

A Solitary Life



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For James

Dear Family:

As you may know, I've been asked to write a book about my life. Not a 'tell all' that includes every dirty little detail, but a literary treatise that just happens to be about my life and work. The work part I can handle. The life part, well, that's a different story altogether and one that I will need assistance in telling.

Since your lives are so intimately intertwined with mine, I thought it appropriate that each of you should have some say in what you want me to talk about, what you feel is appropriate and necessary for you.

So, here is my offer. Over the course of the next few weeks, or months if time allows, I would like for you to write down your thoughts about our lives. Please include your own observations, memories, anecdotal stories, and dreams that you believe will elucidate the story of my life and of our life as a family. It is my belief that a one-sided story told from the perspective of the protagonist is often flat. Perhaps with a multiple telling, the story will plump with the juicy tidbits that I've forgotten or, in my myopic memory, have been distorted. You may use any format you wish to record your thoughts and I will work diligently to keep them whole and in context. Please send me whatever you have whenever you have it so that I may begin as soon as possible.

Please note that this book will not include X-rated material nor will you be monetarily compensated for your time, input and/or effort.

Your cooperation is, and will be, greatly appreciated.

With love,

Mary Margaret

Prologue

I hate it when a book opens with a letter so I think I will insist—if Sophia refuses to give up on her idea--that the letter to my family be somehow insinuated rather than reprinted in the prologue. Or, perhaps the edits could be superimposed somehow so that the reader can see from the beginning my cautions, warnings, and the potential reprimands—Garrett called them threats--with which we began this adventure. I also do not like a book that begins with, “I was born . . .” but we will see how this turns out or, more accurately, how this book begins.

My preference was, from the beginning, and still is, that a ghost writer would take over the collection of journalistic scribblings we’ve received as the basis for this book, but my editor has insisted that I be the one to glean the true wheat from the fictional chaff, that I thrust myself bodily into the thoughts and memories of my family and wallow in their reminiscences. Besides, who needs a ghost writer when the subject of the book is, in fact, a ghost writer herself, she asks again and again. It is she who decided on the title for this book as well, *A Solitary Life*. After spending fifty two years with my mother, father, and two brothers, and having lived my life, I have a better title: *Yikes!*

And so it begins.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who has had a hand in the production of

my life story. My family has provided wonderful support and enthusiasm throughout its production. My dear friend and editor Sophia DeMarco has guided me through the pitfalls and minefields of writing an autobiography and although I stand here on the other side bruised, battered, and scarred, I feel better for having survived it. Thank you all for this experience which is, after all, my life.

Mary Margaret

Thinking about writing this book has been daunting. Personally, I don't feel there is enough drama in my life to warrant an autobiography. Nor have I accomplished great feats (or great literary leaps in a single bound) that the world at large needs to know about. But I will pacify my editor and my publisher and my friends, few as they are, and begin by telling you about my life in all its mundane glory.

Retirement has always been pretty much out of the question for me. I feel as though most of my life, as far as my career is concerned, has been spent in a luxurious mode of doing as I damn well please. Except for a short stint teaching, which was also a luxury for someone as smitten as I with school and the vocation of education, I have been a writer or an editor or a ghostwriter. I promise not to bore you with the details of those occupations, all of which are tedious and exciting in turns. In many ways, I believe that what I truly should call myself is a professional reader for even in writing day in and day out, working on books and short stories and articles and screenplays, the majority of my time is often spent reading and reading and re-reading what I've written and written and re-written. In all honesty, I love books more than anything else in the world, including mint chocolate chip ice cream and Good & Plenty candies. There is something about the written word that has enthralled me from the moment my little brown eyes could focus on the page. My world

has been created with words, my words and the words of others. Words have been my constant companion, at times my only companion. It is through words that I have come to know myself. And it is through words that I have been able to live the life that I have lived and survived.

I begin each day the same way I end it: reading. I shuffle from my bedroom to the kitchen, glasses in hand, to flip the switch on the coffee maker. I spread butter on a piece of rye bread while the coffee brews and then carry both to my office where I joggle the sleeping mouse on my desk and the most important action of my day is accomplished: I read my horoscope. (*And she's off. . .*)

It doesn't look good today: 'Working in a group could create some drama today, but it will also enable you to get a lot done.' Hah! Working in a group? That's funny, I think, because I don't have a work group. Or a friend group or even a family group to work with! It kills me, literally—knife through the heart!—(well, not literally or I'd be dead, wouldn't I?) every time I contemplate living or working in a group. I live a solitary life behind closed doors. My life is simple, miniscule, uncluttered, boring. Um . . . boring? Yes, boring! And it is exactly what I have always wished for.

Wishes do come true, you know. They do! Wishes are granted all the time as the pieces of our lives fall into place with a sprinkling of fairy dust and a prayer for the future. Just look at the dust right now that's collected on your dining room table, on the top

of the television, on that stack of unread books. You've attracted the fairy dust to you but have you taken the time to recognize it for what it is? Nope. You're too busy living your life to take note of it, until Saturday morning when you'll break out the dust rag and a spray can of Pledge to whisk it away and out of your life. You wish for a clean house. See? A wish comes true.

Sometimes wishes take a long time to come to fruition. Take my wish for instance. For as long as I can remember, my wish has been to be left alone. When I was very young, I wanted nothing more than to be allowed to sit alone in my room to read and write and pretend. My mother's chatter set my teeth on edge; my older brother's bullying left me bruised and angry; my younger brother's perfection in all things gave me reason to want to hide my in my closet (as did the bullying), secreting my own hideous feelings and thoughts and shortcomings. My father, a solitary creature in his own right, seemed to understand me. He left me alone. Always. I saw him on holidays standing in the doorway of the rec room, hiding behind the Christmas tree or a whiskey sour, watching but not participating. Sometimes I thought I could read his mind and his thoughts matched mine. We both just wanted to be left alone. And now we are. It took years and years of cultivating our wishes but they have come true at last. Now, I worry, as does he, I'm sure, that in our solitary fortresses of aloneness, we will wither away, our bodies undiscovered for days or weeks. But that's a passing

fancy as well for even in solitary, someone, anyone, everyone will find a reason to break in. Like that! There's someone banging on my front door! What fresh hell is this? Oh. It's just the mailman.

I wished and dreamed and pined for a day when I could sit alone in the shade of a tree reading, writing, being. That day has come at last! So I sit and read and write and I just am in all my glory. I am. Be still and know that I am. I am still. And I still am.

I don't watch TV most days. It's too depressing. I do, however, watch *Oprah's Life Class* when it's on, running back and forth between the living room and my office down the hall, getting my weekly exercise, trying to keep up when the sound goes off the live streaming feed and then the picture freezes on the computer. When that happens, I miss the poignant moments, the A-has! with the television sound turned down in the living room (the live feed and the show on TV are never synched); I rush to see what's happening, fumbling with the remote to turn it up. I want to participate, I want to Tweet but I don't know how. My one posting on Facebook--my one deep dark secret that no one knows about me--was broadcast to the universe. That's how I found out the hard way that unchecking the "Post to Facebook" button doesn't work. Thank god I have so few friends and they don't watch Oprah. If they do watch and participate in *Life Class*, they've never mentioned my deep dark secret, which isn't a secret at all, really. There is nothing secret about me. How can there be?

I have most of the modern conveniences that living in a high-tech society affords us. I have an iPhone and a Twitter account and email and a Facebook page. I have four friends, people I met online, who also have four friends. We don't chat or text or instant message each other. We play an online game, all silently, reading the nasty messages in the feed and the rants in the forum and the complaints and whines and groans. Even in the virtual world, I am alone, unwilling to make virtual friends.

I once played an online game with an avatar that looked nothing like me. My voodoo doll was young and blonde and thin and pretty but her lips were sealed, too. She didn't talk to the other avatars, preferring to keep her distance. Avatars in shiny outfits and tall black boots would approach to chat, smiling and happy. My avatar patted her pockets and ammo belts looking for something to lob at them. They finally gave up trying to elucidate the rules of the game. "There is a common enemy," they'd explain. "I know," my avatar would think to herself, "and it is you." What does it say about a person when even their avatar is antisocial? Pathological much?

The post office is a creepy place, dark and damp even on the sunniest of days. Nevertheless, it is the one stop I routinely make that makes me feel normal and connected. I am always surprised by what I will find at the post office, some tidbit of information that will puzzle and/or fascinate me. For instance, when did we lose the option to send a package by regular mail?

"That'll be \$5.18," the short blonde woman behind the counter said brightly as though I should be happy to spend that much to mail a two dollar bottle of lotion to my mother. "It'll be there by Friday," she said in her chirpy little bird voice.

"I don't need it to be there by Friday. I just need it to get there," I explained.

"It will cost the same price and get there next Wednesday. You might as well send it priority."

I didn't know what to say. This is the reason the post office is in trouble, I think to myself. I pay and leave. In my moment of sticker shock, I have forgotten to buy stamps so I have to go back in. I walk back around the counter to the same short blonde woman behind the counter who smiles at me as though she's never seen me before in her life.

"Good morning," she says.

"I need a book of stamps," I say. She says she has cherry blossoms which is fine with me and then she leans to her left and tells the other clerk working next to her not to tell George, whoever George is, about the cherry blossoms because they have only a few books left and she doesn't want him to give them to just anybody. *What?* I think to myself. I pay for the cherry blossoms and go back outside to the car. I guess I'm not just anybody after all.

Driving home, I realize that there is nothing that I need from the stores situated along the way. I usually wait until I have several stops to make before leaving the house but today I needed only to go to the post office. I tell myself that by going only when

necessary, I'm saving gas and limiting car maintenance, but the truth is that I don't like to leave the house unless I have to. There are some days, usually Saturdays, when I get up, take a shower, fluff dry my hair, pull on clean jeans, a long-sleeved t-shirt, and my sandals and head out the door, purse and keys in hand. Then I stop, hand on the door knob, and think about where I'm going, calculate how badly I really need whatever it is I'm headed out to buy, and decide to just stay home. Whew! What a relief! Off come my sandals, jeans, watch, and bra. I put on a clean pair of pj bottoms and dig my glasses out of my purse. The keys go back on the hook, and with a huge sigh of relief, I flounce on the couch and pick up the book folded over the arm waiting for me. I smile as I read, thinking of all the gas I've just saved, the energy I can use for some other purpose like dusting or sorting books or playing a game on the computer. The house seems especially quiet then, need relinquished. There is satisfaction in knowing that there is very little that I really need.

Last year, however, I decided to try an experiment. I would make one trip out of the house every two weeks to buy groceries, return library books, or simply cruise the aisles of the Habitat for Humanity bargain store down the road. If I discovered anything else that I needed between trips, I'd have to walk for it, thereby saving gas and money while also fulfilling my need for activity and exercise. I would keep track of my weight and gas mileage and figure out how many pounds I could lose and how

much money I could save by walking instead of driving. Three days after my first bi-weekly shopping trip, I decided I needed protein. I had watched a television show on healthy eating and discovered that I needed to eat more red meat. Not a lot, but just a little. So, I decided I needed a steak. Not a big one, but a little one that I could cook on the ancient gas grill that lives under the black tarp on my back patio. And I'd pick up a baking potato and a small tub of sour cream and maybe one more stick of real butter, all things I didn't really need at all. But, if I was going to take the hike, I might as well make it worth my while.

My house is the fourth from the corner of Woodley and Main. Main Street runs across the railroad track, past the elementary school and dead-ends at the highway. On the corner of US 12 and Main Street is a shopping center with a grocery store, a drug store, a Goodwill, an empty slot where the video store used to be, a Chinese take-out, a pizza delivery counter, and a jewelry/pawn shop. Oh, and a new nutrition/health food store. As I walk along Woodley, huffing and puffing past three houses that look just like mine, holding under my arm the canvas shopping bag I will fill with my necessities, I realize that I probably should have worn cooler clothing and better shoes. But I'm half way there, I think, and besides the grocery store will be freezing with the air turned up high on such a warm day. I always wish I'd worn a sweat shirt when I shop at this particular grocery store rather than the cheaper one two miles down the highway. And then I remember that the

meat at this store is much better than the meat at the cheaper one and I keep putting one foot in front of the other, almost there.

I make the right turn onto Main and admire the flock of pink flamingos clustered near the flower beds on the corner, standing on their stick legs, all facing the same direction as though waiting to cross the street or catch the bus that ambles down this street several times a day. I wonder how long it will take for the white hot sun to fade the brilliant pink plastic to washed out pinkish white. Hmm.

A small knoll leads up to the railroad tracks just past the not-so-convenient convenience store on Main. New owners have stopped selling gas although the tanks are still there and a sign by the entrance advertises a ridiculously low price per gallon. I imagine people pull in to fill up, go inside to complain that the pumps don't work, and then buy cigarettes anyway. Luckily, the tail end of the train is just heading south out of sight by the time I negotiate the rise and make my way safely to the other side of the tracks. In our town, both sides are essentially the same, so there is no wrong side of the tracks. I laugh when I think of my mother trying to make that distinction when she first came to visit. "There is always a right side and a wrong side," she insisted. I let her think whatever she wants.

I'd forgotten that the sidewalk runs out just past the elementary school and I have to cross Main Street and zigzag across a little wooden walkway through the undergrowth to pick up the sidewalk on

the north side of the street. This will take me straight to the shopping center so while I'm not really comfortable walking under the branches and through a gaggle of Goth teenagers who hang out near a bench just past the wooden walkway, I realize that I can manage. Three years ago, I tried riding my bike to the grocery store, following this same path. A similar group of teenagers were gathered in the same spot and although they probably thought nothing of an older woman peddling along on a paint-flecked bicycle with bulging tires, I couldn't stop the vision of Almira Gulch and the strains of da dum de dum de dum dum that coursed through my brain. I think that's when I finally stopped riding that bike altogether, with thoughts of wicked witches and little dogs too.

Letting myself get out of shape was a big mistake. The stitch in my side runs up my back and over my shoulder. Putting my hands on my knees and breathing deeply doesn't help. A woman wearing hot pink, too short short-shorts is pushing a baby stroller around me. She doesn't ask if I'm okay but simply utters, "Move!" as she sidles past. I suppose if I had collapsed she might have shoved my body off the pavement so others might pass. That's what passes for polite behavior these days I suppose. The stitch subsided finally and I walked the rest of the way with a hitch and limp. As I round the corner by the Goodwill, two laughing boys come rushing at me and push me out of their way. They're not big boys so I don't fall down, thank you very much, but then

ahead I see what they were running from: a newspaper stand parked outside the new health food store is on fire, the flames licking through the door propped open by burning newspapers. I wish I could say, "I know the boys who set that fire," to the health food cashier and a passerby who stand with hands on hips and wonder what to do, but I don't say a word. I don't know any of the children in our sprawling neighborhood. Besides, they grow up so fast that I would never be able to recognize them even if they lived right next door. Lucky for me, though, I don't have any neighbors right next door. To the south is an empty lot, covered over with weeds and fallen pine limbs; the house across the street has been abandoned; to the north is a snowbird who lives beside me for three months each summer, locked up tighter than a drum every day, afraid of letting in even a little sunshine. My stockade fence prevents any fraternization with the house behind me to the east. Their yippy little dogs bark incessantly when I putter in the flower beds out back so I rarely putter any more, which explains my lack of exercise and the wheezing and chest pain I feel as I walk. Finally, someone pours a bottle of water on the burning papers and bits of ash and soot float up and out and across the sidewalk. I use the canvas bag I'm carrying to shoo it away from my face, but I see flecks of black on my t-shirt and consider, once again, what a mistake this walking thing is.

Standing at the meat counter, I realize that the meat in the case is fresh and very, very expensive. It's

a good thing I'm feeding just me and not a small army of friends and family. I'd have to mortgage my house for a Sunday pot roast dinner. I select a small but good cut and cruise the aisles.

Steak: Check. Potato: Check. Sour cream and butter: No check. I mentally cross them off the list. I'll make do without.

Checkout is fast and painful. My two little items bang against each other in the bottom of the too-big canvas bag. Slung over my shoulder, I realize that I could have bought more, but by the end of the sidewalk in front of the Goodwill, the stitch is back, the hitch is more prominent, and I am limping badly. Sweat pours off me, trickling down my back. My hair is soaked and I hobble slowly to the bench now deserted by the Goth kids. It's cooler under the trees but my head is pounding and I have to make it home. I cross Main and slide down the rise past the tracks, skirting a car pulling out of the gasless convenience store. I cut across the yard behind the flamingoes, waiting for someone to charge out of the house and yell at me for walking on their lawn. Then I realize that the camper, usually parked in the side driveway, is gone and that I am safe. Well, safe enough. The second house on my block scares me a little. It's always dark under the pines so the house is shaded and spooky. The garage door windows are permanently shuttered with cardboard or plywood, against storms I tell myself each time I pass. The yard needs mowing and there are weeds taller than me in the side yard yet the city never posts a notice as they

do in other neighborhoods and on other streets. Or maybe they do and I just never see them. Then I wonder to myself, of course, if maybe there is a more sinister reason for the boarding of the windows. I hobble a little faster and then feel silly as I turn into my driveway and stumble the last few steps to the side door.

Such was my one and only endeavor to get more exercise and save gas. Now I order steaks online and have them delivered in iced cases. And I drive to the grocery store whenever I want, although I really don't want to at all. I'm happiest just sitting in the backyard under the trees, reading, writing, listening to the birds chatter. If I'm very quiet, the dogs don't bark through the fence and I can pretend I'm the only person left on earth. Now, that would be heaven.

You can purchase your copy of *A Solitary Life* at Amazon.com in Kindle format or paperback. Then visit me at www.colleensayre.com and let me know what you think.

Thanks for reading!