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Margaret and Me

by Gill Hilton

Margaret stirred her morning coffee for one minute and twelve seconds. That might not sound like a long time but on the spectrum of coffee-stirring, believe me, it is an eon. I had asked her if she would like a cup of coffee. No, she said, she would make it herself. And so she placed herself by the kettle, blocking all further access to it, and prepared her beverage with laborious care and concern, lest the perfect choice of cup, water temperature, quantity of coffee granules and molecules of milk should not be correctly calculated and ceremoniously brought together. And then came the requisite stirring needed to create this best of all possible drinks. She did not offer to make me anything, perfect or otherwise.

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Margaret does not drive. I, feeling in sisterly and holiday spirit, offered to drive the three miles or so from our rented apartment to the seaside.

“How long does it take?” she said. “Are there toilets? Will we pass a good-sized supermarket?”

I answered each of these as best I could, trying to reflect in my tone of voice my understanding that her erratic bladder and strict dietary requirements are part and parcel of who she is.

Margaret burns easily in the sun, so she always wears long-sleeved blouses. The day was forecast to be a scorcher so I offered her my sun cream. My own forecast that she would refuse it was as accurate as the BBC's meteorological prediction turned out to be.

The walk from the car park to the beach was sweltering, and further than I had guessed.

“I'll have to stop,” said Margaret. “I'm too hot. It's this vest,” she said.

“What vest?”

“You have to wear a vest,” she said.

“What?”

“You can't wear a blouse without a vest, or you just get covered in sweat and the blouse sticks to you.”

“So how does the vest help?” I immediately regretted prolonging this conversation.

“It soaks up the sweat,” she said.

I managed to say nothing, but she persisted.

“It stops your clothes sticking to you. Otherwise you're just covered in sweat the whole time.”

The words pushed themselves out of my mouth: “But you're too hot.”

“Better than being sweaty,” she said.

I had a sip of water, hoping it would swill my mouthful of words away.

The beach conquered, I found a Waitrose that was only a minor detour from our journey back to the apartment. Margaret scowled at me as I bought a Big Issue from the woman outside the shop, and pushed on in with her trolley, loading it with expensive, organic, hand-reared oats and tofu-flavoured kefir.

“We'll have to find somewhere else to get my bat's milk cheese,” she said. “They've sold out.”

This I refused to believe, and then I realised she had said, 'goat's milk.' With bitterness I heard myself agreeing to go on a goat's milk cheese foray the next day.

In that moment, looking back on my life with Margaret, I realised that one seldom was able to do her a good turn without some thoughts of strangulation. I reminded myself that it was only day one of our fortnight's holiday, and slipped another bottle of Chardonnay into the trolley.