



# Chapter 9

Bởi:  
unknown

Maggie and I were sitting in the patient sunroom in our wheelchairs. Her cancer had flared up again and they'd admitted her. With her fuzzy head and her toothpick figure, draped as she was in a hospital gown that would have accommodated three more of her, she looked like a little ragamuffin doll. When I told her that, she opened the omnipresent pink journal. "Note to self," she said aloud as she wrote in the journal, "write a poem about Maggie the Magamuffin." Most anyone at Memorial Hospital would have caught the double meaning in that poem, because many a morning you could catch the scent of Maggie's special muffin recipe (called, of course, Magamuffins) wafting through patient care unit corridors. Poems for the soul, muffins for the body, as Maggie would say.

Maggie made a quick note in her pink journal and closed it. "When I first got diagnosed, I was pretty bummed," she said. "I wasn't what you would call a model of positive thinking." Maggie cackled like a six-year-old laughing at the punch line of her own joke. "I started writing poems for the same reason that Saint Exupéry flew airplanes – you know, the guy who wrote *The Little Prince*? To free my mind from the tyranny of petty thoughts. I think it saved my life, back in those desperate lonely times, creating an imaginary sex life filled with romantic couplets and one-night stanzas." Another cackle. "So I thought if writing poems could be part of my healing, then maybe writing them for other people could be part of their healing. And you know what?"

"What?"

"Turns out that sharing poems has been even more important for my own healing than writing them has. Every time I write a poem for someone else, I'll bet I kill a million cancer cells."

"So how did you get a job as the hospital poetry therapist?"

Maggie shrugged. "Just asked for it. I went to see the director of the volunteer department with the idea, and she said yes. I suppose it helped that my application was in the form of a poem."

Maggie pulled her knees up to her chest and rested her chin on them. Without thinking, I tried to do the same, but of course the message got lost somewhere between my brain and my leg muscles. “You’d be surprised,” Maggie said, “just how important a simple little poem can be in someone’s healing.”

“Yeah, I probably would be,” I replied. “Before I met you, I’d never even heard of a poetry therapist. In fact, I probably would have laughed at the idea.” If Maggie was offended by this comment, she didn’t show it.

“I’ll tell you about one,” Maggie said as she wiggled around in her wheelchair. “Several years ago, I wrote a poem for a mom who’d lost her baby. I said that a baby is like a mermaid on a moonbeam, breathing there inside you. It’s magic, and no matter what happens, some bit of that magic, the magic of the mermaid on the moonbeam, is always there.” Not for the last time, I marveled at how someone so young could have become so wise. Maggie continued: “A while later, I got a letter from that woman. She told me that of all the piles of paper she’d taken home from the hospital, my poem was the only thing she’d kept, that it was framed on the wall in her bedroom. So you see, even long after the doctors and nurses finished their work, my poem is still helping that mom to heal.”

My memory went back to the miscarriage I’d had before Robbie was born. I’d left the hospital more than merely grief-stricken; I’d felt that my baby’s death had somehow been my fault. How different might my emotions have been had Maggie been there to write me a poem?

“Want to know a secret?” Maggie asked. I nodded, and she said, “when the nurses take care of you, it’s not just them taking care of you – you’re also taking care of them. It’s a two-way relationship, whether the two of you know it or not.”

“How can I be taking care of my nurses when I’m flat on my back in bed?”

“That doesn’t matter. In fact, it might even help you empathize. You’ve seen how hard the nurses here work, and how stressful their jobs can be. They’ve got problems at work, they’ve got problems at home, and they’ve got to leave all those problems out in the hallway every time they walk into a patient’s room. And you know what? Some patients make their nurses sick, and I mean that literally. They don’t want to be in the hospital, and they go out of their way to let everyone know it.”

“So what can you do?” Even as I asked the question, I knew what the answer was going to be.

“Well, for one thing, you could write your nurse a poem. One of my nurses was going through a really tough time. You’d never have known it just watching her, but one of her kids had been busted for drugs and she was going through a nasty divorce. I wrote

a poem for her, a poem about finding strength in adversity – how it’s like stumbling across an oasis in the desert. She cried when I gave it to her. Maybe this was the first time anyone had recognized that this caregiver also needed to be given some care. It was like my poem was the hug she needed, you know, a hug printed on paper.”

“I imagine she has your poem framed up on her wall, too,” I said.

Maggie nodded. “Maybe so.” We both looked out the window for a while, comfortable with the silence. At last, Maggie said, “You should do this, Carrie Anne. You’d make a great poetry therapist.”

I just laughed. “Oh, Maggie, you’ve got to be kidding! Why, I haven’t written a poem since the ninth grade. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“It’s actually pretty easy,” she replied. “You just put yourself in the shoes of the person you’re writing for, then write a poem for yourself, the ‘you’ who’s in those shoes. It will come out perfect, every time. Guaranteed.”

I laughed again and shook my head. “I’m afraid I’m not creative like you are, Maggie. I don’t have a Poetry Muse.”

“Of course you do. Everyone has a Poetry Muse. You just need to wake her up. It’s a actually good thing you haven’t written a poem since ninth grade. That means you have bunches of them stored in your memory banks.”

“I doubt it, Maggie. When it comes to poetry, I’m afraid my memory banks are empty because I haven’t been making any deposits.”

“Then you’re going to have to steal some. There’s really only one master poem, you know. Everything else is just a variation. So if you don’t have a good idea yourself, just go out and steal one.”

“Steal one! You’re kidding, right?”

Maggie cackled in the way that only Maggie could cackle. “No I’m not. And actually, I even stole that advice – from T. S. Eliot. He said that good poets *borrow*, but great poets *steal*. And he should know, because he was a great poet.”

“You’re very persuasive, young lady,” I said, “but I’m afraid I’m too old to start writing poetry now, even if I were to steal ideas.”

“Too old?” Maggie cocked her head to the side and frowned. “How old do you have to be to be too old to write poetry?”

Before I could answer, Maggie's nurse walked into the sunroom. She apologized for interrupting, but Maggie was scheduled for a procedure. After they'd left, I started doodling on the notepad I kept in the pouch on the side of my wheelchair. Though I didn't want to admit it, Maggie was right. My memory banks *were* filled to overflowing with poems waiting to be born. I could almost picture them as real physical things. I picked up the pen and started to write:

The Envelope, Please

My memory is an envelope  
into which I place my thoughts  
and experiences.

All those poems waiting to be written.

I address it to the Me I don't yet know.

Seal it with a first class kiss.

Drop it into the Big Blue Box.

And pray

that it doesn't get lost in the clouds.

It was the first poem I'd written since the ninth grade. I have no idea how many hours I spent writing, scratching out, and writing again, so totally did I give myself over to this maiden voyage back into the world of poetry.

Maggie, Maggie. The mermaid poet dispensing miracle poems, who herself was so desperately in need of a miracle. As it turned out, being a mermaid was no protection against being eaten by sharks.