"My Name is Margaret."

Alice B. Walker*
"My Name is Margaret."

Alice B. Walker

Abstract

The station was crowded and I pushed impatiently past hundreds of people...
"My Name Is Margaret---"

Alice Brandt Walker

The station was crowded and I pushed impatiently past hundreds of people. I didn't look at them because I was tired and lonely and sick. Sick inside because now I was going home—alone. Back to that small apartment with the patched rug. That small apartment in Galesburg, Illinois, where Eddie's tie would be draped over the arm of a chair and the small room would smell of shaving lotion and—but I wouldn't let myself go.

I gave the porter my bags and followed him to section 12. When I turned around, there sat a girl—about my age, dark hair, a pale face—and then I noticed her eyes. They were brown—not an ordinary brown, but a brown that looked almost amber. Her dress wasn't exactly poor, a little worn and old—but neat and clean.

"My name is Margaret—what's yours?"

I answered, "Mine's Jan," in an amazed tone, because her voice was unlike her appearance. It was rich and beautiful and filled the end of the car with a sort of glow, and I felt better.

"Where are you going, Jan?" Margaret's voice startled me again.

"I am going home—my husband has just been shipped out"—I looked up, and her eyes told me to go on.

"My cat and dog will be there waiting for me—they're all I have now—since he's gone." I didn't know why I was telling her all this, yet—something about her fascinated me and I felt happy with her.

"So now I'm on my way home to store the furniture, then to start back to college and get my degree."

I had finished my story and my heart felt lighter, because she had shared my memories.

As I looked up again we were stopping at a station just outside San Francisco.

"I'm meeting the wife of my husband's commanding officer here. I won't be long—just a few moments," Margaret explained as she moved quickly out of the compartment.
I watched her as she talked—quiet, sincere. She was tall and graceful. The officer's wife handed her a small traveling kit, then in a few more minutes, took her hand and held it for a few moments, saying nothing. Then she turned quickly and walked away.

I watched, but didn't understand. I wanted her to come back because the room was lonely without her. I missed that smile—and those amber eyes, for they filled the section with warmth and a feeling of ease and comfort.

“She's a wonderful woman,” Margaret said, and again her genuine regard made me feel small and insignificant.

I waited for her story, but she didn't tell me much.

“My husband is a lieutenant in the troop command, and I am working in San Francisco,” she explained in answer to my questions.

I waited for more, but she merely asked, “Do you like to play cards?”—her eyes saying, “It'll help you forget, Jan.”

I hastily agreed because bridge is my game. We asked a sergeant and a corporal if they would like to play. They nonchalantly nodded, then did everything but break both arms and legs getting over to our seat—and Margaret and I laughed. They were typical “G.I. guys,” funny in a sarcastic way, “G.I.” butches, with every hair pointing skyward, ready and willing broad grins that were so broad they nearly enveloped their ears.

Every time Margaret was dummy she would knit on a pair of olive-drab gloves—she had been knitting on them ever since I got on the train.

“Yes, they're for my husband; he's in the troop command,” Margaret told the soldiers. But she didn't tell them he was a lieutenant because she was afraid they would feel ill at ease.

Her story came out in bits—rather reluctantly.

“Why do you call your husband ‘Chris?’” I asked. I waited, knowing, by her eyes, it was a real story.

She smiled and her eyes remembered. “I was reared in China, where my father did missionary work. That's where I met ‘Chris.’ The name Bill just didn't suit him and the name Hollister reminded the Chinese Monks of Holly, and Holly of Christmas—so they called him ‘Chris.’ The name has stuck through the years.” She smiled again, but her eyes did not, and again she picked up her knitting—those olive-drab gloves with the long forefingers.
I could have seen it—but I didn’t because I was too busy making a bid of four hearts.

“Come on, Marg, ol’ girl,” the Sergeant drawled; “your bid.”

“Oh,” Margaret looked up quickly and smiled and asked forgiveness. She laid down her knitting rather reluctantly and picked up her hand.

The game continued and the arguments were heated and long. My system of bridge was not going to work with the Sergeant because he had read the 1943 version of Culbertson! The Sergeant always had an answer for everything; I soon learned that.

“I wonder how often I’ll hear from Eddie?” I asked—partly of myself, partly of them.

“That Rookie,” the Sergeant and Corporal laughed. “The war’ll be over before he gets in.”

I ignored the remarks about my Rookie husband and listened as Margaret said, “I hear from ‘Chris’ quite regularly, but I can’t write because fellows in that branch don’t have an A.P.O.”

“That’s right,” agreed the Corporal—“I bid three clubs.”

The day passed, and as I lay in the lower berth that night I could see Margaret’s eyes—so full of beauty, I wondered if anything would ever mar them. But soon the gentle rocking of the train put me to sleep and dreams of Eddie—wherever he was.

By now, our foursome was known all over the train. All the Sergeant’s “buddies” came back to talk and show us pictures of their girls—girls at home, as Margaret and I would be in a few more days.

Margaret still had on that blue tweed skirt and blue hand-knit sweater.

“I packed things in such a hurry I didn’t leave out anything else to wear,” she explained but did not excuse. “When I received word that ‘Chris’ was coming home, I started East to wait for him in Ohio at his home. I hope I haven’t bungled things.”

I assured her quickly she was doing the right thing and took her explanation of clothes—but it didn’t fit. Margaret wasn’t the type to forget.
“Jan,” Margaret said, changing the subject, “I could write a book about you.”

I laughed and dramatically flung back my hair: “That’s what they all say!”

I received a big hand from my appreciative audience, and Margaret laughed with them. I turned my attention to a bridge game that, I knew, would last all day—and it did!

The marine and his wife across the aisle talked on, and Margaret picked up her knitting again—those olive-drab gloves with the long forefingers. The army drifted in and out and kept coming back—coming back to Margaret because her eyes held understanding for them also.

At lunch we talked of home, and Margaret’s eyes were dull and flat.

“I’m not sure I want to go to Ohio now,” she said hesitantly. “But I guess we can’t all like our mothers and fathers-in-law.”

This brought forth a standard joke from the Sergeant and Margaret’s eyes were smiling again.

“You know,” she said rather reluctantly, “I’m just beginning to get a little excited. My Mother’s coming home on the Gripsholm tomorrow, and I haven’t heard from her for two years. She’s been in a Japanese internment camp—my father’s still there.”

I was silent. Again I was at a loss to understand her. We all were—even the Sergeant.

“It’s like someone coming back from the dead. It’ll take a little while to get used to having a mother again.” She looked up at our blank faces and laughed.

“You see, I’ve been working on my master’s degree at the University of Chicago where my husband taught philosophy, and I haven’t been with my parents for some time.”

We smiled knowingly—but we didn’t understand. As we left the dining car, she picked up her blue knitting bag that looked as if it had everything but her bed in it and took out her olive-drab gloves again. In a little while I noticed she was very deliberately ripping out the forefingers in both gloves.

“I decided ‘Chris’ wouldn’t need these, and since the Corporal doesn’t have any, I’d better give them to him. Then he won’t freeze in Chicago,” Margaret said, and the Corporal readily agreed. “I’m from Florida and don’t even own any winter clothes—only tropical khakis,” he explained.

I sat and watched them. They filled the empty space and made
me forget. The laughter, talking—the stories—were all a part of it. And Margaret, I couldn't forget her for a minute—nor will I ever forget her.

"Well—here we are in Galesburg. That's where I leave."

Margaret went back to the compartment with me, and as I packed my clothes I said, "Hope you and 'Chris' get together for Christmas."

She didn't answer, and I went on packing.

They all got off the train to bid me goodbye, but at first the Sergeant and Corporal were too busy looking around to pay any attention to us.

I repeated my wish about Christmas, and again Margaret was silent. I looked at her questioningly.

"I didn't want to tell you this, I didn't want to tell anyone, because I was afraid it would spoil your trip—but 'Chris' is dead."

The words hung for a moment, clear, concise, and then smashed to the still, quiet platform.

I stood there—still—and felt like a small child standing in front of a huge, beautiful monument.

I couldn't say, "I'm sorry"—that would have been all wrong. Then finally words came.

"I feel so cheap and small"—and at that moment I hated myself.

"Don't—please don't Jan. Don't you see—I wanted it this way. I've had fun—you've helped me through the first and worst days. You've made my trip a happy one"

I was going to stop her, but I couldn't.

"I wanted to help you when you got on the train, because I knew how you felt—I went through it too, but you're just starting—my waiting is ended."

Even now her eyes were deep and shining.

"I didn't want anyone to know because I don't want pity—I can't live all my life on pity and sympathy."

I knew I should say something. But what? What could I say to a woman whose life was ended, whose world was shattered? I only felt humbled and small. Me—with all my cheap little remarks, my begging for sympathy, with my expensive clothes and gay, casual remarks.

"The telegram came yesterday, and I'm going to Ohio to settle his affairs. God only knows how I dread that visit with his parents." She turned around, walked a little way, and then came back. "Even Western Union has a touch of humor in it. They
come to the door, hand you a yellow envelope, some smelling
salts, and a hundred dollars.”

I saw a smile on her lips and dreaded remembrance in her eyes.
“But ‘Chris’ was fighting for something”—she paused—“this
may sound ‘corny’ to you, Jan, but—some day I’m going to put it
down on paper so the whole world can read it—read it and know
what Lieutenant William Hollister died for.”

The Sergeant and Corporal came back from their little excur­sion and Margaret said, “Don’t tell them—let us go on this way.”

By this time the two were bidding me goodbye.
“So-long, Jan, ol’ girl, and take care of that Rookie of yours.”
“Yah,” repeated the Corporal. “We were only kidding about
him being a Rookie. Don’t you worry about him—he’ll be O.K.”

“Good luck, Jan,” Margaret said, and pressed my hand tightly
in hers.

I started to say “Good luck” to her but stopped; it would have
been cruel and ironic.

“Goodbye, Margaret,” I said simply.

The train pulled out, and as I stood there in the cold December
snow, four words kept running through my mind—“My name is
Margaret.”