

The Road to Maggie's Mountain

Maggie is going to let her graying hair grow long, move to the mountains, and cook food for the elderly.

"In their homes," Maggie says, "the foods they know. The dishes they have always eaten, prepared the way they like."

Maggie says that even though services like meals-on-wheels will deliver a hot meal, it is not the same thing.

"How can it be?" she says, "Consuming food you have not seen prepared, or smelled as it simmered on the stove, or anticipated when writing out the grocery list?"

I picture Maggie arriving on some old person's doorstep, loaded down with brown paper grocery bags filled to overflowing with carefully chosen ingredients. I wonder, do they have a Safeway in the little mountain town she is moving to? Or will she grow the fruits and vegetables in her own garden? Will she also raise chickens, catch them by their necks, and swing them wildly in an arc above her head, until they are dead?

It is not that hard for me to imagine Maggie doing these things, even killing a chicken, cutting off its head, and wiping the blood on her butcher's apron. Living a life far removed from the high-powered position she now holds in a large corporation in the heart of Silicon Valley, she would meticulously pluck the feathers out one by one, until the pebbled flesh is whitely exposed, wash and gut the bird, and neatly slice it down the breast bone. It makes me proud to know that I have such a competent friend, one who can master so many different worlds.

Maggie is intelligent, and she listens better than anyone I know. Sometimes she listens so well that I am ashamed of how much talking I do, as I go on and on about the daily crises of my life. She just listens, never nodding her head, or saying uh huh, or looking around for the nearest escape. She does make comment, though, and what she says is volumes neatly distilled into one perfect, concise sentence that shows she has gotten to the heart of the matter.

The old people who wait in the mountains for Maggie will adore her, like I do. They will enjoy and grow strong from her wholesome cooking, welcome the embrace of her arms, listen to the low and reassuring tones of her voice, grow whole from her attention. I imagine Maggie in some frail old woman's kitchen for the first time, cooking with the old woman's sixty-year-old pots and pans, listening in that attentive, compassionate way she has, never judging. I imagine the old woman will first eye her with suspicion, be a bit bossy and lacking in gratitude, and treat Maggie as if she were hired help or a disfavored daughter-in-law trying her best to please an impossibly cantankerous woman who wants the beloved son to visit, and not his proxy. The old harridan will snap at her impatiently if she puts in too much pepper, or uses the wrong pot.

"No! Not that pot," the old woman harumphs, "*It's aluminum, and I only use it when the roof leaks.*" Her cane taps out a reprimand as she shuffles over to the open cabinet under the stove. "*This one here,*" she says, pointing with the cane to a pot way in back. It has been so long ignored that Maggie must wash the pot out first before using.

Maggie does so, and asks the old woman where she first got the pot. Maybe Maggie will even recognize the name of the manufacturer, as her own mother had a set of pots just like it.

When Maggie goes to get the milk out of the refrigerator, the woman tells her cream is better. Maggie takes out the half & half, and carefully measures the right amount, squinting to read the handwriting on the recipe. She asks the woman to stir, and the woman mutters something about *young 'uns can never do anything by themselves*; but she is secretly pleased to be of use. Maggie asks her where she got this particular recipe for cream of butternut squash soup, and off the woman runs, with a long narrative of how she first tasted it when her sister Lucille made it the time Uncle Frank broke his leg, and how Lucille always felt that her sister's version was not quite as good as her own, "*But really, I improved upon it—*"

Maggie throws back her head and laughs, as the steam hisses out beneath the battered lid of the old pot, and the air is fragrant with the scent of soup the woman had not prepared for five or ten years, who closes her eyes and breathes deep the scent, saying "*It smells just as good as I remember!*"

The two of them then sit down at an old oak table purchased the year before the old woman's ten-year-old son had died from a head injury.

Maggie ladles out generous portions of the creamy soup, and butters the fresh baked bread. The old woman raises her spoon to her lips and takes a sip, complaining it needs salt.

“But it’s pretty good,” she says. *“Better than Lucille’s. Almost as good as mine.”*

A few years ago, Maggie told me about attending a women’s self-discovery workshop where the women did all sorts of activities: meditations and chants, timed writings, paper collages, tracing one another’s body outline on large sheets of butcher paper, things like that.

“I enjoyed all of it,” she said, “until we had to make a self-portrait. I couldn’t do it. I found that at age fifty, it still bothered me I would never be considered pretty.”

Maggie isn’t in the habit of revealing herself to others. Her tone is matter-of-fact. A woman as successful as she is in business knows how to sound tough, even when she isn’t. Maggie and I have never played cards together, but I suspect she seldom loses a hand of poker. She continues, “My tooth was chipped, and my parents never got it repaired. And the rest of my teeth grew in crooked. I learned to smile with mouth closed. People thought I was sullen. Once my mother told me it was good I was so smart, because I sure wasn’t anything special to look at. I disappointed her.”

Maggie shrugged her shoulders, “Eventually, I made enough money to fix the tooth myself, but it was many years before I lost the habit of hiding my imperfect teeth.”

Imperfect is a word I cannot associate with Maggie. Of everyone I know, she most sees the truth of a thing—except her own beauty. After she told me this story of how it hurt never being called pretty by her parents, I wanted to do something to show Maggie just how beautiful she is. I thought of Andy Warhol’s Marilyn Monroe silkscreen, where Marilyn’s face is repeated over and over and over, like entry hall tiles, only each time the screen or colors are just a little bit off, so that each one is a little varied, a little flawed. I thought I would do something similar, perhaps find airbrushed sterile faces of playboy playmates, whitewash the images, and repeat them over and over, row after row, each one dull and lifeless in their uniformity. And then, scattered here or there, I would have a likeness of Maggie, which would crackle with life. Maybe then, Maggie would see what I see.

To do this artwork, I needed a likeness of Maggie. I had no photographs. I took out a sketch pad, but something happened on the way to the blank sheet of paper. I could not put the tip of the pencil on it. I could see an image of my friend in my mind, but I knew that to try and capture it on paper would be useless. Maggie's beauty transcended the shape of her forehead, nose, cheekbones, chin. No flat, one-dimensional paper could capture her spirit. How does an amateur artist—one who pens silly birthday greetings for friends—create an illusion of life, a generosity of spirit, a beauty beyond that which can be seen with eyes?

Luckily, the phone rang, and I had an excuse to put the project away.

I don't number the days until Maggie leaves for the mountains, taking with her two majestic cats by the names of Rose and Baby, her pots and pans, her cookbooks and spices, her fabrics and sewing machines, along with her fax machine and computer, and maybe a business suit or two. Maggie is vague about the actual moving date when I do ask; and for that, I am grateful. As the time grows nearer, I wonder how many times she and I have met for coffee or talked on the phone, and she has wanted to share her excitement about this new phase of her life, but kept silent, knowing I do not want to be reminded of her eventual departure. Has she wanted to share her plans with me for planting a garden or joyously anticipate the bright endless days she sees before her, of reading and writing and contemplation in a place where the air is fresh and untainted, and the smell of dirt clings to her sensible walking shoes? No phones ringing, no deals to close, no employees to hire and fire, train and retrain, no bottom line to contemplate and weigh against the misery downsizing or restructuring will cause for those below her. Instead, she has listened to me whine and speculate about my troubled marriage, fret over my daughters, or babble on about a painting I want to do and might never begin.

She will be leaving soon. As the time for farewells draws nearer, I cling to these new images of Maggie cooking wholesome, organic foods for others. She lets her short sensible professional haircut grow long and tangled, like pumpkin vines growing up around her ankles, lugs fresh fruits and vegetables to the elderly, shifts through their brittle yellowed cookbooks to find their own special recipe for rice pudding or chicken and dumplings, stirs things together, and listens—like she has done for me—with love to a complete stranger unravel the mystery of his or her life. When Maggie

laughs her warm, full-bodied laugh at the just the right moments, her frail elderly feel less forgotten and unloved, and Maggie shares with them an intimacy she never had with her own parents. Maggie is my friend. This knowledge is a blessing.

When I think of driving the distance to her new home, the road to Maggie's mountain seems long and unfriendly to me. I am afraid of driving, and don't venture far from home.

"What will I do when you are gone?" I have moaned on more than one occasion. "You will learn to drive," Maggie says, as if she knows this will happen.

I am not so sure. I see myself gripping the wheel tightly, feel my heart beating against my chest like a small, unthinking caged animal. I cannot close my eyes while driving, but I repeat a mantra over and over, you can, you can, and practice breathing, although the terror I feel is more like gulping for air while drowning. I tell myself, once I am away from the big cities, the big freeways, the big trucks, the noise, the speed, I can do it. Once I am on a small mountain road, going my own speed, it will be okay. I block the memories of the kinds of accidents I have heard about that happen on such roads, try to push them under the surface the way my cousin Jack would hold my head under water when we swam as children. *You can do this*, I tell myself. *You need to do this*. The slow lane is about to run out, and I feel as if I am trapped in an elevator, hurtling its way down to the bottom of a thirty floor building, when the cable snaps. I make a lane change, and big trucks whiz by me. I am back in seventh grade, the first day of junior high, when for no reason other than pure meanness, some big football-playing-shouldered boy—a ninth-grader—shoves me into the metal locker, a small girl weighing less than a hundred pounds, who pulls herself away from the metal, dazed and confused.

Then I remember—another boy yelled at the one who hurt me, saying "Why'd you do that, man? She's just a kid!" I remember his kind smile afterwards, as I walked to find my next class; and every time I saw him in the halls that year my heart would flutter. Behind the wheel, my anxiety begins to lessen, and I drive three quarters more of a mile. I wipe my clammy palms on my jeans, and repeat my mantra. But when I see the first exit I feel I can safely make, the temptation is too great, and I take it. What if I am in an accident? What if I die? What will happen to my

children? Will Maggie cook for them if something happens to me? Their father certainly won't.

Maggie is not afraid of driving. She knows how to get where she wants to go. When I picture Maggie driving the long stretch to her new mountain home, the road is much kinder. I imagine her smiling, mouth wide open, whistling through imperfect teeth. Maybe she even wears sunglasses and the large hoop earrings she occasionally wears on the weekends. The trunk of her small car is filled with books and papers, pots and pans. How well do Rose and Baby travel—will she need pet carriers for the journey? Or will she leave the cats behind, let them be adopted by others in her neighborhood? She tells me that Rose will go to everyone, and is called “Princess” by all the neighbors. The first time I saw Baby, she was curled in some autumn leaves on a patch of bare ground, looking as if she had grown from that very spot. I have heard that cats are highly territorial, and will travel alone for hundreds of miles to get back to the place they call home. Maybe Maggie will take them with her, and they will take one whiff of that fresh mountain air, long for the smell of diesel and factory pollutants, and journey back. Still, no matter how attached the cats are to their neighborhood, I cannot really imagine it. Who would not want to stay with Maggie?

How long have I known Maggie? Eight years. How many years will it be before I could trust one of my daughters to drive me to the mountains? At least another eight. I picture my oldest daughter, Tasha behind the wheel, her long hair pulled in a pony tail. At sixteen, maybe she will no longer wear it in a pony, but opt for some wild punk look, streaked with green. I will sit in the back seat, and let Tasha's little sister, Natalie, sit up front. Natalie, who is confident and bright, will make us laugh with her smart, brash comments during the long drive. My hair will be gray by then, having resisted all of my husband's attempts to talk me into dying it blond. I will let it grow long, tangle like the vines I imagine overrunning Maggie's yard. In the trunk of our car will be the art supplies that my daughters and I all enjoy playing with, and extra supplies for Maggie, too.

At the starting point of our journey will be my husband, the girls' father, who barely glances at us as we leave, as he sits in his chair, reading the newspaper, drinking beer after beer after beer. When we don't return by Sunday night, will he be worried about us, or merely inconvenienced? Who will pack his lunch?

Eight years is a long time. Will Maggie still be in good health, strong and vibrant? Or will some of the flesh begin to fall from bones that have become brittle, leaving her frail and dependent? We will greet each other with hugs, and I will again feel the acceptance I have always known when I am with her. I won't have to try and please, or change, or rearrange myself, just let myself be embraced by the comfortable familiarity that I have so long missed.

I will open my purse and send my daughters into town, who will gladly escape the company of two foolish old women with gray hair like tangled vines. They will buy lemon slushees at the Big Chief drive-in, complain about the heat, swat the mosquitoes, wonder about the cute boy working at the gas station, and buy tie-dye tee shirts from a roadside stand. Tasha, who often is unhappy and lethargic, will begin to feel strength surge through her slender body as she finds wide open unpeopled places to roam. As the stress of city life falls from her, she even begins to smile. Natalie will build a comical monument to creativity out of rocks, painstakingly searching the hills and riverbeds for just the right ones. When she tires of the task, she will learn to talk to strangers, who will go and find her rocks, leaving her more time to create.

And I will cook for Maggie, and she will cook for me. Her kitchen will be filled with the scent of orange peel and cranberry, nutmeg and cloves. The steam of hot elderberry tea will rise like cumulus clouds about our heads, as we sit in contemplative silence around a large oak table left to her by a woman she used to feed. There will be no more talk of disappointments, or punctured hearts. Or when we do talk of such things, all our trespassers will be forgiven. Including my husband. Including myself.