

## FOR MAGGIE

Crackling down the gravel driveway, the car came to rest with a sigh. It had been a difficult journey. Vera cried, brushing away tears non-stop most of the way; wanting to reach her destination yet dreading what would be there to greet her upon arrival.

Maggie had been her best friend. They'd known each other for years. Spent birthdays together, seen in many New Years, and shared so much. Theirs was a lifetime of closeness. And now Maggie was no more. Vanished all too soon into an eternity of the unknown. Evading an intensifying wave of sorrow, Vera stepped out of the car and locked it, hesitated, delaying the moment.

The windows of the house, blinds drawn down, were transformed into secretly watching eyes. Vera wanted to spend some last hours in what until now was Maggie's residence, a once-familiar place brimming with her friend's exuberant approach to life. Monday morning, start of the working week, the For Sale sign would appear out front. Distant relatives had decided. The house and everything in it could go. They had no objection to Vera using her key.

'Sure. Anything you want, just take it. Pop the key under the mat when you leave. Then the Thrift Shop people can use it when they come to clear things - Maggie's hoardings.'

Vera had winced, hearing the mildly condescending note in the voice on the phone. But for now, at least, the place was hers. She came seeking a haven for her distress.

Moving towards a front door approached so often in the past was this time an uneasy walk down a memory lane stripped of signposts, made strange like a road in a dream. There wouldn't be the usual boisterous marks of welcome. No music playing, no smell of good food cooking. No cheery smile spreading across that dear face. No wholehearted embrace.

Turning the key in the lock Vera stepped inside. All was dark and quiet. She stood, listening. Until now, she couldn't have imagined the limitless depth of sadness such uncharacteristic silence conveyed. Her heart thumped agonisingly inside her. And yet...Vera almost stopped breathing. There it was. A sensation of Maggie, as if her warmth, her sturdiness, simply couldn't disappear. The house itself seemed to continue holding her close, waiting for her return. Even the air was expectant.

Resolving to make the most of her time, Vera went from window to window pulling up blinds, letting in the sun. The sky outside was a brilliant, hard blue.

'The kind of day Maggie would've loved,' Vera murmured.

Perfect summer days, she was always busy around the house, in her garden, inviting friends to gather and join her. Never wasting a moment, that was Maggie. Even at the end, Vera thought, grief rising once more. A mere six months from diagnosis to death.

Vera pushed the thought aside. Now that sunshine filled the living-room she looked about, appreciating all the quirky things her friend collected and treasured. Not clutter. Charming sources of curiosity, calm, and comfort. The chiffonier featured fond keepsakes alongside a cosy chair for curled-up chatting on the phone. In her mind's eye Vera could almost see Maggie there now. Everything added up to the woman she knew so well.

Short and broad with white spiky hair like a dandelion seed head, and glowing, chapped-red cheeks. Deep lines of laughter round her eyes, she always appeared to be returning from a bush walk or setting off into a head-wind. Life around her was an adventure, an abundant pool in which she constantly fished. No wonder people loved her.

There was Maggie's collection of idiosyncratic hats and caps hanging in a row along the wall. Famous for her Mad Hatter parties, hilarious gatherings of friends featuring an array of crazy headgear, feasting on food whipped up by the hostess - startling sandwich fillings, puffed-up scones baked in mini-terracotta plant pots, and lop-sided sponge cakes. Commemorative photographs scattered around the room told the tale. Good times, past. Vera's eye fell upon one in particular. She picked it up.

Maggie as a girl in school uniform, wide smile, long hair flying. The image gave Vera a tender ache inside.

They went to the same school and told each other everything. It was Maggie who walked up to their teacher, explaining why her friend was always in trouble for not answering roll call. Veronica. Vera hated her name.

'It sounds like a nasty disease of the foot.'

Blushing, sharing the awkward secret shyly with her classmate, she found Maggie listened with empathy. Boldly she, Margaret, came up with the solution. Names like those just wouldn't do, not for girls like them. Their teacher smiled, sharing the news with colleagues in the Staffroom.

'No more Veronica and Margaret.'

After that no-one saw Vera without Maggie, or Maggie without Vera. Inseparable, they made a pact: best friends forever. That first summer together they played every day, got along brilliantly, full of chat and laughter. Well-suited from the first, their connection only became more intense over time.

Leaving school, they studied catering together. Worked hard for long hours while training, but always supported each other, enjoying life and having fun. Vera went on to teach Home Economics. Maggie moved from one eating place to another until, taking the plunge, she set up her own restaurant.

Maggie's Inn, highlighting adventurous recipes created and cooked by its owner, was an instant hit. The chef's sense of humour bubbled over daily with house specials like 'Road-kill Rabbit Stew' and 'Poke-in-a-Thumb Plum Pie.' Fame and cookbooks followed. But the essential Maggie was unchanged. Always a friend, first there when needed, always caring, always willing.

It seemed bizarre. Imperceptibly, surrounded by the hospitality of Maggie's home, the pain of Vera's recollections began to fade. Tacitly the space reached out.

Vera softly entered Maggie's bedroom; looked about. It too seemed poised, ready to indulge the personal needs of its owner. Peaceful; unlike places Maggie attended to briskly help Vera through each of her labours. Making her laugh, panting along with her, yodelling to match her friend's ear-splitting cries. Lining up after, cradling each tiny new arrival, crooning gently, sharing tears of happiness. Given her friend's special caring skills, Vera sometimes wondered why Maggie never married, never became a mother.

But then, no man could ever keep up with Maggie. They'd have had to fly with her, riding on her hair, willing to hang from the hem of her petticoat. Vera had watched two or three men make the attempt, but no one managed to hold on long enough to make it to touchdown. Candidates would still be preparing to taxi prior to take-off while Maggie was long gone, orbiting the planet.

'One woman to one man means muddle.'

That was Maggie's maxim. Given Vera's two marriages, high and dry now for years, she was in no position to argue.

Spending time in Maggie's house, visitors inevitably drifted towards the kitchen, the true heart of her home. Vera made her way there now. The substantial woodstove stood sentinel over the anticipated landscape of loss. An imposing wooden table dignified the lovingly refurbished workplace where Maggie once created and trialled her recipes. Vera paused. A well-worn notebook lay on the table. She sat to leaf through it.

Maggie's flamboyant handwriting greeted her. Vera's eyes soaked up the lines. Descriptions of ingredients, menus, complete and incomplete recipe ideas and more; turning the pages Vera could almost hear Maggie's laughter, her joyful voice. And such wisdom! Vera smiled.

‘Linked in food means linked in Life.’

Later, ‘a happy face serves half the meal,’ followed by ‘cooking teaches us economy and history – ask any great-grandmother.’

Vera came eventually to two pages stuck together, the last pages written on in the notebook. She eased them apart.

It was a recipe.

The date at the top indicated Maggie had been working on this right up until her last days. Ingredients were listed; several crossed out and adjusted, necessities added or subtracted. Scanning the page, Vera saw. It was a recipe for marmalade. Of course! Maggie believed in making full use of surplus fruit and vegetables coming into season, hated seeing anything going to waste. Her garden was full of fruit trees. Jellies, jams, marmalades and creamy curds – Maggie made them all. It had been a highlight, some of the best times they spent together. Two friends, making merry, working away to preserve summer produce for winter use.

Looking down at the discovered recipe, Vera was filled with a sudden urge. Returning to Maggie’s hat collection she seized the battered, wide-brimmed straw number her friend wore around the garden. Outside she ransacked the woodpile, coming back to feed and light the woodstove. Its warmth began to spread and sink into her. Next, taking a basket, she went out to collect fruit. There was plenty ripe for the picking.

Placing her tantalizing bounty on the table she searched the kitchen, gathering together what she needed. The first essential was Maggie’s heavy-gauge pan. How much had gone into this old comrade over the years – so much fruit, the sweetness of sugar, the sweetness of productivity. This matriarch of marmalades and more was soon surrounded by a complement of saucepans, sharp knives and shredders, spoons, a sugar thermometer, and a host of various-sized jars.

Vera set to work in earnest. It was as if Maggie’s spirit had returned in delight to stand alongside her, urging her on. The carefully constructed recipe, brimming with unique and unusual additions, twists and turns both sweet and spicy, was clearly no mere marmalade. This was a concoction to relish, a creative blend of all things good.

‘Cooking as Art,’ Vera heard Maggie’s voice proclaim, ‘abundant ingredients collected and skilfully combined from the heart so that they become something greater than themselves.’

Yet Vera also felt the fundamental simplicity and durability of the kitchen, the sturdy equipment she was using. The recipe, this splendid synergy, was the very essence of Maggie.

Eventually, task complete, jars and jars of a glorious golden mixture covered the table top. Looking at them Vera fancied Maggie, unsubstantial but somehow still vibrant, looked at them too. The rich smell and taste of this last recipe would remain poised, captured for a long time to come. Written in Maggie's sweeping hand, the recipe was an invitation to see her as she'd always been, to go on celebrating with her into the future, to persist. Ready to remind Vera - and all the rest of Maggie's friends Vera intended to share it with - of the vast and deeply happy structure of memories this one person had so coherently left behind.

'How lucky we've all been to know you, Maggie.'

Before sealing the jars, Vera went about farewelling the house, pulling down blinds and collecting things to take away with her. Not much. Her visit to share these precious closing hours with her dearest friend was the true memento. The hat she'd worn into the garden and one or two others Maggie was fond of, Vera placed with the schoolgirl photograph into the substantial marmalade-making pan, now scrubbed clean and dried. The unique notebook containing Maggie's last recipe and other writings topped off the lot.

At the kitchen table Vera sealed the jars and sitting, drew labels she'd prepared towards her. What a day it had been! Arriving with such sadness, looking backwards, mourning the fact that life seemed so brief, this house, rich in her friend's essence, had absorbed that pain. Instead, Vera was left to fix happiness on what Maggie left behind; a recipe, a notebook, placed as if wanting to be found. A bridge to the future and a reminder to go forward into any task with passion, celebrating whatever came next. At last Vera realised. As usual, her wonderful and extraordinary friend had been waiting here for her all along.

One by one, the late-afternoon light fading, Vera began to attach the labels to the jars: 'Maggie's Marmalade – For Maggie.'