

Who Do You Think You Are?

On Saturday, 21st June, 1969, Margery McCafferty was finally laid to rest.

Margery. Whatever had possessed her parents to call her Margery? Actually, she knew. It was her mother's doing. Her dad would have had no say in the matter. Margery had been the name of her mother's sister, who had died in infancy, and so the burden of the hateful moniker had been laid on her shoulders.

That's what she got for being the first born, she supposed. The other two girls, twins, born three years later, had been named after queens, Elizabeth and Victoria. Even her brother's name had a whiff of royalty about it, but that was coincidence; he was called after Charlie Higgins, her dad's best man. Why hadn't the late, lamented, Margery been a Charlotte or an Eleanor or a Catherine?

And so it was that on that summer's day in 1969, the time had come for Margery, 1918-1919, dearly beloved daughter of Florence and Henry McCafferty, to be left in peace beneath the headstone in the West Road cemetery, where she had lain for fifty years, while her namesake, newly incarnated as 'Maggie' (mature and upper-class, according to Britannica), rose from the ashes and embarked upon the car crash which was her marriage to Derek Watson.

*

She and Derek had met when they were in the sixth form. The school was on three sites, after an amalgamation of the local grammar school and two secondary moderns. He was studying science and was based in the Grammar Wing where the laboratories and state of the art equipment were. She, a linguist, found herself in the curiously named JIC (she later discovered it had meant Junior and Intermediate Crafts), a draughty wood and concrete edifice on the other side of a busy road, which had formerly housed the metalwork, woodwork and cookery departments of "Wellie", Wellington Street Secondary School.

Now, there's a social comment if ever there was one, and a distinction which, as she pondered later, nicely summed up the relationship between her and Derek. Indeed, their paths might never have crossed at all had they not found themselves in the same group for general studies. He had told her that if that particular module, Equality and Human Rights, had been held in the JIC and not the Grammar Wing, there's no way he would have opted for it. He'd never actually ventured across the road to see for himself, but some of his mates had told him it was minging.

He told her that when he was in Primary, the lads used to tease him and call him Brush because his hair stood on end like a toilet brush. By the time he was sixteen however, from the chrysalis of adolescence had emerged this clever, witty, handsome young man and, with a bit of coaxing from Brylcreem, the hair had settled down into a trendy quiff. He knew about politics and history and all that sort of stuff, and would often stay behind after class and have a heated discussion with Mr Rowland about Vietnam or the IRA or Martin Luther King. She wondered if they ever talked about the state of the bogs in the JIC?

*

To add to Derek's many talents, he was a brilliant bopper; all the other girls, dancing round their handbags, would watch on with envy as he chose to dance with "Margarine" (no wonder she hated her name) at the church hall on a Saturday night. She had been totally smitten, and even now, felt a quiver of excitement, thinking about snogging at the bus stop as they waited for the number eight which would whisk him away until she saw him again at school on Monday.

She used to think Elvis was singing "Can't Help Falling In Love" just for her. She later realised that Derek had never been as quite in the moment as she was, and when he had tipped her head back a bit, it wasn't to plant a smacker on her mouth. He was more concerned with not getting make-up on his shirt. Perhaps "Lipstick on your Collar" would have been a better theme for him.

Her mother, never backward at coming forward, and always fiercely protective of her brood, had succinctly offered her view:

2

“He’s had a tip about himself that Derek. He’s a right big’ead. You can do better than that, our Margery. Get rid of him.”

*

In spite of her mother’s wise counsel, she didn’t.

They’d both gone off to Uni. Him to Nottingham, her to Leicester, close enough for them to visit every weekend. It had worked at first, but as time went on, new interests were pulling them apart.

She had spent a term in Paris, immersed in the world of cafes and coffee, of Camus and Sartre and Piaf, but now, back on campus, she was feeling disconnected and aimless.

He meanwhile had become President of the Debating Society, had taken up rowing and was a popular figure in the college bar where he had become a regular and a favourite. He was quite the raconteur.

Nevertheless, when he was offered the chance of a PhD in Montreal with his former prof, it was she, his bopping partner from the church hall hop, who went with him as his wife. Montreal sounded exciting, they spoke French there, it was full of promise, but whilst his world opened up, hers became increasingly lonely in their little apartment on the twenty fourth floor of a high rise on a remote edge of town. No one spoke to her in French or even in English, come to that. It was too far to walk to the centre, she hated the subway and, most important of all, she was pregnant.

It had also become apparent that her mother had been spot on. A few snogs at the bus stop and the odd weekend trip between Nottingham and Leicester had hardly been preparation for a lifetime commitment. For example, one of her first missions on arriving in Canada was to go and buy an iron. He had to be kidding! But no, "Lipstick on your Collar" was no joke. He expected a clean white shirt washed and pressed every day, just like his mother used to do. Well, stuff that for a game of soldiers. She wasn’t his mother. She’d buy

the iron but he could iron his own bloody shirts. “Start as you mean to go on” her mother had told her.

3

He didn't like her wearing his socks either. In Maggie's family, or Margery's as she'd been at the time, it had always been a case of first up best dressed. Whoever was last got the odd socks, or the ones with the spud in the heel. No one complained. That was just how it was, although it was noted that Elizabeth, the most immaculate member of the family, was always first up and had, on occasion, been known to hide socks under the jacket of the hot water tank in the airing cupboard. No one minded that either, except their Charlie once, when he was going out on a hot date with Wendy Rutherford and could only find one grey sock size 8 and one with cute teddies on that belonged to Victoria.

“Oh, never mind,” their mother had said, in her usual fashion. “That Wendy girl's not worth bothering with if she complains about odd socks.”

They were married the following year, so she mustn't have.

*

In the Watson household, by contrast, a fresh pair of socks (and underpants) was laid out with the pristine shirt every morning. All Fauntleroy had to do was roll out of bed, have a shower, brush his teeth, then, after adding a splash of Brut (he liked the advert on the telly “If you have any doubts about yourself try something else”), step into his newly laundered clobber.

Well, that was all coming to an end, and pronto!

She hadn't noticed this fastidiousness on his weekend trips to her digs in Leicester. His kegs were usually to be found screwed up in a ball under the duvet and his T-shirt in a heap, with her bra and top, on the floor next to the settee where they'd chucked them in a frenzy of passion. He wasn't too fussy either back then about getting on his motorbike at six o'clock on a Monday morning and roaring back to Nottingham in time for his first lecture, stinking of sweat, booze and last night's curry.

*

It wasn't just the ironing and the loneliness; she could have coped with that. It was his simmering resentment. He had a new life ready-made and the truth became clear, he didn't need her in it. A seedy apartment in the arse end of

4

town and a wife who was up the duff just didn't fit his image. He had a new job, new colleagues, new friends. It wasn't long before he started rowing again. And propping up the bar. She could imagine him, laughing and joking, entertaining everyone with his witty stories that even she had found funny first time round. If only he'd pay her just a little attention, if only he'd occasionally come in with a take-away and a bottle of cheap wine, ruffle her hair and call her sweetheart, or even Margarine, just like the old days. If only he'd occasionally show an interest in her burgeoning bump.

"Move over to your own side. I can't bear the feel of your feet on my legs," was a more regular greeting as he rolled into bed beside her after yet another late night session somewhere. Then he'd fall asleep stinking of sweat, booze and curry. At least that was like the old days.

*

By the time they were leaving Montreal three years later, Neil Armstrong had walked on the moon, Concorde had made its first supersonic flight, the Beatles had called it a day, and both Jimmy Hendrix and Janis Joplin had taken too many barbiturates.

Derek Watson had a two-year old son, a PhD, and the promise of a super duper job in the UK.

Maggie had a two-year old son, morning sickness and her mother's voice in her head. She wished she had listened.

"Like a Bridge over Troubled Water" Simon and Garfunkel had crooned on their final album. It was their swansong too.

*

She and Derek had tried to patch things up, to make a new start. The comfortable semi in a desirable suburb suited his image and his new lifestyle. He would drop his shirts off at the laundromat round the corner from his office on a Wednesday and have them delivered to reception on a Friday. They were not only washed and ironed but starched too.

“Brilliant service, eh pet? Looks great, doesn’t it? Canny lass in the laundromat, ‘n all.” He stood in the kitchen, a vision of sophistication in his

5
favourite white shirt and floral tie, his Y fronts and his new socks. She hoped he didn’t call the “canny lass” in the laundromat “pet”, she, personally, hated it, but had to agree the shirt indeed looked flawless. She wondered if the service was as brilliant as his mother’s.

She knew he wasn’t keen on the cats, whose fur he said got everywhere including up his nose, and the finger paint all over the bathroom didn’t impress him. He loved his kids he said but he couldn't be doing with their mess. On the odd Sunday she suggested going for a trip to the beach or for a picnic in the park, he looked at her as if she was having a funny turn. Didn’t she realise how hard it would be to get sand out of the Merc? It already cost him a fortune in valeting. And how could he possibly take the boss out to lunch with fingerprints all over the glove compartment? She had to realise that this was a company car not a tour coach.

She didn’t recall him being so pernickety when he first passed his test. They’d had many a bag of chips and a few steamy fumbles in his dad’s Morris Minor, but maybe now wasn’t the time to remind him of that: she couldn’t bear the atmosphere and the simmering silence. A row would at least have cleared the air.

Although he clearly adored Fleur (yes, they’d had another one), even now he justified not coming to collect them from the hospital on the day of her arrival. He had arranged to take the Friday off, he said, – that was the date in his diary- and she just had to understand that there was no way he could

miss the planning meeting with the Nissan bigwigs just because she had decided to give birth three days early. It had been organised for months and was far too important. Sitting it out with her newborn until an ambulance became available, Maggie rang her mum to see if she could come over a bit earlier and collect Dan and Izzy. If not, she'd ask Joan next door to scoop them up. She just hoped Joan had enough sausage and chips to feed her two as well as her own. They were always ravenous when they got home from school.

*

6

At the beginning of August, 1980, not long after Derek had left, lured by the prospect of being able to breathe again without a noseful of cat hairs, of being able to sit down without landing on a Weeble, and by the seductive charms of a younger woman, the letter arrived. She hadn't really expected a positive response: after all, it had been twelve years since she'd left uni and now, one failed marriage, two dogs and three kids later, the only things she was fluent in were the theme tunes of Trumpton and The Wombles. In fact, she often fell asleep dreaming of Uncle Bulgaria whizzing round on the Trumpton Fire Engine with Hugh, Pugh and Barney McGrew.

Anyway, someone at Ridley Park High School must have seen some potential in her - either that, or their chosen candidate had accepted a post elsewhere. Whichever it was, she'd better crack on revising the subjunctive - her new job, her new role, her new life, was about to start. MERDE!

She'd been practising for a few days now - sashaying into the bedroom, imagining her dressing gown and slippers were the pencil skirt and two and a half inch heels she was going to buy next week with her new Fenwick's card; smiling confidently and shaking hands with herself in the full-length mirror.

"Hi, pleased to meet you, I'm Mags McCaffery, new French teacher" Was "hi" a bit too familiar for a first day? She tried again.

"Hello." She let her voice fall on the "o", so as not to sound too cocky. "My

name's Mags McCaffery. I'm joining the Foreign Languages Department".

She shook her own hand in the mirror a little more demurely. Yes, she fancied that: She'd do it. She'd call herself Mags- trendy, young, fun.

First impressions were important.

She'd discovered that to her cost...six months earlier.

*

God knows what she had been doing in town that February day. She shuddered involuntarily at the memory She hated it at the best of times. So it must have been something pretty important to make her get on the bus in the rain with a snotty, teething ten-month-old in a sling. A bill to pay probably.

7

Yes. That was it. The next payment was due on the cream carpet Derek had insisted upon buying when he got the directorship - not that he was planning on bringing any of his colleagues home anytime soon, she must understand, not with all these cats and kids about. A cream carpet in what used to be "the other room" but which was now called the lounge certainly enhanced his corporate image.

He liked to sit in there, alone of course, (no kids, no cats and rarely a wife) and watch some late-night telly with a tumbler of Glenmorangie Single Malt, (no ice) which, according to the ad was "delicious by design". He liked that. His favourite show was Dave Allen at Large. "Doing" Dave, sitting on a bar stool, glass in hand, telling risqué jokes was one of his party tricks. He was pretty good at it, as a matter of fact.

This was not the first time she'd wished they banked at the Trustee. There was a branch much closer to home.

As she remembered, there'd been a bit of an altercation at NatWest. Some issue with the account number or something. She wasn't altogether sure. Derek usually dealt with money stuff but these days with his new job he was much too busy and much too important to be bothered with the mundane.

From her high seat (high horse!) behind the glass, the bank teller, (according to her badge Sharon and here to help) addressed her as if she was a half-wit. To make matters worse, Fleur, thankfully asleep all the way down Northumberland Street, had now woken up and was bawling at the top of her lungs. Sharon was forced to share the Watson's business with everybody in the queue.

Maggie, her face as red as the baby's, scuttled out of the bank followed by a dozen pairs of eyes. She didn't know which made her feel worse – censorship or pity. What she did know was that she was cutting it fine as she ran, with her screaming bundle, back up the hill towards the bus station.

Thank goodness for the raindrops trickling from her hair and down her face. They disguised the tears she tried to blink away as she rounded the corner just in time to see the number 64 reverse from its stand and pull away into the traffic.

8

It was ten past two. There wouldn't be another 64 or any other bus going past the Lane Ends till 15.00 hours the man in the peaked cap and the tight, shiny jacket which smelt of Old Spice and old fags told her. According to his badge, he was Jim, an employee of the Tyne Wear Transit Network, and, like Sharon, he was here to help. He was very sorry, pet, (grrh!) but all he could suggest was boarding the number 39 which left from stand 6 on the hour and every twenty minutes thereafter, so there'd be one departing in, let's see...he consulted the station clock...8 minutes. She'd have to alight at the Town Moor and catch the 27 which went via the West Road. He knew it was a bit of a long way round but, provided there were no holdups, that would get her to the Lane Ends by 15.08. The service terminated at Benton at 15.14. He supposed, of course, that she could take the Metro but she'd have to change at South Gosforth and he couldn't guarantee a connection. Then there were all those steps. Especially with ...you know. He nodded towards the bawling bundle.

Having given her the benefit of his encyclopaedic knowledge of the local travel network, of his command of transit-speak (board? depart? alight? terminate?) and, simply by that sage nod, his opinion of her mothering skills,

he adjusted his cap and walked briskly off, clearly needing, like all men, to find something seriously important to deal with.

What Jim didn't know and so couldn't add into his meticulous calculations was that, apart from the bawling bundle, Maggie Watson had two other kids to think about and that they had to be collected from Manor Gardens Primary at quarter past three, or, as he would have said, 15.15 hours. Not 15.14 or 15.16... 15.15 on the dot.

Now *that* would have challenged his timetables.

*

Rummaging round in the bottom of her bag, hoping to find a pound coin lurking there, so she could get a taxi, would have been a waste of time. Literally. She quite seriously didn't have the time; each minute rummaging meant one minute later at school. In any case, she knew there wouldn't be one. She'd been through every pocket and every bag in the house to find even enough change for her bus fare, and had only been able to scrape that

9

together by unpicking the play-doh that Izzy had, for some reason, wrapped around three ten-pence pieces.

Quite how far she was going to get by taxi for one pound hadn't had chance to cross Maggie's mind.

*

She had no choice.

It was only a two-minute walk away from the bus station. From the bench where she had been left by Jim, who was here to help and whose tang still lingered in the air, she could see Derek's office – just above Gregg's and One eyed Jack's. It had often struck her when she saw it from the bus, that the logo, MasonPatterson Associates, emblazoned across the fine old building that had once been the Grand Hotel, contradicted the “bespoke architectural design” of the company's strapline. In her view it was akin to vandalism. In fact, she thought the same about all those beautiful examples of Newcastle's Victorian heritage that were now brashly dedicated to The Deep Pan Pizza Co

and Joe Rigatoni's and Sarah's Tuck-In. Richard Grainger must be turning in his grave.

"MasonPatterson" came the female voice through the intercom at the entrance. "Corporate Affairs Suite. How can I help?"

What should she have said? "It's Derek's wife"? "It's Mr Watson's wife"? Who exactly was she? In the event she mumbled, "It's me, it's Maggie".

After the ignominy of explaining her predicament to the disembodied voice, she was invited to enter the building. Shaking the rain from her sodden blue cagoule and from Fleur's baby sling, she stepped into the lift. "What a state," she said to the bedraggled figure staring at her through the soft pink mirrors on all sides. "Oh well, in for a penny, in for a pound, or even a tenner if you're lucky." She pressed the button and the lift whizzed her swiftly and silently to the third floor.

"So, you're Mrs W." The voice, now revealed as a thirty something blonde, dressed up, yes that was exactly the word, dressed up, like an air hostess, gave her the once over. An understated enamel badge announced her as Anne,

10

but, unlike Maggie's two previous encounters that day, not that she was here to help. "Delighted to meet you". She held out a pale, manicured hand which did little to reflect that sentiment. "Just hang on a mo, I'll tell Dex you're here. Your taxi fare home, that's what you wanted, wasn't it? Won't be a sec."

"Dex?" she thought. "Who the hell's Dex when he's at home...?". Well, not when he's at home but clearly when he's in the office.

Maggie moved to sit on one of the bucket seats, but thought better of it. The imprint of a wet bum would not be a good look on the grey plush.

From reception, she could see the back of his head through the "minimalist glass envelope" of his office. He'd got that from idea from Norman Foster's lobby in the HSBC building in Hong Kong. Three or four buff young men, looking, and probably smelling, identical to him, were there, in his thrall, cradling their identical cups of coffee, no doubt lukewarm and made by the

chichi Anne. He'd be regaling them with some tale or another - probably something about his Hong Kong adventure with "Norman", as he called him. He'd only been there for a week, but you'd think his brief was to design the whole damned structure singlehandedly. He had the gift of the gab, she had to hand him that. Eat your heart out Dave Allen.

She watched as Anne went over, took him to one side and had a quiet word in his ear. He turned to look at the drowned blue rat with its hair flattened to its head like a medieval helmet and its young attached over its shoulder by a sling. His laughing face suddenly ashen, he bolted out of the office, mortified.

Anne glanced her way, then followed him.

She emerged some five minutes later and handed her a crisp a ten-pound note. "Mr Watson said don't wait up for him. He'll be late.

"Mature and upperclass?" What a joke.

The drowned rat in the blue cagoule gathered up its young and, with its tail between its legs, slunk off.

*

11

She wasn't in bed when the car pulled up. She was in the kitchen scraping egg off Izzy's plate. Congealed egg was always a bugger to get off, but this time the sight of it suddenly made her sway and retch dreading the inevitable confrontation when he walked through the door. Why couldn't Izzy have had beans on toast like Dan? And Fleur, having bawled herself out, had adamantly refused the stewed prunes that Maggie had offered her and with one swipe sent the bowl careering off the high chair. It had landed on the floor - face down, inevitably. Thank heavens she hadn't succumbed and let the kids have their tea in the living room in front of the telly. Prune puree on his precious cream carpet would have sent Derek completely over the edge.

Once the kids were bathed and in bed, a relaxing glass of rouge had beckoned, before she began clearing up the debris of the day. As usual, she'd fallen asleep on the sofa, but mercifully, when she came round an

hour later, the dregs in the bottom of the glass were still intact. Derek hated a mess. She thought she might have been invited to tonight's launch for his latest project, a new multi-million-pound office complex for Nissan in Sunderland, but Derek had said it would be better if Anne went along, as she was more au fait with the detail and would be able to talk to the clients. He was hoping that one day the name Watson might be added to that gaudy logo on the Grand Hotel. They usually laid on a posh buffet at the Imperial, - lobster thermidor, prosciutto-wrapped chicken, steak and mushroom stroganoff, stuff like that, not to mention the copious amounts of Lanson and Chateauneuf du Pape, which of course, he always DID mention. With luck, that may have softened his mood.

There was an exchange of voices, the car door slammed and the car moved off. At least Derek had had the good sense to leave the Merc in the underground carpark at the office and get a taxi home. No, she mused wryly, not a taxi these days and certainly not the number 64 bus. Now he was a Corporate Director, it would be a chauffeur-driven car courtesy of MasonPatterson Associates.

She heard the key in the latch. She heard the front door open and then close. She heard the scraping of his shoes on the mat. She heard the hall cupboard click open, his overcoat swing onto a hanger, and the hall cupboard close

12
again. She heard his stocking feet pad along the passage and then, before they reached the kitchen, turn left into the lounge with its new cream carpet. She heard the door close behind him. She heard the familiar theme tune of Dave Allen at Large. She heard canned laughter. She put her head into her hands and, for the second time that day, Maggie Watson dissolved into tears.

*

“The magistrate said it was a pity really. Thought you looked like such a nice couple sitting there together”, Brian Steadman, her solicitor, told her as they emerged together from the dingy courtroom into the late summer sunshine. “They usually get all kind of toe-rags in there, shouting the odds at each other, fighting to the end. Not many divorces are as civilised as yours, you

know.

I'll walk you up to your car. Fancy a coffee on the way, now you're a free woman? There's a new place up at the Haymarket."

"Hmm", she smiled ruefully. "Looks can be deceptive, Brian. And thank you, but no thank you. I want to pop into Fenwick's while I'm in town. I'm starting my new job next month and I need to get some decent clothes. New job, new image, you know."

"Ok", he replied, shaking her hand. "Take care of yourself, Maggie. Oh, and have a good life"

Maggie stood for a while, turning her face towards the sun, which was disappearing behind Central Station.

Have a good life. Yes, she would have a good life. She had come a long way since that day in 1969 when she had said her final goodbye to Margery. Margery was dead and buried but Maggie was still alive and kicking. She had grown up, she had learned lots of things along the way... about life and loneliness and, above all, about love.

And, yes, looks could be deceptive. She didn't need to reinvent herself for a second time. She didn't need to be "Mags", in the pencil skirt and the killer stilettos. She didn't need to wear fancy-dress to be a good teacher, or a badge saying "Mum. Here to Help," to let her kids know they were her world. No, Maggie Watson was doing ok, and she was going to stick with her.

13

"Hang on Brian", she called, running to catch up with the figure striding along Grey Street ahead of her. "I will walk up with you. Can't stop for a coffee though. I've decided not to go to Fenwick's after all. Izzy's seven tomorrow. I'm going home to make her a cake."

