuttle tragedy — from a time and mechanism totally foreign to Maggie, from a bright moment high against a cold, clear sky, when people together with their technology were suddenly gone. Quickly. Easily. As though death had become precisely what Maggie has always said it is.

When Maggie and I stood at J. Franklin’s casket two years ago, she took my hand and laid it on his. “You see?” she said of his hands that had been palsied in the last months of his life. “They’re quiet now; he’ll paint again.”

And now Maggie has turned to the trees a final time — shot on over to be with J. Franklin and all those she has loved and lost and dressed in the scant

treasure of her burial box and the more abundant wealth of her love and language, her vision and her gift for life.

For the last several years, the only time I felt real peace was when I visited with Maggie. Now I feel only lonely when I think of her, which is not as often as I should, because there has been no time for picking berries this season.

But on this rainy day — after I have thought about her, and written about her, and missed her — I am finally able to disconnect the memory of her from the events her life ultimately transcends. The images of Maggie's world, not mine, define this day. Maggie, once again, is sleeping late and listening to the music of the rain on the roof. And if there is a kitchen handy, she'll bake bread; and while it's baking, she'll push back the chairs, have a dance with J. Franklin, and not bother if all the loaves burn.

Which is why, although I do not know their names, I shall try not to forget the wild berries in the bush next spring, and the joy of picking them, and the pleasure she took in us that we may yet take in one another.

