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The Margarets of the World

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The Margarets of the World

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"It is my first time inside a city school. Signs on the doors tell me to sign in at the main office, but there are no directions to the main office. I ask a girl walking by; she points down a hallway to my left. As I walk I notice the floors are old; some of the tiles cracked and dirty. In the main office the principal, to whom I have spoken on the phone but never seen, rushes past me just as I explain to someone behind the desk that I have an appointment with her."

ORIGINAL ESSAY



*** Prize for original essay awarded by Dr. Michael Costanzo

***** The Margarets of the World**

It is my first time inside a city school. Signs on the doors tell me to sign in at the main office, but there are no directions to the main office. I ask a girl walking by; she points down a hallway to my left. As I walk I notice the floors are old; some of the tiles cracked and dirty. In the main office the principal, to whom I have spoken on the phone but never seen, rushes past me just as I explain to someone behind the desk that I have an appointment with her.

“Mrs. Jones!” the desk person calls. Mrs. Jones turns mid-flight. I stick out my hand and introduce myself.

“We spoke on the phone. I’m here to tutor a child in reading?” She looks at me blankly for a moment, then says, “Oh yes, come this way.” With long strides she leads me through the school, asking me questions as we go. I explain again, as I have done once on the phone to her and once on her voice mail, that I have three daughters of my own, all in school. That I lived in this neighborhood when I was young and single. That I’d like to help.

The teacher is not in her classroom. We stride briskly back down the hall to a teacher’s lounge. Ten or so teachers are seated around a table eating their lunch. They all pause and look up. No one smiles at the principal or at me when I am introduced. We are plainly intruding.

“This is Mrs. Williams,” the principal says to me, indicating a dour, middle-aged woman. “There is a student in her class for you to work with.” The principal leaves. The teachers still look at me. Mrs. Williams’ fork is frozen halfway to her mouth.

“I’ll wait in the main office until you’re done with your lunch,” I say hastily, and beat a retreat.

I am to work with a little girl named Margaret. Margaret is sticks on springs. Her tiny, skinny legs have amazing buoyancy, and she runs so lightly up and down the hall that I half expect to see her continue right on up the wall, like Fred Astaire in an old movie clip. Unfortunately she dances along the hallways when she should be sitting at a tiny, cramped desk with me, just outside her first-grade classroom door, where she and I are hunkered down to try and help her with her reading. Mrs. Williams has given me a brand-new pack of alphabet flashcards, still stuck together at their perforations. Did she buy these herself for this occasion? Or have they been among her supplies for a long time and she’s never found time to use them?

Margaret seems to know her alphabet fairly well, although she mixes up her b’s and d’s. The pictures on the backs of the cards are another matter. Going through them, I find that she is unable to identify a zebra. “A horse?” she asks. She doesn’t get lion right, either. “A tiger?” The lemon stumps her completely. “I don’t know,” she says. She doesn’t know what a xylophone is, or a teapot, or a bunch of carrots with their greenery, or a ladder. I wonder how often she has been read to.

After struggling through the alphabet, punctuated by my “Sit down, Margaret”s and “Come back please, Margaret”s, I read her a Xeroxed book provided by her teacher. She has plainly heard it a million times and doesn’t want to hear it once more. She is distracted by every event and person in the long hall, no matter how remote. She is a social butterfly and must greet everyone, and she must tell me who everyone is, and who their siblings are.

Teachers go by, leading long uneven columns of kids. In this part of the school they are all third grade and under. I am unpleasantly surprised by the way the teachers bark orders at the children. “Stand up! Stay in line! Be quiet! Stop that! Get back here! Cut that out!” The kids are unruly. Some fall on the floor. Some punch other kids. A few wave sticky little hands at me as they go by. Many smile. I smile and wink at them. We are supposed to be quiet.

Mrs. Williams gives me the same pack of flash cards the next time I come in, and Margaret is clutching the same paper book. Once again we are to work in the hall. This time I ask Margaret to read to me. She glances at each word for an instant, fixes her eyes on the ceiling, and guesses.

“Going?” she says. The word is “dog.” She tries another. “Like?” The word is “ball.” She won’t focus on the word or sound it out. I think she gives it a very fast look, sees a letter near the end, and thinks up the first word she can that begins with that letter. Is she dyslexic, I wonder? Surely the school would have already tested her for something like that. Mrs. Williams seems too harried for me to ask.

After several sessions with Margaret, I am beginning to be discouraged. I can hardly get her to look at a word or stay in her seat. Her spoken language seems to have little relationship to the written English she struggles with. When I tell her to read me a word, she says, “I can’t!” Her refrain is always, “I can’t read, it’s too hard, I don’t know that word, it’s too hard, I can’t, I don’t know.” She smiles broadly and twists her torso as she says it.

I say calmly, “Of course you can read.” When she gets a word I make a BIG DEAL out of it. We must do high fives, which I pretend give me a sore hand. That

makes her giggle. I say, “All right, Margaret! What a good job! See, I KNEW you could do it!” She grins, plainly pleased to be praised. I have brought a book from home this time, something with few words and colorful pictures. I invite her to sit on my lap for the story, knowing I am probably breaking some school rule, but she sits, and I read the story with so much expression that I feel like “master thespian,” but it seems to work – she listens to most of the book without fluttering away down the hall. I go home feeling slightly better.

My next time with Margaret is far different. Mrs. Williams tells me at the classroom door that Margaret has a temperature of 102° and is in the main office waiting to be picked up. Would I like to work with another child, or ...?

“Why don’t I go sit with Margaret until she gets picked up?” I say. “I can read to her if she wants.” For the first time, Mrs. Williams’ face creases into something resembling a smile. Is that relief in her eyes, or concern, or both?

There are about eight children eating lunch in the principal’s office. Whether they are all sick or there for some other reason, I don’t know. Is there no school nurse, I wonder? No health office? I remind the principal who I am and say I will sit with Margaret until she is picked up. Margaret’s eyes are red and glassy. “She isn’t getting picked up,” the principal barks, “but you can have her until she’s done with her lunch.” Behind the principal I see Margaret’s eyes well. Apparently until that moment she thought someone was coming for her.

Margaret trails out of the office with a lunch tray, her coat and backpack dragging on the floor. Silent tears are beginning to overflow her eyes. The principal shows us into a nearby empty office and leaves the door ajar. I help Margaret with her things, pull up a

chair for her, and sit down nearby. She stands. I say gently, “Are you okay, sweetie?” Margaret bursts into tears and says something long and, between the sobs, unintelligible. I stuff her little hands full of tissues and coax her closer, inch by inch, until I can give her a hug. She is burning hot.

I have brought another book, *Are You My Mother?* and I read this to her while she picks at the potato chips and sips the chocolate milk that came with her school lunch; she leaves everything else untouched. No, she isn’t hungry, she shakes her head in answer to my question. She sits more still than I have ever seen her sit and she listens carefully to every word of the book. Acutely conscious of the staff just outside the office door, I nevertheless read the story with all my best squeaky, silly, and growly voices. I ask Margaret questions. “Isn’t that guy funny?” and “Who do you think this is?” but she only shrugs. I sit close and from time to time rub her back while I read, again knowing that I am probably violating some no-touching rule but not caring. When I am done she asks to hear the book again! And she listens to it straight through a second time. On impulse, I give her the book, knowing my girls won’t mind parting with this outgrown treasure. Margaret nods, yes, she would like to have it to keep. I write her name in it and take her back to her classroom. I tell her I will see her next week. That I hope she feels better soon. I smile at the teacher (who doesn’t smile back), walk out through the halls, smile at everyone I pass, wave to a couple of kids. Then I get into my car. I start the engine. And I cry all the way home.

My three daughters have become quite interested in Margaret’s progress. When I make a set of vocabulary flash cards, my youngest daughter, age 8, helps me choose pictures and glue them onto index cards. As we flip through magazines she says, “Will

Margaret know what this is?" We rule out things like pineapples, lobsters, and binoculars. Finally we have about 35 picture cards. On the back I print their names: car, door, boy, cat, man, horse, elephant. We cover them with clear contact paper. My daughter is satisfied that we have done a good job.

And Margaret seems to like them. I explain that first we will look at all the pictures, then we will read the words. My goal is to teach her to sight-read these basic words. She looks interestedly at all the pictures and even gets some of the words correct the first time around. She tells me everyone in the pictures is "ugly" because it made me laugh the first time she said it. Afterwards we go through the cards I read her a story. She listens to most of it. For the first time, for some unknown reason, we are not to work in the hall but in the library. There is much less traffic there and Margaret focuses much better on the work at hand. I thank the teacher when I bring Margaret back to her classroom.

I notice something else, too. Teachers I see every week now smile and greet me (except Margaret's teacher). I hear them sometimes say kind and encouraging things to their straggly lines of kids, as well as sharp and admonitory things. I notice how some of the older kids walk along purposefully with books tucked under their arms.

I have been working with Margaret for five months now. I know she has a large family but I have been unable to get a clear account of exactly how many brothers, sisters, and pets she has. She speaks often and proudly of both parents but "my Dad" figures prominently in many things she tells me, and it is apparent that she adores him. I know nothing about her background, where she lives. I would like to meet her parents some day, shake their hands and tell them what a beautiful daughter they have, what a

good job they have done with her. For Margaret is sweet and funny, and so lively that she reminds me of a firefly, flashing brightly hither and thither as it travels through the dark.

As the weeks go by I notice that Margaret says “I can’t” less and less. She actually studies a word and sounds it out, and she can even sight read a handful of words, which she does with great glee, shouting out the word the instant she sees it and giggling at the astonishment and enthusiasm I display for each one she reads that way.

“Elephant” was a word she was convinced she’d never be able to figure out; now I show it to her while shaking my head and saying dismissively, “Ooh, this one’s too hard, I don’t think you....” Her whole body erupts out of the chair as she interrupts me with her excited shout: “Elephant!” “Oh, my GOSH!” I exclaim, my jaw dropping in amazement. Margaret giggles, pleased as punch.

We have been working hard on two simple rules: sound it out; and “e” on the end means the vowel in the middle says its own name. With these two rules she is reading more and more words with minimal help. Best of all, she has memorized big portions of *Are You My Mother?*, and comes to me each week with this book tucked under her arm. She thinks she is getting away with something because she can read those parts quickly and flawlessly. I am delighted to hear her say “mother” when I point to the word and slide effortlessly on to the next one: what Margaret thinks is cheating, I know is actually sight reading.

The school year is drawing to a close. I debate what to get Margaret for a gift for all her hard work, and settle finally on a small box of crayons and a dot-to-dot book. She discovered dot-to-dots in one of the teaching tools I brought along and seemed fascinated

by the idea that zooming her pencil around the numbers in order would reveal some mysteriously secret picture.

On my last day with Margaret I wait, as usual, in the hallway outside her classroom. Teachers are leading their wavering rows of children back from the lunchroom. Often, teachers walking by will roll their eyes at me; clearly, this gesture is meant to convey exasperation as well as a certain camaraderie.

Shouting from one end of the hall attracts my attention. Two rows of classes stand on one side of the hall, staring at a squirming little boy who stands alone on the other side. Two teachers are also staring at the lone boy. One of them yells, “Rico, show Mrs. Smith what you just did.” The boy squirms. “I said, SHOW HER!” yells the teacher. Nothing. “Show Mrs. Smith what you just did!” She yells yet again. She is still yelling at the child, a kindergartener, when Margaret’s class comes up and distracts me.

Two kids slap my hands, smiling, as they file into the classroom. “Get in there!” yells Margaret’s teacher. Another little girl stops to give me my weekly hug, although she has had no contact with me other than a smile as she goes into her classroom. Margaret’s teacher, who has never smiled at me nor called me by name (despite the name tag I wear), nor spoken more than a few words to me, now stands 12 inches in front of me, with her back to me, as she converses with another teacher, as though I am less visible than the class work taped to the wall behind me – which, I note, has been changed only twice in 5 months.

Margaret skips up, smiling, her book tucked under her arm. “Hey, bud,” I say. And we’re off for our final session.

I give Margaret her little present, praise her hard work, and wish her a happy summer before leaving the school, no need to sign out or say good-bye, for I doubt whether anyone other than Margaret's teacher even knows I was here, or what my name is. Not that I am expecting thanks or a going-away ceremony, and it is painfully obvious that the teachers have all they can handle already. But it would have been so easy for someone to say, "Would you like to come back?" Even though I am not an expert in child development or reading, it is plain to me that a small amount of individual attention and lavish praise has made a real difference in the capabilities of one child.

I can't help feeling sorry, as I leave, for the sensitive souls in the classrooms, mixed in with the kids whose first language is shouting, and wonder what will become of them, the Margarets of this small and inhospitable world?

By: Catherine Agar