

Poppit Beads

By Esther Paul

Well, here I am on death row – sharing this dinky room with another old hag, Alice by name. No more privacy! She snores most of the night – can't hear herself, I expect. And she passes gas – probably can't hear that either.

The only thing they'd let me bring to this "wonderful retirement home" to remind me of my past life are two pictures and one armchair. It was hard to choose. I painted the one of a quiet meadow in the sun seen through the cool shade of tall trees near Constance Bay. The other I painted in the forest behind Bell High School. Jack loved this shadowy blue-tinted, ghostly forest. The chair is Jack's comfortable antique gentleman's chair, so faded now, but with such elegant lines. The worst part of deciding was what I was forced to leave. My whole life was left behind! Everything I picked up while I was sorting through all my stuff had a memory: old papers, snaps, albums, receipts, locks of fine baby hair, pressed flowers and leaves between the covers of old hard-covered books, report cards – my own and my children's. The baby pictures were the hardest, and our wedding pictures – we were so young then and eager for life's adventures.

As I sorted, I suddenly had an image of those old plastic poppit beads that were all the rage in the fifties. One could snap those beads together in any length or colour to make necklaces long or short, or bracelets. I imagined that the events of my life were contained in each bead: my own childhood with its adventures exploring our little prairie town and the hills of the valley where I roamed and played, my teen years and first love, nursing, marriage, children...

In the long sleepless hours in my unfamiliar surroundings I pass the time dreaming of episodes of my life contained in the opaque depths of those pastel-coloured poppit beads. It's like looking into lit rooms from outside in the dark. I see

myself moving about doing things. Reminds me of a passenger train passing by at night; the coaches a quick blur of light shining into the darkness, where there is life and people, then a dark space, then another coach. All at once one lit space contains a clear picture of Graduation Day: receiving my nursing diploma, all starchy and white, cap, shoes, bib newly pinned with the St. Agnes gold pin, that bouquet of blood-red roses in my left arm, reaching out to take the navy ribboned scroll in my right hand. The world was my oyster that day!

Now I'm stuck here sharing this 12 by 12 box of a room with a stranger. The stale air is a mixture of urine, Chlorox and old people, and the days run into one another like melting ice-cream. I'm a nobody here – not a wife, mother, grandmother, member of the board; I'm just an old body occupying space, a chore for the staff.

What a kerfuffle in the middle of the night last night! My poor roommate, Alice! I hope she didn't die in pain. Heart, I suppose. They won't tell you anything here. "Just don't you worry your head about it now, Irma," the head nurse snapped at me when I dared ask her, "did she have a stroke or what?" They are so disrespectful too, calling me Irma, or worse, "Deary." It's Mrs. Shaw to you, you young know-it-alls – young as my granddaughter!

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Here comes my third new roommate. Selma told me her name. Was it Margaret (no last name, of course), or Maggie, Marnie? I said hello, but she didn't answer. The pitiful thing looks lost sitting in her armchair where they plunked her while they cram her personal stuff into her half of the closet and her chest of drawers.

Oh, my God. This one's worse than the last – whimpering all night long, as soon as I turned off the light. I called the

floor nurse three times and each time Margaret didn't or couldn't seem to tell them what was wrong. I'm dead tired. Don't feel like going down to breakfast, but they get upset if you don't notify the kitchen an hour ahead of breakfast time. Oh well...

No sign of activity in the other bed now. Funny how she settled down with the coming of daylight. Too bad for her though, they'll soon rattle in here and rout us out of bed to go for breakfast.

* * *

Here we go again: lights out, whimper, whimper.

"Margaret. What's wrong?" I pad over to her bed, bend closer, see the glint of her eyes, a reflection from the chink of light shining under the door.

"Can I do something for you, Margaret?" Feel sorry for the poor thing. For me too – I'd like a good night's sleep for a change. Three nights now. The nurse doesn't even bother to come now when I press the button. I touch Margaret gently on the shoulder. She's curled up like a foetus. I begin to pat her, like you would a baby. I hum a little, talk gently to her.

I stay for a few minutes patting and humming; Margaret doesn't speak but she is quiet now. It's obvious she hears me – whether she understands, who knows? Now I'm feeling cold and tired so I return to my bed to don my warm slippers and housecoat. She starts up again.

"I'm coming, I'm coming. Hang on." I pull her chair next to her bed and resume the patting and quiet tuneless singing. Finally her breathing deepens. She's gone. Good.

A reasonable sleep last night but I had to do the patting

routine again. Seems to work. I'll start the patting earlier tonight.

* * *

Humming and talking nonsense the following night in the dark, I run out of things to say, then I remember the poppit bead idea. There. I'll tell her about the episodes of my life, bead by bead. She's at least my age; she'll understand – if she understands anything. Doesn't speak but seems alert and listening when I talk. The nurses tell me her hearing is okay and she can talk, her daughter Nora told them so.

Let's see... m-m-m, must pick a happy scene. Oh yes...
"Picture this, Margaret: Here's my Danny rushing into the house from kindergarten one sunny afternoon in spring. That was our first house. We were so proud of that little two-bedroom bungalow with lime green shutters, a big picture window looking out on the street of similar homes. We had a big yard planted with birch, weeping elms in the front yard, ornamental bushes by the house, the walk lined with a bright bed of annuals. I had just finished pouring Danny's glass of milk and putting two of his favourite cookies (peanut butter) on a plate. The kettle was boiling to make myself a cup of tea to sip while we sat together at the kitchen table so he could tell me all about the day's adventures. That was our routine. He was breathless and excited.

"Mommy, Mommy! Look, look.' He thrust two rumpled papers into my hand with pencil drawings and random splashes of colour: red, purple, green.

"We sat and solemnly examined the pictures. 'That's our house, Mommy, see the flowers 'n' trees. That's you looking out the window.'

"I see,' I said. 'You've sure got the flowers perfect. They're

called cosmos, you know. What am I looking at out the window?’

“You’re watching me come home from kindygarten, of course!’

‘Right. And the other one?’

“That’s our family, can’t you see? There’s Daddy, there’s Spencer (that was our shaggy mutt of a dog), there’s Sue (his eight-year-old sister) and...’ almost poking a hole in the paper he punched so hard, ‘you!’ I noted that the biggest person in the picture was himself, then me. The smallest was his Dad. Interesting, I thought at the time.”

I pause, listening to Margaret’s breathing, pleased to hear her deep even breaths. I wait another minute or two, then quietly shuffle off to my bed, climb in and carefully pull up the covers. Only 11 o’clock by my bedside alarm.

Next night the same routine – she settled down after only ten minutes of my story-telling about another piece of my life – another poppit bead. I began to tell her about how Jack and I met.

“He was admitted to my ward in the military hospital with a broken leg, and we seemed to hit it off right away. I was on night duty. He had trouble sleeping so we spent hours talking in hushed voices so as not to disturb the other fellows in the ward. I felt really sad when he was discharged. Then he surprised me by leaving a note for me on the ward asking me to go on a date with him. Anyway... when I saw Jack in his Air Force uniform – how handsome he looked... well...”

I stopped to check Margaret’s breathing. Yes she’s gone. Hmm-mp! I feel a little miffed that I didn’t get to tell her more about our wonderful days, being so totally in love and

then getting married without letting our parents know till afterwards. Oh well, there'll be other nights I suppose

What should I tell her next? About my being pregnant before we were married. About how guilty I felt because I might have caused the baby to miscarry with my negative attitude – wanting it to be gone! I never told that to anybody, even my mother, because I miscarried in the third month and there was no need to tell her. I knew she would be really angry at me. I could easily guess what she would say: “Irma, you have disgraced this family. You are supposed to be a good Catholic girl.”

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During the day Margaret acts like a robot: eating what food is put in front of her, going docilely off for her twice-weekly bath in the tub, donning whatever clothes the nurse lays out for her, never balking. She never speaks; I've tried many times to draw her out.

“How are you this morning, Margaret?” Or “Do you know I painted those two pictures?” No response. Nights we fall into my story-telling routine and she calms down every time. She is interested; I can tell by her bright shining eyes when I begin each night. I go through many episodes of my life: about my friends, the death of my dear Sue, our camping trips, our cross-country tour of Canada and the States. I must admit it feels good to tell somebody all about myself without censure or interruption. I just tell it like it is. Margaret knows more about me than almost anybody.

Her daughter certainly doesn't show much interest – drops in for five minutes about once a week, hangs clean clothes in the closet, deposits clean underwear in Margaret's drawers, scoops up the dirty clothes from the hamper where the nurses put them, shoves them into plastic bags, and leaves. She hasn't the decency to even speak to her

mother. I feel like taking a strip off her when she comes in next time.

* * *

Oh, my God! The pain! My head's going to split open! "Ga-a-a-e-e-e . . ." Weird noises come strangling from my throat. What's happening? Help me somebody! "A-a-a . . ." Why doesn't someone come? Why can't I scream? Is it night already? I thought I just had lunch. Everything's turning around, spinning... Why can't I sit up? O-o-o-h-h. I can't stand it . . .

* * *

Margaret called the nurse.

I see it all from above. I float down the hall after her as she scuttles all the way to the nurses' station in her sock feet. "Come quick! Irma's in pain. Help her!" she shouts hoarsely. The day nurse doesn't respond immediately but sits with her pen in her hand and an astonished look on her face because this is silent Margaret talking. Margaret steps around behind the counter and actually grabs the nurse by the shoulder.

During the next half-hour of confusion, Margaret sits as close to my bed as they allow and cries. Nurses and the doctor come and go, then the nurse pulls the sheet over my face and draws the curtains around the bed. After Dan's visit, they begin to wheel my cold body out of the room.

"Stop!" Margaret shuffles over to the gurney, pulls the sheet off my white, still face and tearfully leans down to kiss my cheek gently. "Good-bye, dear friend. I love you," she whispers.

"Nurse, please give me a moment with my friend." She

shrugs and walks out into the hall.

“Thank you for opening your heart to me, dear Irma. I wish I had told you how grateful I am. You have no idea how you have helped me; I was so frightened when they brought me here. I thought it would happen all over again. Awful things happened in that hospital or whatever it was they brought me from and I was punished if I dared to complain. If I yelled they just yelled back at me and ignored what I had asked for. Sometimes even whacked me on the arms or shoulders. Tried telling Nora but she didn’t believe me even when I had a black eye and a broken wrist. Said I was careless.”

“But you gave me courage; I knew you would help me if I needed it again. And then I felt your love and saw how you had braved life’s storms. I admire you so.”

* * *

I wish I could console poor Margaret, who cries so heart-rendingly for over an hour. I hang around for a while after they take my body away; I feel so sorry for Margaret. During that time the nurse’s aide comes in to clean out my chest of drawers, removes my paintings from the wall, drags the gentleman’s chair out into the hall, and finally empties out my little bedside table.

At the back of the drawer she finds a length of gritty faded-yellow beads and tosses them into the garbage...

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