



***The Misadventures
of
Margaret & Dick
(The First Collection)***

Margaret Graham

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By
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Introduction

A collection of The Misadventures of Margaret and Dick with all the right misadventures, but not necessarily in the right order, as beloved Eric Morecombe might well have said. These moments of high drama have been hauled from Facebook, and jotted down in response to a tsunami of requests ('Stop exaggerating,' says Dick.) They include 'in the time of Covid', more recent incidents, and those that are probably deeply showy offy and inappropriate.

This is the First Collection containing 55 Episodes. A second collection will be available in time for Christmas 2023.

Episode 1

Margaret and Dick were out early to walk the dogs. Margaret 'sees' to Polly's offerings with a little black bag, Dick to Rosie's. They entered the Sports Village. All dogs have to be on a lead because some grown-ups are so so bad at 'picking up' (Do hope you've had brekky) Dick seemed to be lagging behind. Margaret turned, looked, and yes, there was Dick, bum in the air, searching the verge with Rosie looking bored. Polly and Margaret made their way to him.

'I know it's here,' Dick said.

'OK,' Margaret said. She waited.

Dick tutted. 'Yes, it's here somewhere.'

Rosie looked too and almost said, 'Come on, Come on. Yes, it's right there so what's the problem? Honestly, Polly, you just can't get the staff.'

Finally, Dick straightened. 'I know it's there.'

Margaret bent down and looked. Yes, plain to see, there it was. Margaret pointed.

'I still can't see it,' said Dick.

Time was awasting, they had plods to do. In fairness the grass was long, but even so ...

Margaret pointed again, her finger approaching a little closer.

'Where? I still can't see it,' Dick said.

Margaret said, loudly, 'There, where I'm pointing. I'm not going to touch it, for heaven's sake.'

'It's not my fault I can't see red if it's among green,' humphed Dick. 'That's why I couldn't join the RAF.'

Oh, Jeez, thought Margaret, not colour blindness again. 'It's not red, it's brown.' Well yes, she supposed she was very loud.

Margaret stabbed her finger much closer, almost touching the offending article. The dogs were restless, Margaret was beyond restless. Dick too was on the edge.

At last, at last the black bag was in action. At that moment applause broke out. Margaret and Dick turned and there were six other dog walkers, correctly distanced, in thrall to the pantomime.

'She started it,' Dick said.

Margaret merely raised her eyebrows, and then remembered it was an action not allowed now in some universities or something like that. She kept them raised, so very there. They went even higher when a helpful (busybody frankly) dog walker said, 'Actually brown is close to red, so Dick could be right.'

No-one, least of all Margaret, likes a suck up.

Dick bowed. Margaret and Dick said goodbye, and walked on to the buttercup field, very very quietly.

Episode 2

Margaret and Dick and the dogs tottered along with Margaret who was training to walk Hadrian's Wall.

Dick said, 'Look at that great big bird flying in a really tight circle – there it goes, above the distant allotments. But why?' They looked up at it circling; round it went, and round again - on and on.

'Just for once I have to say I don't know,' said Margaret. 'Because of course, I usually do.'

Dick sighed, the dogs sighed. Margaret wondered why they sighed.

On they walked, and still the bird circled.

'Perhaps' said Margaret, inspired as she so often is, 'It is circling prey.'

They stopped and looked. They walked on, closer and closer, then fell quiet, even Margaret who is never quiet, or so says Dick.

'See, I told you it was circling,' said Margaret.

'Circling prey you said. It's a bird scarer,' said Dick. Because by now they had seen the pole, and the wire that attached the bird to the pole. The bird was made of black material and didn't really look very like a bird at all.

'Circling prey indeed,' muttered Dick.

Dick likes to be right, but Margaret likes to be right too. This morning no-one was right. So they walked on rather quietly, looking round, hoping no-one had heard them.

They passed a kind lady who was herding ducks, and adolescent ducklings, away from the road. The ducks and ducklings walked in a straight line as the lady ran backwards and forwards, herding them while quite a few people watched.

'Those are real,' Dick said.

Margaret knew they were and thought Dick was showing off.

Someone else said, 'They were playing in the road. The traffic had stopped, so she is getting them back to the beck.'

All the onlookers thought she was wonderful, and clapped. It upset the ducks, they ran about willy-nilly, so the lady had to gather them up again. Everyone crept away pretending they were not the ones who had clapped.

Margaret and Dick passed two rabbits. Margaret zoomed the camera because they weren't being naughty and doing what rabbits seem to do a lot, but were just playing. She said this to Dick.

'If you say so.' Dick has his own thoughts on some things.

Approaching Thirsk they saw that work was being done on The Sports Centre. Margaret saw two pigeons who were making a nest in the lovely little hole in the eaves the nice workmen had made when they took apart the roof.

'They'll have a bit of the other, and there'll be eggs,' Margaret said.

Dick said nothing. The dogs said nothing. They all stood quietly and worried whether the workmen would turn them and the eggs out. Dick especially worried that Margaret would 'have a word' with the nice workmen who might not remain nice.

He is probably right to worry. Margaret takes her role of 'she who knows everything' seriously.

Margaret and Dick didn't see anything else on their walk, they just kept going until they thought Rosie looked as though she was tired, so they all sat on the verge at the edge of the barley field and rested, and thought of all the nature they had seen that morning.

Rosie wasn't tired, but she knew Dick and Margaret were, so Rosie and Polly let them pretend the grown-ups were concerned about Rosie. At last it was time to plod plod home with Rosie and Polly feeling very glad that Thirsk was rather a weird place to live, which is what kept Margaret happy. Margaret is a bit weird too you see. No-one tells her that, of course.

Episode 3

Margaret walked into town to the Post Office, because she had to send a knitted crib blanket to her God-daughter's new baby. Mr M was not there. A nice young woman was. Margaret sent it, then the lights went out, not all over England, just in the PO end of the Co-op.

Margaret said, safely unrecognisable behind her mask. 'I will have to feel my way out. It could be nice.'

'Now then, young Margaret,' said a man. 'You just remember I am taken.' Margaret's mask is only good for Covid, clearly.

Off she went for her 8, perhaps 9 mile walk, feeling that her cover was blown. (But thank you for the young, Mr Man). Up and Over the ancient barrow in the corner of the field.

'So sorry to disturb you, everyone', she said to those buried beneath. It's what she always says and Dick thinks they must hear the thud of her feet, and know the apology is coming and would scream with irritation, if they could.

Round the copse twice, Margaret went, then on and on, then saw her friend, and stopped to talk, but not for long. On she walked until it was time to turn for home. Margaret sat in the conservatory with Rosie and Polly, and Dick. She told them about the 'blackout', the copse, the wild flowers, the man in the co-op who called her young, a friend she met... She looked at the dogs on the chair and said, 'What do you think the girls are thinking?'

'Does she ever stop talking?' Dick muttered.

Margaret decided not to be on speakers, to give them their wish and then they'd be sorry. She took roses to her neighbours. They like her Old English, which are so fragrant. Margaret told them about the 'blackout', and other things. They told Margaret how lovely the roses were.

Margaret returned. She made coffee. Rosie and Polly were up with Dick in his study. Margaret thought she might just sit and drink her own coffee because she wasn't sure if she was yet on speakers. But Margaret's mother would have said that sort of behaviour wasn't kind, funny or nice.

Margaret called, 'Coffee.'

'Come into the hall,' Dick called. Margaret did, carrying the two mugs of coffee. The girls were sitting on the bottom step, and Dick, the trickster, had given Polly a bread-face.

Margaret laughed and laughed. She spilt the coffee.

Rosie ate Polly's bread face, which Dick had cut from a loaf he made, with two holes so that she could see, and a hole for her nose, so she could breathe. Dick liked making bread. Margaret thought the machine sounded like one of those heavy breathing nuisances that sometimes phone. It does that when it is kneading which Margaret finds a bit of a do, because it makes such a meal of it.

Dick mopped the floor.

Margaret made more coffee.

They all sat in the conservatory, and Margaret couldn't talk because she was drinking coffee so everyone was happy.

This is the sort of day Margaret and Dick have very often. It is why Margaret has a glass of white wine in the evening, and Dick has a LARGE glass of red wine, and they watch Montalbano from the box set to enjoy Sicily, and the food Montalbano eats. They have to read the sub-titles which means they have to concentrate and not talk, but often they still don't

know what's happening, and who killed who as the sun sets over the Mediterranean and all is well with the world.

Episode 4

Margaret and Dick had a very strange day earlier in the week but she couldn't write it down the very next day because she had her swirling head, which means she has to lie down. It's a nuisance, like travel sickness but you haven't been anywhere. The doc said, ages ago, to take travel sickness pills, and lie down in the quiet. Dick likes the quiet bit.

Anyway, two days ago they were walking with Polly and Rosie down a narrow lane, near a farm. They turned the corner.

'Oh,' said Margaret. 'Oh, heavens.'

'What is it now?' asked Dick. Margaret felt the 'now' was a little unfair, as she hadn't caused any ructions - thus far... Well, that morning at least.

'A pig, in our way. A pig with udders.'

'Other what?' asked Dick, coming round the corner.

'Oh,' Dick said.

Margaret said 'Quite.'

Because, yes really, there was a HUGE pink sow, blocking the way. Margaret and Dick picked up the dogs.

'Go on, Mrs Pig, off you go,' Margaret said, not sure whether to push the HUGE sow to one side.

The HUGE sow turned and looked, long grass hanging from her mouth.

Her eyes said, 'If you touch me I'll 'ave your 'and... In one bite.'

Margaret thought the sow must have had a lot of piglets, and had been feeling frazzled, and so had escaped for some peace. Margaret understood because she has had a lot of children too.

For a moment, Margaret felt they had bonded, and said, soothingly, 'Off you go, just a little, so we can slip past on the verge.'

Margaret didn't really want to slip past on the verge because there were nettles, and her legs would be stung because she always wears skirts. Why? Her back view in jeans leaves much to be desired.

She called to Dick, 'Take a photo, quick quick.'

'Stop talking. Just get past her,' said Dick.

The sow moved, a little. Margaret slipped alongside, sting, sting. Dick followed, but wears trousers so wasn't stung. They hurried down the path to tell the farmer, feeling a bit important because he would want to know. They saw him by a fence, and told him. He thanked them. They felt even more important.

They walked on, and Margaret wished they had taken a photo.

'Stop talking,' Dick said.

Quietly they ended up at the beck. Really truly, there was a cow across the path. Margaret didn't have to pick up Polly because there was enough room, so she took a photo, and slipped past, and so did Dick.

'How very strange,' they said together.

Then ... Then ... Then ... later in the day, something really really strange happened.

Margaret read on Facebook that Enid Blyton's books had been cancelled.

Margaret was a bit bamboozled with this, on top of all the strange goings on of the day. So Margaret wrote on Facebook that things and people shouldn't be cancelled willy-nilly.

Someone replied that they thought 'Someone could be offended at you using the word willy-nilly. After all, they might not have one.'

Margaret read it to Dick.

'The world's gone stark staring mad,' Dick said.

Margaret said she would organise a march to Hyde Park. One of the grands would be in a Noddy pedal car, and lots of friends would dress as Big Ears, Noddy or one of the Secret Seven, or the Famous Five, and they would chant. 'Keep your hands off our willy-nillies.'

For once Dick didn't tell her to stop talking. So very there.

Episode 5

Margaret and Dick went on holiday to Malta some years ago and Margaret was reminded of this by a friend, who happened to have just read a short story by Margaret in a magazine, a story based on this debacle. No no, this experience, Margaret corrected her.

Margaret and Dick had gone to Malta because Dick spent 3 years there as a child when his father was in the RN, and he loved it. Dick flew a lot with work. Dick usually went Club Class. Margaret and the children had never flown Club Class. This was a package holiday plane. There was only one class. Margaret sat with the older children. Dick sat across the aisle with the youngest, a tiddler. Dick was not happy.

'I have no room for my legs' he said.

Margaret said, under her breath, 'Join the real world.'

Dick did not hear because the youngest is a bad traveller like her mother and the plane had started along the runway.

'I feel sick' the youngest said.

'Of course you don't, we're still on the ground,' said Dick.

Margaret looked across. 'Get the brown bag, NOW.'

Dick did, but too late.

'I told you I felt sick,' the youngest said.

One minute later the plane took off. Once cleaned up Dick held another brown bag at the ready the whole of the flight, his knees up round his ears, saying that he really wasn't used to this.

The youngest told him to, 'Stop talking.'

Dick told her she would go to bed with no tea.

The youngest cried, but there were no real tears.

A day later, Margaret and Dick were by the pool. The children were quarrelling, all four of them. Dick had gone to the bar. BAD Dick. Margaret looked around and saw a high slide. Margaret doesn't like slides, not high ones. But, she thought, perhaps it would be quiet up there because the quarrelling was loud and it made her feel frazzled, like the sow, who couldn't have climbed to the top of the slide, let's face it.

The trouble was, that if Margaret went up, she would really, as a matter of pride, have to come down into the water. Margaret doesn't like a wet face or pool water that bleaches her dyed hair. But as the noise of quarrelling rose so did Margaret.

One foot on the ladder, brushing the rope aside. It must be to keep small children away. Well, it was very high. She took another step, then another.

The gardeners waved at her. Two shouted their good luck. It was very hot but she had her cotton sunhat on, which would float when she hit the water and which she would take care to recapture.

Up to the top Margaret went, and now the whole poolside was in awe, some beckoned from their sunbeds, some pointed, some bellowed but Margaret couldn't hear what they said but knew it was almost time to slip slide and splash.

'Yes,' Margaret called. 'Just about to sit, and then I will be on my way.'

How very brave she was, because no-one else had been down the long long high slide all day. Down Margaret sat. The steel was very hot, and frankly, she was quite a tight fit.

Tally ho, Margaret thought and pushed off. She slithered, slid, but only for a yard, then there was a ghastly screech of thigh flesh on even hotter steel. She did hope no-one had heard. Shudder, judder, stop. She could go neither forward, or back. The poolside was rather quiet now.

'Are you mad?' called Dick fetched from the bar by No 1 son. 'It's a water-slide and it's broken, there is no water to sluice you down. That's why they were calling you.'

'But they were waving me on,' Margaret explained.

'They were using sign language, rude sign language, telling you to stop.'

She now understood why the rope had been across the bottom of the ladder. Momentarily she felt absurd, and then that Dick was being rather rude. Was there any need to shout quite so loudly?

But then she realised that apart from that it was quiet, and the view of the gardeners was excellent as they rushed hither and thither, collecting garden hoses willy-nilly.

Dick sat down on a lounger, in the shade and read his newspaper. It became hotter. Margaret relaxed under her sunhat glad that the kids had disappeared. She ignored Dick when he shouted to her that they couldn't bear the shame, the embarrassment, the mortification. Dick could be prone to over egging the pudding.

Hotter and hotter it grew, The poolside voyeurs, even Dick, had joined the gardeners and all were trying to fix the hoses together, somehow.

Margaret was by now uncomfortably hot. Steel gets that way. She also feared she looked liked a tomato, and her sunhat was cerise, so – horrors -was she clashing?

She asked Dick who was back on his lounger. He sighed, checked on the gardeners and slipped into the water and waited at the bottom of the slide. Margaret thought it would be nice to have a cushion to land on, when...

Goodness, Margaret had no idea a metal slide could get quite so hot, her thighs were on fire, but the gardeners were coming, manhandling the joined together hose. A gardener climbed the ladder, saying lots in Maltese, as he dragged the hose behind him. He reached the top. Margaret smiled at him. He did not smile back. In fact, Margaret thought, he growled.

The poolside were back at their sunbeds, watching, waiting, their cameras out. Oh, how Margaret liked being a star. The water was turned on. For some while the water built up behind Margaret's bum, and slopped over the side of the slide, because there was no way round such a HUGE dam. Margaret's bottom, however, was deliciously cool.

'Liefert, liefert,' the gardener shouted from behind her. 'Eh?' Margaret asked, turning round.

He pointed to his buttocks, and then the sky. The crowd laughed. Margaret duly lifted her buttocks, the water slithered, and slipped beneath.

'Siet, siet', the gardener shrieked.

Margaret sat, and was sluiced, yes, sluiced down, quicker, quicker into the cool cool water where Dick waited to catch her. Margaret missed him. Down and down she went while her hat bobbed on the surface. Dick grabbed her arm, and pulled her up. Margaret, gasping, grabbed her hat. Dick hauled her to the side, because Margaret could only do a bit of doggy paddle, but she had sort of forgotten that, so frazzled had she been when she went up the ladder of the high slide. No word was spoken.

Margaret thanked Dick as he shoved her up and out.

Dick did not say, 'You're very welcome.'

Margaret stood, and bowed to the poolside and gardeners who were clapping, laughing cheering. She thanked them all of course, feeling a bit like the Queen, but Dick said the Queen would never in a million years have got herself stuck on a water-slide.

Dick offered beers in the bar. More cheers. No 1 son had taken a photograph.

'One for the album,' he said.

Margaret has not been on a water slide again. Dick and Margaret have ever since chosen a hotel with a pool and an outside bar, but no slide. The children have left home, oh no, not because of the slide but because they are old enough. So it is quiet.

But the slide performance it is one of her favourite short stories. Oh, how she, and Dick, suffer for her art.

'You have no idea how much,' Dick is known to mutter.

Episode 6

Margaret is on her Hadrian's Wall walk. What a toddle it had been to reach the morning of Day 3. Her feet are talking to her: 'Really woman? Another day in this heat?'

Margaret and her friend Penny are the rearguard, self appointed. But necessarily so. You see the group have some really fast trail walkers who have watches with timers which show them how many miles they have walked in how many minutes, or so Margaret and Penny think because whatever else would all the clicking be for, every time they stopped and started.

Patrick, the group's guide, often calls a halt for everyone to look at bibs and bobs of Roman Forts, or Roman carvings on the wall, and/or beautiful views, perhaps an interesting bird, all of which gives the rearguard a chance to catch up.

When this occurs the front 'runners' (Margaret uses that term with feeling) click their watches, and scream to a STOP. Puff pant comes the rearguard. They are all reminded that here is a fort, as there is every mile, to warn of marauding Scots.

Suspicious beings, the Romans especially when one considers they had actually arrived uninvited. Just saying.

Guests, Margaret thinks, are like fish, they go off after 3 days and Romans stayed much longer than that.

Margaret mentioned this to the group. Strangely they clicked their watches and set off without answering. Penny gave Margaret a Dick look, which meant 'Stop talking.'

The group walked alongside or on the foundations of the wall, mostly because the stones were removed once the Romans had gone. The stones were recycled for other buildings, or walls.

'There you are, recycling isn't something only the young do,' Margaret said.

This time the runners laughed, and stayed a bit to chat. Then, as always - click, off go the leaders, Gulp of water, off go the rearguard. They look like separate groups, because Margaret and Penny take photos, marvel at what they see, stop and talk to the fundraising Macmillan supporter walking towards them, heading for the end. He started in Newcastle, Margaret's group in Bowness.

The Macmillan walker was a widower and Macmillan were wonderful to his wife. His sons have arrived to walk with him for the last two days. They all talk about his wife. Margaret and Penny donate. Then set off again, the gap is bigger.

Margaret and Penny catch them at a small bridge. They are waiting, the timers clicked off. A man and his wife are coming the other way.

'Hello' says Margaret. 'Lovely day.' They chat and learn his father built the bridge to get the cattle across in 1962. His father left his initials. He clears a patch of the path of mud, weeds and cigarette ends. There they are WRM; Walter Robert Michison, drawn into the concrete before it had set. It is his son Robert who is showing these initials to the group.

This is, for Margaret, the high point of that particular day. Click go the watches, off the leaders sprint again. Off lumbers the rearguard. It's so hot, even the sheep seek shelter beneath the ancient oaks.

Episode 7

Yesterday the group walked further on Hadrian's Wall in similar heat heading towards a Roman dig. On the way the group walked along a turf wall, instead of one of stones, and beside them a vallum, a sort of moat. And a bit later they passed two mounds, about a metre high and 2 metres at the base. No-one knew what they were. One of the party suggested they were the burial barrows of dinosaur moles. Everyone looked at her, then at the mounds. 'B.....y big ones,' Margaret murmured.

As usual Penny and Margaret were the rearguard. Margaret had to take pics of the mounds while Penny and the group sauntered on. A young man, who must have been as hot as Margaret, came towards her. He looked rather fine, and had a rolled umbrella strapped across the top of his backpack, a look which Margaret liked very much. Margaret became silly.

'Hello,' she said. He stopped.

'Are you aware that is the old turf wall, and the dip is the vallum, a sort of moat?' She said.

'Why no,' he said. 'And the mounds?'

'Ah, the mounds,' Margaret said, 'These are barrows within which are buried dinosaur moles, one in each because they were so very huge. They died out because they couldn't find sufficient food. These are rare mounds.'

'Good heavens,' said the young man. 'I had no idea.'

As Margaret's party vanished over the hill she felt that perhaps she had gone too far, as she so often did. 'Oh yes,' she said. 'They were called Daisy and Alice.'

He stared at the mounds, then at her, and then, oh how they laughed as he nodded, 'Ah, got me there.'

He laughed again, a little nervously, because he wasn't used to meeting a shiny (sweaty) tomato recently escaped from the local lunatic asylum, wearing a child's floppy sunhat bought because it was the only one that fitted, as she has a small head.

She also wore a large bum bag at the back, from which dangled her socks which she had washed last evening – almost dry, and a small bum bag at the front.

'Goodbye,' they said to one another and Margaret caught up with her group and told them of her adventure.

'You didn't say that?' said the lady who had mentioned moles. 'Oh yes she absolutely would,' said Penny. Oh how they laughed. But they a little nervously. They too, however, looked like tomatoes, which was reassuring to Margaret.

Click, off they all went. The leader, conscious Margaret had been fascinated by the marks that craftsmen made - Roman and recent - showed them another Roman one. It was a mark of strength carved into the wall in the shape of a willy. Oh yay.

Just before they arrived at the dig they came upon a man dressed as an itinerant metal worker from Roman times. God bless him, Margaret thought, as he waited for 40 school children to arrive by coach, as you do, to go to the museum and archaeological dig. He said he enjoyed it. The children certainly did, because Margaret and Penny bumped into them all as they ran around the dig absorbing their history.

Margaret had to put on the fan in her B and B bedroom, and have a large glass of wine in the pub where they ate and she made a vow never ever to walk any wall ever again, not even if she was paid a million pounds. Then she paused. Oh, well, maybe.

Margaret was already aware she was shallow so this was no surprise to her.

Episode 8

Ah ha, so far a road well travelled, some stretches containing what their leader called undulations (definition: a smoothly rolling form). Margaret begged to differ: they were in reality steep hills, so very there. Frankly, these Romans were something else ... building walls, digging ditches and vallums (almost moats) all along territory that contained peaks and troughs that had Margaret gasping, panting, puffing, and wondering why? Why? Her boot had shown it's disapproval and it's sole was beginning to flap in protest.

The group's leader wasn't putting up with such nonsense, and so it was cable tied. Many people's boots seem to have been cable tied. Was it the heat? Has Margaret mentioned the heat? Really, has she? Well, so hot that people were having nosebleeds. Yes, they were. So they looked like a Masonic outing, with cable ties on boots, bloody hankies, and a tomato in a child's hat, because the others had adapted but Margaret continued to exhibit strange heat-like qualities, much like a permanent hot flush.

There was the occasional coffee stop at lovely tourist places though they had to walk off the wall to reach them. Oh my, how the tomato got a rev on for that. And then, if really really lucky there was a plastic loo, the outdoor temporary job. As their Leader said, as they had finished the last of the upsy downsies 'Just think - there will be soon be porcelain at our B & B.'

Never had porcelain sounded so wonderful to a group who had given motorists a display worthy of Dad's Army as the women answered the call of nature, crouching behind bushes, unaware that passing traffic had an excellent view their buttocks. So unaware that it took many hoots and toots to realise the gift they were giving.

But no time for pithering, for on they went, peak after peak, sometimes scrabbling over rocks, avoiding crevices, and using stones as steps. The tomato, as many were, was on all fours, using hands and feet, so not free to take a picture, thank you very much.

At the top they saw hayfields. So hot it was, that the group refused to walk over a mile to their B and B at the end of the day.

Instead, they all left the wall and headed for the village through which they had learned a bus would come. They reached the road, and horrors, couldn't find the bus stop.

They waited, waited, looking and finally saw the bus. It came round the corner. Margaret stood in the road, with one other, and they waved their bus passes, and another got on her knees and begged. Behind them the group groaned.

'Over egging again,' came the cry.

But the bus stopped. So they drove the last mile in their masks, admiring the scenery and wondering if their blisters would ever heal.

Episode 9

The next day – glory be – there was rain. It was so wonderfully cool as they traipsed 16 miles on terrain described as 'lumpy' by their leader. Lumpy was a creative understatement. Lumpy means hills. Not the hills of the previous few days, which were monstrous entities. But hills nonetheless. They were not lumps.

One of them had been unwell overnight after the heat, but she managed to get upright, and step out. So brave.

Margaret had also been a tad woozey on stepping out of bed, and had to sit pretty sharpish, so Stugeron was employed to calm the troubled breast, or whatever it was that was troubled. Off they toddled, all of them a bit under the weather, and not quite their jolly selves. They passed the leavings of the red squirrels who had been guzzling cone seeds. The shells were numerous, left for someone else to put away. Mother wouldn't be happy.

The group's leader placed himself into a vallum, a sort of moat, a feature that is part of the fortification of a Roman fort, or in this case, the wall. He placed himself there to show the proportions, or to get in Margaret's photograph. Leaders can be quite pushy.

A vallum is so deep, outliers would be insane to rush across the flat terrain, slip slide down into the bottom, and rush up the other side, only to be met by a hail of something from the Romans on top of the wall. The leader said that in addition it kept the Roman Army squaddies out of mischief because they had to dig the things when they had an idle moment. On they plodded, up and down the 'lumps', and for some reason Margaret was humming the music from *The Full Monty*, and did the little dance they did in the Post Office queue. She wore her rainproof and her sunhat - it kept the rain off her glasses. She also had her usual socks hanging off her huge bum bag. The socks dripped but then they would in the wet. Tomorrow the group leader promised them they would be walking along the bank of the Tyne into Newcastle and therefore the 15 miles would be dead level. Margaret had come to realise their leader lies. Will it really be flat? They will see.

Episode 10

Glory be, their leader had not lied, the trail was NOT lumpy, it was almost flat. So off they toiled in the rain, Margaret still tomato-like in her RED weather gear which she had ordered to be extra large, as she knew it would need to accommodate her rear bum bag, and her little one. The little one was at the front with plasters and her phone, her debit card, and cash.

'What mugger would think of looking under a walking tablecloth?' one of their group dared to say.

In Margaret's back bum bag were weather trousers, plasters -yes more – masks for the pubs, first aid bag, (large) so far not needed, but she does like to dispense advice, and be nursey, (she did not bring her outfit, there wasn't room.)

A naughty friend had bought it for her, but it has never been needed. Dick forbids and the mere mention to the unwell is known to bring about a rapid recovery.

Margaret has no formal medical knowledge, of course. She is, in fact, a hypochondriac but that serves her very well when advice is needed.

There had been nothing serious yet on which to flex her hypochondriacal knowledge, though there have been septic bites, awful blisters. Which brings Margaret to herself, because she had a blue toenail. She was told by their leader it would go black, and come off. It is caused by one's foot banging against the front of the boot as one walks down steep terrain. Margaret finds it is in fact excruciating. But she feels she must be grown-up and has said little in the way of complaint. Ouchy. Ouchy.

They headed towards the Tyne, and followed the trail to Wallsend. There were rowers on the river, and wild flowers either side of the mown paths which had once been wagonways. Four Geordie bloke-friends they had passed earlier, now passed them, waving. Later they passed the blokes, waving.

The group traipsed onwards, timers still clicking, rearguard still guarding. It was cool, and still raining. Margaret's cable tie broke, but their leader fixed another. They were roaring along, they had to reach Segedunum, the Roman fort and Museum (the end of the line) by three. Their little feet were a flash of movement, but still the rearguard guarded.

Along the Quayside in Newcastle they tore, past the iconic bridges. They had their picnic in the rain; soggy bread. The blokes passed them. The group called, waved. There was no response. The group took off their hoods and the blokes laughed, waved, then moved on. Margaret and Penny were still the rearguard.

They had a group photo beneath a signpost, giving their mileage, with which they argued, for they had done over 90 miles actually, because they went off course to see so much, learn so much, rest their feet, and find their B & B with its precious porcelain.

Then down into Segedunum. Phew, puff pant. 2.50.

They'd made it. They looked at the Roman Fort, the Museum, ate a cake and drank a cuppa. Dick arrived. They all said goodbye. Strange moment. So many trials and tribulations, and then it was over. They all needed medals. These were not awarded. They didn't see their Geordie blokes. Perhaps they'd all been picked up. Such a wonderful county, such beauty, such kindness Such HIGH hills, such lumps, undulations, such a great group, but very very good to be on the way home.

Episode 11

Dick drove Penny and Margaret to Thirsk. Penny was to stay with Margaret and Dick before heading home. Brave Penny to stay with them.

When they arrived at Chez Graham Margaret accepted the LOVE of her fourlegged besties. Then Tilly, the lovely cat, made it clear she was really only interested in being fed, before nipping out to survey the scenery.

Once Polly and Rosie were also fed, Margaret and Penny enjoyed the scampi and chips Dick had picked up from Craig's Fish 'n' Chips, and of course, the bubbly wine. But first Margaret had collected clean towels from the built in drawer under the bed for Penny. They watched Montalbano and tried to prop their eyes open. At last, it was bedtime. But hang on...

'Where's Tilly, she went out ages ago?' Dick asked. They looked. They saw no Tilly.

'Oh but she never stays out for more than 15 minutes,' they said. 'She must be in.'

They searched again to no avail, so left the downstairs window open. Up and down like yo-yos Margaret and Dick went - all night - to check, inside and out. No, Tilly did not return. Was it something Margaret had said? Margaret chewed her nails to the quick. Penny left at 6.30 in the morning to get home for lunch, but really to escape. Still no Tilly.

Margaret washed the towels and linen then they walked, and walked looking for Tilly. They made posters, stuck them on lampposts. They asked people, who promised they'd look and text about her to others. Someone put her picture on the local Facebook page.

'Has she been beaten up by the ginger boy cat?' Margaret asked.

'Stop talking,' said Dick. They walked again with the dogs.

'Find Tilly,' ordered Margaret. They didn't even try, just wanted to go home. Tilly is a quiet cat, she hardly ever talks, and when she does, it is very very quietly. Dick likes this about Tilly and feels Margaret could learn much from their British Blue.

At 5.30 Margaret and Dick accepted that Tilly had been gone 24 hours and there had been a terrible thunderstorm all afternoon, so Tilly was wet through, and perhaps frightened. Had she talked to strangers who had kidnapped her?

Oh no. Their hearts were sinking.

Finally, it was cocoa time, after which Margaret went to the bedroom. Her phone sounded. Someone had seen a grey cat in a nearby street, but the dogs were being naughty, barking, clawing at the towel drawer and she could hardly hear. Margaret said 'Be quiet. No, not you, kind lady. Thank you so much. We will go and look.'

'Stop talking,' she told the dogs, who wouldn't. Margaret's No 3 daughter who is a bit fey and 'feels things' texted. 'She's in the house.' Well they had looked everywhere: cupboards, wardrobes ... So she was wrong, of course.

The dogs were howling now. At last Margaret looked down at the drawer beneath the bed, which had housed towels. The drawer she had opened to find towels for Penny.

'Surely not,' she said. She pulled it open, looked. No Tilly. Margaret shut the drawer. The dogs clawed the drawer again. Then there it was, a faint meow, a tiny little sound, just as it always was.

'I can hear her, I can hear her,' Margaret shouted and shouted.

Dick ran up the stairs, and listened but this is a man who thinks all the world mumbles.

'I can't hear her.'

'Well, I can,' shouted Margaret. Dick opened the drawer again, and suddenly Tilly squeezed through a small gap at the back of the drawer, where there was a space underneath the bed. The relief. The dogs were proud, and wanted a Dentistix for being good. Tilly, ever the polite cat, dived for her dirt box, then wanted her food. Margaret texted the nice lady back and explained. The nice lady was pleased. Tilly was fed. Tilly used the dirt box - again. Dick was pleased.

The question had not yet been asked. 'Who shut the drawer?'

The front door bell sounded. Dick answered. It was a neighbour.

'Has she been found?' he asked. Tilly liked the open door. Tilly ran out. Margaret heard Dick say, 'Oh Oh. Oh no.'

Margaret chewed her nails again. The neighbour's friend caught Tilly at the end of the drive.

'Not tonight, Josephine,' the friend said, giving Tilly back to Dick.

Tilly was gated for a little while so everyone calmed down. The dogs wanted medals, Tilly wanted treats.

Dick wanted paracetamol for his headache. Margaret wanted to be back on Hadrian's Wall.

The next day Margaret and Dick took the posters down, and used WD40 to clean off the sticky bits.

As they rubba-dubbed Margaret realised that Margaret and Dick's life will never be like that of others. She realised it was pointless to ever ask why. It is just one of life's strange quirks.

Poor Dick.

Episode 12

Yesterday it was hot. Margaret and Dick sought sanctuary within the house. A gentle hour, Margaret thought, to study her navel in the sitting room, a dog sitting either side on the sofa.

'But not too close – Momma. And do not demand love,' said Polly. 'Too hot, too hot.'

Dick was upstairs setting up his new computer. Not a happy situation with which to be involved so everyone left him to it.

Then ... oh then... came scratching and cavorting from the hall.

'Is that Tilly, the cat who hides in towel drawers, Momma?' asked Polly. 'And is that chirping?'

'Yer what?' shrieked Margaret, leaping off the sofa, out of the sitting room into the hall. 'Oh no, oh no. Bad Tilly, Wicked Tilly. Leave. Leave the fledgling sparrow.'

Tilly fled. Margaret tried to scoop up the still living sparrow. It flew into the sitting room. Ah, so not badly hurt, but one wing drooping. Oh dear, Margaret thought as she followed. Hopefully it might fly out. They must all stay calm and quiet. The dogs started barking.

'Out', shrieked Margaret at Polly and Rosie.

'But it was bad Tilly not us,' they shrieked back. 'We were merely reacting.'

Margaret shrieked, 'Dick. Here. Now.'

Dick shrieked back, 'I'm busy.'

'Now,' shrieked Margaret, her throat becoming sore. She opened the windows, then spied the sparrow on the floor by the sofa. She approached, carefully, quietly, with a cloth to scoop it up, taking care not to hurt the drooping wing. It flew with both wings towards the window but diverted to hide behind the bookcase.

'Drooping wing, my Aunt Fanny,' thought Margaret.

'Down here NOW, Dick,' Margaret shrieked. The dogs had left. Dick arrived. Margaret explained. Dick used LANGUAGE.

He thought. He said, 'Torch.'

Margaret found a torch feeling that this must be how nurses felt when the surgeon asked for 'Scalpel'.

She slapped it into his hand. Dick could see the bird in the beam from the torch, tucked in its hidey place. Dick used more LANGUAGE, then added. 'It's stuck.'

Margaret and Dick removed the books, then the lower shelf. It flew behind the sofa. Again they approached. It flew towards a window, but diverted again to hide behind the other bookcase.

Again Margaret and Dick stayed quiet. Listened. There it was, a scratching.

'Torch,' said Dick. Slap into his hand. Dick had a look. 'Stuck down in the corner. A book has tilted blocking its exit.'

Off came more books, out came the bottom shelf. They stayed quiet, still.

It flew, not to the window but the TV wiring. Then to the very heavy dresser, and scuttled along the side to the back. Margaret tried to catch it with a tea towel because she could see where it was heading. Too late. It slid into an inaccessible inch wide space at the back, almost against the wall. She heard it drop down to the floor, where silence ensued. But the torch beam showed it pinioned behind the - did she say before -very heavy dresser.

By now Margaret and Dick had dismantled much of the room. Everything hideable behind was on the sofa, more books heaped in piles on the floor, with the shelves. and all the time the heat beat in through the windows. Margaret and Dick were sweating. They were not on speakers, except for Dick to say, 'One two three' as they heaved the VERY HEAVY dresser away from the wall, inch by inch.

Off flew the bird, out of the window, both wings working.

They replaced the room. No word spoken. Dick left to seek sanctuary with his computer. Margaret allowed Rosie and Polly back into the room. Polly said, 'Tilly is a very very naughty cat, isn't she Momma?'

Rosie said, 'Yes, very very naughty.'

Margaret saw Tilly enter, and pace, and smell, and sulk because Momma had spoiled her game. But Margaret had a very cross word, and reminded her of the towel drawer in the bedroom, in a threatening way.

Polly said, 'She'll put you in there if you're naughty again, you see if she doesn't. So very there.'

Margaret heard Dick talking to himself. Something about a something something madhouse.

Margaret sat down on the cleared sofa, and had a nice cup of tea, dogs nicely distanced, fan on. She couldn't help but agree with Dick, which was a very rare occurrence. And to be savoured.

Episode 13

Margaret fears she might have yet again gone too far. You see she arrived at the post office, and queued and queued, as one does, all masked. It was quite frankly, very hot. She wondered later if she had been momentarily overcome by the heat as she took her place in front of one lovely post office lady, while a nice young man took his place next to her, but suitably distanced and in front of another lovely post office young lady.

Margaret's package, a book, was weighed. Margaret heard the other lovely lady say how hot she was.

The young man said, almost in a whisper, 'Well, I always think you are hot stuff.'

Margaret heard another voice, not the young lady's saying, 'Oh how kind. You did mean me, didn't you?' It was Margaret's voice. How surprised Margaret was.

The young man turned, looked, because he was surprised too. Margaret's eyes crinkled, though he couldn't see her bewitching smile behind her mask.

He sought for words, becoming quite red, or so the bits she could see on top of the mask seemed to indicate. The lovely ladies, and the queue started tittering, it grew louder. The young man crinkled his eyes. 'I meant both of you,' with a sort of bow, and a sort of laugh. Oh, good recovery young man, thought Margaret as she paid the postage for her package, and went on her way, wondering if perhaps her sunhat had caused his consternation.

It was her Hadrian's Wall, somewhat battered child's sunhat, bought to fit her small head, and it had walked many miles, even in the rain in order to keep the water off her glasses. So yes, the brim sagged a bit. Well, all of her sagged, let's face it.

But it was a very pleasant interlude she decided as she strode through the park wondering if she would see Mr M, whose day off from the Post Office it was, walking his dog as he sometimes did. Perhaps he had seen her first, because he was nowhere in sight.

There was always another day.

Episode 14

Margaret was told to discuss with you a result that Dick would like the world to acknowledge. His first tomato pickings of the year, his HUGE tomatoes, he insists she emphasises. (In all honestly, one feels they are not very huge at all but they are red, and round (reminiscent of her on Hadrian's Wall perhaps?). Yes, Dick's tomatoes are not large but Margaret is learning when to correct, and when not.

Dick is in competition with Dr Kathleen Thompson, author of the award winning *From Both Ends of the Stethoscope* (anyone with cancer, or friends of those with it will gain immensely from this book). She is also - it seems to Margaret - creating an allotment out of her garden to judge from the images she sends on Whats App.

Dick began it, though. Because he has been sending Dr Kathleen images via Margaret, of his emerging tomatoes, courgettes, and peppers. In return Dr Kathleen has been sending images, via Margaret, of her 'growings'; tomatoes, courgettes, and peppers. The competition is fierce. Margaret is waiting for measurements to be included. Frankly, Margaret is beginning to feel used.

Dick also has French Beans, runner beans and this and that, and Margaret repeats, tomatoes - various breeds of tomatoes. Margaret is running out of hours in the day, as her phone buzzes with multitudes of images, to and from.

Dick spends more time than is healthy polishing his tomatoes for each film shoot, as does Dr Kathleen, probably. So too for the courgettes, and peppers. Margaret has to admit all of which do gleam. But Margaret's fear is that images will soon not be enough for Dick (she can't speak for Dr Kathleen) as Dick clearly has plans...

Margaret suspects these plans are heading in the direction of showy-offy glass cases, after the prized vegetables have been stuffed. But not by Margaret. This she must make clear, gently building up to explaining that vegetables are grown to be eaten. Munch munch.

She will say this when the time is ripe - sorry - when the time is right. Which might not be long, because she has seen evidence of brass plaques being engraved in the garage. But these things must be nipped in the bud - as it were.

Episode 15

Yesterday, dogs on back seat, presents in the boot, one of them driving the first shift, the other on the back seat with the dogs. Dick drew the short straw; he was on the back seat with the dogs. Off they set towards the London area, to see all four kids, and various grands for lunch. They would return to Yorkshire the same day.

Traffic was excellent, they changed over half way. Margaret was then on the back seat with the dogs. One whinges, with every breath. Next time, Margaret thinks she will wear ear phones and play loud music. Someone always sits in the back because if they both sit in the front and leave the dogs on the back strapped into their own little seatbelts the whinge goes up decibels.

They arrived. 'Hello hello.'

The soon to be four year old grand rushed and hugged. All whingeing was forgotten. All pre-visit stick up the nostrils horrid Covid tests forgotten.

'Quick quick Anna,' said almost four year old. Was it because Margaret was bearing gifts. But no, it was because she had made Margaret (with mummy's help) a ceramic pot, in the shape of a butter dish, for Margaret's precious things.

'But my most precious thing – you - won't fit in,' said Anna. Roll of eyes from the four year old who then stopped, thought, and looked rather too closely at Anna, sizing her up.

'Neither will you, Anna, not nearly, not even a big fat toe'. Oh, thought Anna, let's stop there.

Then another daughter arrived. Anna's size was forgotten. Phew.

Soon one son, three daughters, and an older Grand were round the table, talking laughing, even the seven month old babe. Then it started.

'Do you remember, Granny, when you took me to Amsterdam? We nearly got on the wrong plane...'

Margaret certainly did remember, failures do stick so.

'Well, in my defence' Margaret said, 'the departures board did say the plane for Amsterdam was ready.' There it all was as clear as it had been that day: the departure board, the slight stress headache.

'Quick, quick,' Margaret had said, gathering up bags.

'No, no,' said the 12 year old Grand. 'It's the wrong number. Remember how you nearly took us on the wrong tube after going to the Imperial War Museum and we had to take over, and that kind man helped us?' Margaret had not forgotten, no matter how she had tried.

Finally they scrambled onto the right plane, with the help of another nice man.

'When we arrived,' continued the Grand, 'the problems weren't over.'

Grannie Margaret did wish she wouldn't go on so, because some things need to remain between two people, and not told to mothers of the Grands. 'We had to get the train actually into Amsterdam.'

Margaret remembered how her confidence had ebbed quite quickly. In fact, it had disappeared. Why on earth had she suggested this trip to see Anne Frank's hidey hole, knowing full well her already documented lack of direction, and any sort of sense of where to go, was quite the bane of everyone's life?

It had seemed so straight forward when she booked the adventure because she had found her way round Australia twice. But in Holland they spoke Dutch. Margaret did not.

At the airport train station Margaret tried to buy tickets from a machine, one she could not understand. What she needed was a nice man to help, and she must also keep a smile on her face as the Grand was looking worried. So off Granny and 12 year old traipsed to get in a queue to ask the nice man behind the grill for two tickets. He spoke English. Granny wished she was better with languages as she shouted back, announcing clearly all the better for him to better understand. 'He's not deaf, Granny,' whispered the Grand.

They arrived in Amsterdam at last. Found the nice hotel. Then straight off to Anne Frank's hidey hole.

'Tram?' asked Margaret.

Flash of fear and roll of eyes from 12 year old. Quite. They had a map and could walk, much safer for how would they ever know which tram to get on and where to get off? The hidey hole was silencing, saddening, eye opening. As the 12 year old, now 19 said at lunch this day. 'How could all those people have hidden for so long in that tiny space, and then been betrayed, to die. Covid is so little against those times.'

It had been a busy weekend in Amsterdam: the art gallery, the canal, the cafes, but how to find the ones which weren't full of spliff smoke? And spliff smokers? With difficulty it seemed.

Margaret suspected they both got a lungful because they became a little giggly just walking past all the open doors. Was breathing it in damaging to a 12 year old? What would the daughter say when she smelled it on daughter's clothes? Perhaps Margaret should get a gift for her, just in case of crossness?

In they went to a gift shop. 'What are these, Granny?' said the 12 year old. 'Would mum like it? Margaret hurried her out of what she now realised was a sex aid shop as people switched batteries on and waggled them about.

But where was a normal shop? There were so many they could not go in. Finally they bought solid perfume in pretty little pots in one. This seemed safe. One for her mother. And another for a friend, who never received it, because on closer inspection it appeared to be decorated with Greek Gods doing impossible things to one another.

Finally it was time to go to the station, to await the train back to the airport. Easy peasy because there was a big sign on the platform. But how would they know when to get off? A nice man in the carriage told Margaret.

Margaret then concentrated hard when they were at the airport looking at the departures signs. 'That's our plane,' Margaret said, picking up the bags. 'Let me check, Granny.' There was a look of wonder as the Grand said. 'Yes, it is.'

Home they travelled, having laughed and laughed, then felt sad at the thought of Anne Frank. They had eaten too much, but Granny worried that their clothes smelled of spliff smoke and she would be frowned on at in customs and taken into a room with stern men in uniforms to be frisked.

On arrival the lady at the passport cubicle desk beckoned the Grand over to her. 'Only you,' she said, loud enough for Margaret to hear. Margaret was eventually beckoned over.

'Who are you?' said the lady.

'I expect you think I am her mother, as I am so young?'

'I don't think you are her mother, this young lady has said you are her Grannie, but are you really? Do you have a letter of permission allowing you to take her out of the country, and bring her back?'

Margaret did not.

'But you can phone her mother,' Margaret said.

The lady sniffed. Horrors, would she smell spliff smoke?

The Grand spoke up. 'She is my Grannie. She gets lost wherever she takes us, and other people have to help us find our way, but she means well. Though, on our way back from the Imperial War Mus-'

'Must we - again? Margaret said. 'I just needed time to get my bearings.'

'You say that every time, Granny.'

'Fine,' the lady said, waving them through. 'Please go - NOW.'

Personally Margaret thought she was a bit sharp, but at least Dick would be waiting at the end of the arrivals channel to take them home. Indeed he really was, waving and waving, and the Grand ran over. She said, 'The lady thought Grannie was a people trafficker, but I told her how she always gets us lost, and I think she looked at her, and realised she was only a Grannie after all.'

Margaret felt rather hot and bothered, as Dick said, 'What's that smell?' He sniffed. Looked at Margaret.

'Really? You didn't did you?'

Margaret shouted very loudly. 'Take me to the car and stop being so silly.'

A few years later Granny said she'd take the now 15 year old and her bit younger sister to Auschwitz which was something they were doing at school. The Grands paused. Looked at one another. Looked at Dick.

'Will you come too, Gramps. You know where you're going ALL the time because as you say, you can navigate by the stars.'

Margaret wanted to put her thumb to her nose and waggle her fingers, but she knew that would be childish. So they ALL went to Poland.

Episode 16

Margaret and Dick had a day at Beamish Living Museum. People have to book online now, but all very seamless and sensible, and on arrival Dick and Margaret met their niece and two children. Off they toddled to the colliery, which later the kids said was the best bit. The winding house was open, so the cages in which the pitmen descended were visible. The lamp board was somewhere else, but Margaret can't remember where, which is typical of Margaret. The numbered lamps were taken by the men, along with a disc with a matching number. At the end of the shift the lamp and disc were replaced. If they weren't it meant a pitman was lost. Was he hurt? Probably. A search would ensue.

Round the colliery houses they walked; fascinating. A pigeon house in the front garden of one, and there were artichokes growing, and spinach. Geese roamed in another, one of whom had had quite enough of the gawpers and gave them a right royal rollicking. Then masks on, and into the houses, a look at the proggy mat half finished, the fireplace where the cooking was done. No electric lights. 'What?' from stunned children.

The loo was in the back yard. There was an appalled step back from the children.

The double bed in the front room for the parents, along with the chairs and table, and the other bed was probably in the one bedroom upstairs. A box room too with second bed, several to a bed, as in the other bedroom. In each the little one would say, 'Roll over,' And one fell out. Then there were five in a bed. The little one said, 'Roll over.' And one fell out. And on and on. Margaret was getting on their wick.

Then the school, with its rows of desks. Margaret said she remembered these from her school days. The ten year old's look said, 'Goodness you really ARE as old as you look.'

Margaret and Dick explained that the class left their stuff in the desk all day, and had the same desk for the school year. What's more the teachers came to them. Yes, their windows had been as high, to stop them looking out and dreaming the day away. Margaret fears she told them she spent much time outside the classroom door, for talking, and giggling.

'Do not copy Aunt Marg,' said their mother, or was it just the roll of her eyes that said that? On they went passing an AA box. Great excitement from Margaret and Dick, because their dads were both members and had badges on the front of their cars, and they got saluted when they passed an AA man, or rather their car did. The AA man didn't salute RAC people, heavens no. But the RAC people didn't salute the AA people, so very there.

Then into the old town, starting with the chemist. Margaret remembered the coloured water in great jars. She and Dick remembered all the little drawers labelled for medicine. Margaret and Dick were revealed to be terribly terribly terribly old. Would the old dears make it round Beamish? was clearly the worry from the young ones.

People think Beamish is wonderful, no matter how many times they go and it is. No tram rides this time, but an open top bus ride.

'Oh look.' 'Oh yes,' said the ten year old. Then a whisper to elder brother. 'What are we looking at?'

A picnic in the town park, where two wonderful elderlies played flutes on the round bandstand.

Well done Beamish, and all you lovely volunteers in outfits. In the photographers Margaret told the young about their great grandma's photograph with her brother Uncle Stan and

how Margaret could never understand why they wore such lovely clothes in the picture because they were so dreadfully poor in their little North East pit village.

The suitably costumed photographer said they would have hired the clothes.

'But when you get home look at the shoes in the photograph,' he said. 'They wouldn't have hired shoes.'

Sure enough, they were in old old plimsolls. It must have been taken just after their mum died, when Margaret's mum was two, and her dad out in the war. It was 1916. Was it to show him that they were OK? Well, they weren't. Their little faces were so sad. Even sadder when he died when Margaret's mum was eleven.

'You should write it down,' their mum told Margaret. But of course, in a way Margaret already has in her books about pit villages. Everyone should write their memories, for it is their children's past too.

Episode 17

Margaret and Dick went to see number 2 daughter and grand -daughter who were having a few days near Settle, North Yorkshire.

'Oh lovely,' said Margaret. 'It's a bit like a charabanc day out.'

'No, it's not. We're going in the car,' said Dick. Let's toss to see who drives, and who sits in the back between Rosie and Polly.'

Things grew tense. Margaret lost and put on her sea sickness travel bands, took a pill, and settled down in between the dogs, on the back seat. Off they went, with Sally the Sat Nav being bossy and telling us how to get out of our road.

Margaret doesn't like sitting on the back seat. Margaret feels sick and dizzy going along roads with curves. A friend's father used to say that a road is like a woman, it's beauty lies in it's curves. Margaret didn't like her friend's father after that. Curves are her enemy. The road to Settle is curvey. The dogs whinged. They always whinge in the car, while Margaret gets busy telling Dick that there is a roundabout coming up.

'Stop talking, Margaret. It's big. How can I not see it?'

Margaret whispers to herself, 'Well you didn't see that roundabout 25 years ago, and that was big too.'

A narrow squeak like that, when they seemed destined to go straight over, shakes a girl. Dick doesn't understand, so Margaret doesn't explain, again because she was too busy waiting for the next junction, the next roundabout, the next sharp bend when her warning would be needed. And still the dogs were whingeing.

It was a very pretty road but the journey takes 90 minutes. Margaret was not feeling very well, the dogs were still whingeing, Dick was fed up with Margaret helping him to drive. But then they were there.

'Hello, hello,' they all said as Margaret and Dick and the dogs clambered out of the car.

Such a treat, a lovely lunch, a glass of wine, and suddenly Margaret doesn't mind that she has drawn the short straw again, and is on the back seat for the drive home, because Dick is drinking water. Sparkling water, but still water. She is not.

Then a nice walk with the dogs, and the daughter, and daughter's friend, and the Grand. Dick and Margaret walk a little ahead at one point. Margaret tells Dick of the taxi ride from Newcastle to Bowness. to start walking Hadrian's Wall. It was a big taxi and took the six walkers, the taxi driver (of course) and Patrick the guide.

Margaret's friend Penny, asked how Margaret's broken shoulder was these days, with its pins and plates, and wotnot.

'Were there any lingering problems?' she asked.

Margaret told her that the only problem was that she had to wear a big bumbag, not a rucksack, because she didn't like anything pressing on the top of her shoulder - it hurt.

Margaret said, 'I even wear a floppy sort of sports bra, that doesn't pull on my shoulders.'

'Is there any point, if its floppy?' Penny asked.

Margaret said, loudly she realised later. 'Well, yes, or else I'd have to tuck the little dears in my waistband.'

There was silence in the taxi. Even the driver stopped talking, and he hadn't seemed to draw breath since they left.

As Dick and Margaret walked along this very lovely lane near Settle, Dick said, 'Please tell me you did not say that?'

'Dicky, I cannot tell a lie: indeed I did say that,' said Margaret (much in the way of George Washington to his father).

Mr Washington praised George.

Dick said, 'You really should stop talking much more often.'

Margaret sulked as they walked along. Recently Dick looked at the photos that No 2 daughter sent. 'My word,' he said. 'Look at your round shoulders.'

'I was leaning forward busy telling you about the taxi ride,' said Margaret.

'Even so, best to straighten those shoulders, and stick out your chest.'

Too late he realised they were almost back to the taxi and the waistband.

Of course, Margaret had to say it again. Well, one does, doesn't one.

Margaret quite likes drawing the short straw on a motorway journey, because one can relax, as there are no roundabouts and the dogs don't whinge because there are no curves.

Episode 18

Let's go out for lunch,' said Margaret, unwilling to cook yet again.

'Righto,' agreed Dick, knowing from her tone that this was not up for discussion.

So off to the Golden Fleece they trotted. Margaret said, 'Of course, I will be circumspect. I will not have a pud.'

Dick said nothing. 'Didn't you hear me?' Margaret ventured.

'Yes,' said Dick. 'It's what you always say when we reach this point.'

They were just along from The Golden Fleece.

'My mum said it was dangerous to say 'always' because if it is not said just once, then your argument is ruined.'

'It's what you always say,' repeated Dick. 'It's not what you USUALLY say, it is ALWAYS.'

They walked on quietly.

Lunch was lovely, Margaret had the crab and hake, yum yum. Dick had roast beef. Dick knows to give Margaret a taste of everything he orders, just in case she wishes she had ordered the same. Replete, they ordered pudding. Yes they did. Margaret had sworn she would not, but she did. 'Raspberry Crumble, please, Louise,' she said, and could have sworn she heard Dick say, 'Always, yes always, not usually.'

Dick had Raspberry Crumble too. Yum yum. Later they took the dogs out to Topcliffe as Margaret thought they needed a walk because the four-leggeds had not had a lunch treat. And, of course, for the grown-ups to get rid of chip calories. She was absolutely sure this time that she heard Dick mutter: 'Always.' And did the dogs say it too?

But then they saw on the verge ahead a gaggle of geese pecking at the grass. Of course they did, it wasn't just the LARGE glass of wine with lunch that made them see it. This was Topcliffe near Thirsk.

Strange things happen in and around Margaret and Thirsk. You see, Margaret told herself that it was not really strange to see geese on the verge. Well, no stranger than a crumble with no calories, because Louise the waitress had been wise and agreed with Margaret that there were none. So very there.

Episode 19

Spring cleaning throws up memories.

Margaret has a cushion presented to her instead of an Oscar (in her dreams) by her last mentoring group. Lord what fun they were, and so so talented, and open to her 'suggestions'. They had the kindness to title the cushion 'The Wit and Wisdom of Margaret Graham' which Margaret rather thinks is because, though she was leaving for the North, she hadn't yet left, and there was still an element - If we don't say nice things we are 'for it' Margaret has decided to pass on some snips to you, so her wisdom can be fully appreciated. Perhaps the height of which is 'I hate nostrils.'

The thing is, she does.

When writers say, 'I could smell it with my nostrils...' Well, sunshine, you don't smell with your ears, so ditch the nostrils.

Then: 'Pockets are for hankies'. Margaret had bored them many times with her tale of sharing a table with a star of stage and screen, and now books at some award do, and he mentioned he couldn't bear it when people stuffed hankies up their sleeves, because 'Pockets were for hankies.' Wriggle wriggle from MG as a hankie was surreptitiously withdrawn from her sleeve and stuffed under her bum to be collected when rising.

There was a professional actor and playwright in the mentoring group. Whatever he wrote, and then read out loud, sounded superb. One's critical faculties went to sleep, Margaret decided, so she issued a warning:

'We have to be careful not to be seduced by Paul.'

Finally the quote about homework, and then the follow on.

'Now let's consider your homework.' said Margaret. Pause.

'What was the homework?' asked Margaret.

Which rather sums up mentor Margaret.

She loves her cushion. It makes her laugh. But oh, how she misses those rascals.

Episode 20

Margaret was chatting with a pal about how they both love train travel, and it reminded her of a fabulous holiday with Rail Discoveries travelling from the Rockies to Vancouver with her bestie from school, Jan. It was Margaret's birthday during this holiday, and wonderful Jan hung bunting on her door overnight, and a cake and champers on the train, and that evening, our fab guide and Jan rounded up a small group to go out to dinner with birthday girl. Lovely lovely time. Though of course her age then was made public, and until that point everyone thought Margaret was 25.

At this dinner, Keith their guide stood up and recited a poem he had just written. Margaret copied it. It was on the back of an envelope, as these things are, and now amongst her favourite photos and mementoes.

Margaret Graham is her name...

And writing is her game...

So into Canada she came...

To cross the Rockiest terrain...

Forever etched upon her brain...

And so, devoid of any pain...

She enjoyed a moment quite insane...

With a friend who took the blame...

For her birthday, on a train.

Fabulous pal, fabulous new friends, and many high jinks, many interesting sights. They went through the remnants of a forest fire, and then alongside a river where huge trunks of trees were stored bound together like floating rafts. They saw eagles, bears, and let's not go near the white water rafting mistake, and Margaret's intrepid handbag which proved so useful when she disgraced herself having succumbed to white water travel sickness.

The highs, the lows. The times she was very bad.

Oh yes, what about when she was put in charge of the coach which was to take them to their hotel from the train. There were several coaches lined up as they left the train. Some followed Keith to their coach, much like a school crocodile, Margaret and Jan among them as they were suck ups.

'Stand there, and make sure everyone gets on THIS coach,' Keith told Margaret. (He could be quite stern).

He toddled off to solve a problem. Margaret took to her duties with gusto, using hand signals to capture attention. Oh, how she loved signalling people in. Then, oh then, came four of the party who had chosen to upgrade to 1st on the train. Was it something Margaret had said, or done?

They saw her. She saw them. She signalled them in. Closer and closer they came. Nearly there when she halted them mid-stride with a firm flat hand. 'Oh no, there is no 1st class on this coach. You cannot come on board.'

They stood, and they stared.

Margaret broke, 'Only joking. Up you get. Quick quick.' (She didn't have to say quick quick, but she takes power very seriously).

Up they went to cries of: 'No 1st class here. Along to the back with you.' Oh how they laughed.

Keith came. He said, 'I saw. That was naughty.'

Margaret said, 'But nice.'

'Stop talking, get on the bus,' said Keith. (Margaret wonders if all men are like Dick).

Episode 21

Margaret and Dick drank their coffee in the conservatory. The dogs looked at them. 'Coffee only for grown-ups, eh?' their eyes said. 'Well, you can keep your coffee but a biscuit would have been nice, even a share of one. Even a corner.'

'They are round, there is no corner,' said Margaret.

'What are you talking about?' said Dick, looking up from his mobile phone which he was reading to keep his finger on the pulse of the world's problems via the online newspaper. Dick checks often in the day. Margaret thinks that Dick thinks if he isn't paying attention all hell will break loose.

'I think the world is already mad,' said Margaret.

'What?' said Dick looking up.

'Never mind,' said Margaret. 'Let's take the dogs for a walk. We will go to the next village in the car and walk through the woods, and then the barley field.'

'What – walk through the barley field?' queried Dick putting the harnesses on the dogs.

Margaret didn't reply because he knew she meant round the field because she was good about footpaths and she wasn't in the mood, because she had to sit in the back with Polly and Rosie.

Off they went. Rosie whingeing, and worming her way onto Margaret's lap. Polly pushed her nose between Margaret and Rosie because she felt that if she got her nose in there, the rest of her could follow, and Rosie would have to go on the floor.

At last they were out of the drive. Margaret felt it was going to be one of 'those walks.'

Off they went. Rosie dug her claws into Margaret's leg. Now Margaret was whingeing because it made her legs sore. Why had she said anything about a walk - why?

Round the bends they went. Round went Margaret's head. They stopped at the village green. They walked no speakers. Margaret gets like that when she think Dick goes too fast round corners, and drives too close to the car in front, and when Rosie's claws dig in.

It was a lovely day, and they walked alongside the stream. Margaret felt she must speak.

'Isn't it lovely.'

Dick smirked, because he knew she would, because it was awful for her not too, even when it was she who had decided to be no-speakers.

On they walked. There were skylarks, rabbits. The dogs were good. Round the edge of the barley field they went until they reached the lane. Margaret stopped to check for tractors.

'Catch up' she said.

'I can't,' said Dick. 'Polly's lead is wrapped round my legs and seems to be tangled.'

'I can't hear you,' said Margaret, too busy looking right and left and right again, pulling on the lead.

'All clear. Come on.' Margaret tugged yet again. Dick yelped. Margaret looked. She saw Dick had the lead wrapped very tightly round his legs. How?

'Why didn't you tell me?' Margaret said. 'We really need to communicate more than we do.' Margaret realised in that moment that she was all powerful. It went to her head. She tugged a bit more. Dick frowned. The dogs wondered what was transpiring, and sat down to wait. Margaret started laughing.

'What's it worth to untie you?' she asked.

Dick wobbled. He did not reply. She realised she must be kind because it wasn't funny, not at all. But first she had to undo the tangle.

'How? Why? What were you doing?' she muttered. Dick lifted one leg, then the other, and wobbled again. Yes he did.

When Dick was quite unwrapped, he said, 'I was pondering politics. I must have stood within a loop of the lead. One thing led to another...'

They returned round the barley field. Margaret sniggered from time to time, which is something she can't grow out of. She used to snigger in class when something funny happened, and was sent outside the classroom door until she could control herself. She spent a lot of time in the corridor, because control was something she had never really mastered.

The dogs pretended they were not with Margaret and Dick, because Margaret kept on with the sniggering, which even she knew was irritating but sometimes she just couldn't stop. Dick kept Rosie on a short lead, so as not to be looped again Margaret assumed, though she felt it best not to ask because Dick had said not a word.

Dick was clearly not amused. Margaret couldn't altogether blame him, but, she was tempted to say, she hadn't put him in the loop. No, he had stepped in it. Clippy clop.

She decided silence was golden, and discretion was the better part of valour. Snigger. Please stop, she told the snigger army.

They arrived back at the car. The drive home was quiet except for one snigger which Margaret turned into a cough. When they arrived Margaret gave Polly and Rosie a biscuit, even before they were out of their harnesses, and Dick a cup of coffee by which time the snigger army had quite gone 'Just like that,' as Tommy Cooper would have said.

It was rather quiet in Chez Graham, but as Dick picked up his phone, Margaret knew that soon there would be humphs, and 'Whaaat?' and finally: 'The world has gone mad.' Then things would be back to normal.

It was another Sunday morning at Chez Graham.

Episode 22

Margaret and Dick found their old photos, cards and bits'n'bobs in a drawer they hadn't checked since their move. Dick left Margaret to ooh, and ah, and do you remember? Because he couldn't remember. What's more he had raspberry canes to put in, and anyway photos and things are boring.

'Anyway, they're boring,' he really said this to Margaret.

'Whaaat, our history is boring?' Margaret was astonished. 'No, no, what are we without history? What are we without-'

But he had gone, clippetty clop, out into the garden. Margaret heard the geese flying over, honking. She hoped they'd drop a message on his head, everyone single of them. It almost made Margaret snigger but she really mustn't start. Besides, her mum would have said, 'That's not funny, kind or nice.'

'I didn't mean it to be kind or nice,' Margaret would have said, but quietly, as her mum could be quite stern.

She buried herself once more in the photos and there it was, looking back at her: her finest moment, Margaret as a Fairy. It was the moment that confirmed to her that she could have been a star of stage screen and everything else. Indeed, she could have been a DIVA.

You see, Margaret was the lead role in the panto and it was immaterial, as she had told Dick, that it was one *she* wrote - to perform as a surprise for her friend who was leaving his job at the theatre, where he was manager.

'If someone else had written it,' she said, 'I could still have held the stage, waved my wand, spoken my words, my many words. Yes, yes, I know the others had some, well, yes you're right, only a few, but...'

Margaret can be greedy. It is not nice, but ... but ... Margaret felt no-one had ever recognised her star qualities, so she would show them, so very there.

There was a maid (Penny who walked Hadrian's Wall with her and is a crime writer). Margaret thinks that Penny often feels she'd like to push Margaret in the river, or commit a crime upon her person, and that she gets some of her plots from thinking these thoughts, which, let's face it, are not kind or nice. But which Dick finds quite understandable.

Steve was a Baron, but Margaret couldn't really remember which Baron. Steve was very kind to do it and probably didn't want a lot of words. Celia was a BAD fairy who frowned a lot but was also very kind to do it. Well, they all were.

Margaret's part was as a very beautiful good and kind fairy, with a powerful wand.

They didn't have time to learn their lines so read them, but before they got to that point they were invited to raid the costume department of the theatre. Margaret found the green sparkly dress. Would it fit? She sucked everything in, never breathed properly again that evening. It did fit, just. They waited outside the Studio where the audience and Grant were settling down, but for what they didn't know.

Margaret had hoped for a stage, and a spotlight, but she got that later, interviewing a General who had written a book, and had come to the Yeovil Literary Festival. Margaret had held the microphone tightly, and introduced the General.

'Shall I call you Richard,' she said. He agreed.

'What about Dickie?' she asked. He disagreed.

The General was obviously used to being stern, but Margaret had four children and could weather all comers so took centre stage and found she had much to say now she held the microphone – so talked about the subject, and the book because she had been in Croatia just after the peace.

Dick was in the audience and was making ‘cutting his throat’ signs. Margaret realised, rather late, that it was the General who should have been talking. She handed the microphone to him, but not for long. After all, she had many questions and needed the microphone to share her questions on behalf of the audience, you understand. She seems to remember there was a bit of a tug of war with the General once or twice...

Anyway back to the panto. There they were on panto evening outside the Studio door, Margaret not daring to breathe too deeply or the dress might pop asunder. The doors opened and in they swept, Margaret waving her wand. Grant stared, his mouth fell open. Margaret didn't feel that was a very good look. The audience stared, their mouths fell open. Grant closed his, and tried to smile. The audience turned to look at the ‘stage’ which was a corner of the room.

The panto was a triumph, Margaret felt, and was forced to agree that ALL the cast was wonderful and it wasn't just about her - as the applause rang out. When it became quiet Margaret thought she heard Dick say to no-one in particular.

‘I wonder if she might just go up in a puff of smoke one day. One can only wish.’ But of course he wouldn't, not about a star.

Episode 23

Margaret and Dick were busy. Polly and Rosie were busy too, making the sofa comfortable, stretching, luxuriating. Margaret looked at Polly, who opened one eye.

'Oh Polly, are we late for your walkies?' asked Margaret.

'Yes, Momma, you is. But we's fed up with the sports village. Our lives are too contained. We long for excitement, for pastures new, doesn't we Rosie?'

'Did you hear her, Dick?' said Margaret.

Dick, his paintbrush in his hand, looked at Polly, then at Margaret. 'I heard you being Polly. I do so hope you don't really think she replies. Those words, you must understand, come from your mouth, not hers.'

Margaret knows Dick doesn't like chores. She knows they make him out of sorts. She told Polly and Rosie this. Rosie answered, 'Men does hate chores, Momma. It takes away from their important business like telling people how to run the country, that's right, isn't it?'

'You heard her, Dick,' said Margaret, suspecting she might be flying a bit close to the sun.

Dick looked at his paintbrush, and then at Margaret. 'Our dogs could only have learned that from you. They have no such thoughts, they can't speak.'

Margaret looked at Polly, who sat up, appalled. Margaret looked at Rosie who held her paws over her ears, and looked with reproach at her Dada.

'I think Dada needs to go to Dogiversity classes,' Polly said.

Dick looked at Margaret, and then at the two furry girls. 'I am going this minute to phone the doctor to talk about Mummy's problems. And quite frankly, I'm not on speakers with any of you, so very there.'

He wasn't either. But he didn't ring the doctor and Margaret was very pleased, not about him not calling the doctor, but because she realised that in that moment he had accepted that Polly and Rosie could speak, or that at least, Margaret was a very good dog listener.

Margaret thought she should go on television and listen to famous people's dogs, and translate them to the owners. She could make a fortune.

Margaret hugged that thought to her, as the afternoon quietly moved on, because there was a state of no-speakers until tea time, when Polly said, 'Oh Momma, Dada, we's quite fed up. We would like to be gambolling in the meadow. You could both gambol too.'

Dick looked at his paint brush, then the wall, then his painty hands and finally at Polly and Rosie. 'If you tell Mummy she is never ever to believe for one minute that she is a dog listener and advertise herself as such I will come with you all to the meadow.'

'Oh girls, clever Dada. He knew you were little people, with the power of speech. He can come on TV too. We could be a duo, and wear costu-' said Margaret. 'Stop talking.' said Dick getting ready to gambol.

Episode 24

Margaret lost her debit card. She had shoved it in her raincoat pocket having paid for groceries, and would then put it in her wallet after she had packed her groceries into bags. Margaret forgot. A hand other than Margaret's burrowed in, and when she got home, her pocket was empty. What a to-do. She phoned the number in her back-up file, just like her bestie from school, Jan, did when something similar happened to her in Florence.

Harry replied to her call. Harry was lovely. 'How can I help?' he asked.

Margaret explained about her blocked sink, the absence of horlicks at the supermarket ... Years ago she would have explained about being the mother of teenagers, the headaches ... 'Specifically banking matters. How can I help with banking matters,' lovely Harry interrupted.

Margaret told him. Finally, questions answered.

'Card cancelled, new one in the post,' Harry said. 'Pin arriving separately, and must be destroyed ...'

Harry said goodbye, perhaps a little hurriedly.

Her new pin arrived, was noted, the letter torn up, should it be chewed and swallowed?

Margaret tore it into smaller bits.

Margaret kept thinking of her and Jan's trip to Florence, a few years ago, and in particular queuing for the Baptistery late one afternoon. Jan is calm and wise, while Margaret is flakey. There was a 'to-do' in the queue for the Baptistery. A bit of a fight to their right. Being British they ignored. Once in, Jan found her bag open, her wallet gone. Momentarily, calm deserted her but not wisdom.

'To the hotel,' she ordered. 'Fast.'

They tore to the hotel. Jan, wise woman, had lists of numbers to phone, just in case. Margaret had not. Margaret now has. Jan cancelled the cards. Then they had to inform the police and followed directions to the station but they were the wrong police. More directions. It was now dark. They were somewhere off the main tourist route. They saw a man. They spoke in stuttering French. Why? They were in Italy for heaven's sake, but they knew no Italian. He spoke, in English. How did he know? Were their comfy sandals and cardigans a giveaway?

They explained their dilemma.

'Follow me,' he said. 'We hide our police stations, for obvious reasons.'

Oh Lord, what did that mean?

'Bombers.'

'Oh Lord.'

On they went, in his wake, down a dark alley, then another. Jan's calm wisdom deserted her.

'What if he's a sex slave trafficker?' she muttered.

The man turned, laughed. 'Oh, I can assure you, you two are quite quite safe.'

Well really, Margaret thought, no need to use two 'quites'. He left them at the police station. They heard him laughing as he turned the corner. The nice Italian policeman knew English too. They told him about the sex slave trafficker. How he laughed.

'We like our grandmas,' he said. 'We don't call them old, we call them experienced.'

Margaret and Jan thought about it all the way back to the hotel, and decided that experienced was a good description, and wondered if they should have face lifts so they didn't immediately appear grandmas.

But Dick said, when Margaret returned, 'But where would you start?'

Margaret regretted buying him a nice bottle of Italian wine, and wished she'd drunk it herself. So very there.

Episode 25

The next day Margaret and Jan thought they'd catch a bus out to a small village in the hills around Florence. It was a wonderful journey; good views, and a nice straight road, something always valuable when travelling with Margaret. Jan won't go anywhere with Margaret if it's going to be twisty turny. They toddled about the high up village, peering across the Tuscan countryside, and passed an elderly gentleman in a black top hat, and tails, no shirt, but cord trousers, and trainers who tipped his hat. They smiled. As the afternoon wore on they returned to Florence, by which time it was evening. Margaret and Jan went to a restaurant, which had a polythene enclosed street terrace. The lovely waiters found them a table, treating them like bone china because Italian men are so kind to experienced women. Nothing was too much trouble, and Margaret and Jan ate their meal, then asked for a coffee. The patron came, 'Ah, a little Limoncello instead.'

Margaret and Jan saw others drinking it. Saw the lemon on the bottle. They thought, lemons; Vitamin C, fresh, healthy, and as they felt a little jaded after the sneak thief, a tonic would be good.

'Lemons, are good for you,' they said. The Patron agreed and what's more, did not say 'For those of your experienced age'.

He explained in accented English the constituents of Limoncello. It went over Margaret and Jan's heads but they could clearly see the lemon on the bottle. The Limoncello arrived in rather small glasses. Would this be sufficient Vitamin C after yesterday and the gentleman in the top hat today, who they were still trying to get their heads around?

Down went the Limoncello, and was refilled, just as at other tables. Darkness fell on Florence but here, on the terrace on edge of the street, the lighting was soft, and the vitamin C tonic was certainly doing its stuff. Margaret and Jan felt much recovered and round came the bottle again, and again. Finally, finally, much Vitamin C later they paid.

'But where is all the Limoncello on the bill, Patron?'

'No, no, we are now friends, and friends do not pay for the Limoncello. Friends like to see others enjoying themselves. Indeed, we are impressed at how much enjoyment you were able to consume.' How strange they thought, that he should be impressed. They smiled, they stood.

Margaret and Jan could not feel their legs. They were numb. Quite numb. They tried to move. They could not. They realised that they were drunk. Not just a little, but tremendously dreadfully drunk. They eyed the opening in the polythene through which they could see the street. It seemed so very far away.

Wise and calm Jan whispered to Margaret. 'Just aim for the exit, and for heaven's sake, stand up straight.'

Margaret did not know she was sagging. But she looked at Jan, and she was sagging too, so very there. Jan was also holding onto Margaret's arm, tightly, very tightly. Margaret didn't think she would be any help to Jan because the tighter Jan gripped, the saggier Margaret felt.

'You are all right?' the waiter said.

Margaret replied, 'Never better.' She realised her lips were numb too. She begged her legs to move. Somehow they did. Jan and Margaret wanted to lean against one another or perhaps crawl. But they were British, and experienced women, and that wouldn't do. So they

straightened their shoulders, their legs, their backs, and headed to the exit, their walk a little stiff legged and strange. They waved, a table of diners clapped.

Jan said, now behind Margaret as the tables crowded the way to the opening. 'Don't you dare get carried away and sing.'

At last they stood on the pavement, close together, because now they could lean. But which way to the Hotel? It was just a five minute walk. Nothing on a normal day. Now they had no thoughts, no legs, no anything.

'Right, we go right,' Margaret decided, Jan knowing Margaret's navigation skills went left. After ten minutes having gone left then right, then left then straight ahead, they passed the restaurant.

'Please don't let them see us,' Jan said.

They did. The clientele waved, rushing to that side of the restaurant as though they were on a cruise ship passing whales basking.

The third time Margaret and Jan passed the restaurant; shoulders slumped, leaning hard against one another, sagging, they hid in the darkness of the other side of the road, and rethought their route. This time they went neither left nor right, but straight ahead. There it was. Thank you, the God of Limoncello and experienced women.

They clutched the bannister, stumbled up the stairs, not knowing until that moment one could stumble 'up'. They found their respective rooms. They don't share. Margaret fears they snore, and they would never ever dare to eat onions if they shared. But in single rooms one could relax.

Extraordinarily they had no hangover the next morning though by now they understood the word the patron had mentioned. Liqueur. They each bought a bottle of Limoncello to take home with them. Then had to buy another two at the airport as they had drunk the bottles intended to be presents.

Episode 26

Margaret went to the post office, to post a parcel. At the counter Mr M said, 'May I ask what your package contains?'

'The son's underpants, which he inadvertently left behind.'

Mr M reached for the tongs.

'They are washed, but not ironed,' Margaret said

Mr M replaced the tongs. Mr M is used to Margaret.

He sort of smiled. 'Of course.'

Dick said to Margaret when she found him in his waiting place outside with the Polly and Rosie, 'Did you not think to explain that it was an item of clothing, therefore sparing Mr M and the queue?'

Margaret just smiled, enigmatically. Dick knew better than to pursue the subject. Margaret thinks Mr M likes her arrival at the counter, and her funny ways. Dick knows Margaret is often misguided.

Episode 27

Margaret was chatting to her great pal, Dr Kathleen Thompson, (author of the essential and award winning book on cancer: *From Both Ends of the Stethoscope*) about their similarly appalling navigational skills. It put her in mind of a visit to the Imperial War Museum with two of her grand-daughters then aged about 12 and 14. Afterwards they were at the tube station heading for The Wellington on the Strand. Margaret had to admit it had taken some time to reach the IWM in the first place as wrong tube trains had to be corrected by other wrong tube trains, until finally Grandma found the right one. But she does wonder if the young of today have lost their spirit of adventure because, as they stood in front of the station map working out how to get back to Charing Cross, the youngest said, 'No, Granny, we haven't time to go on all the wrong trains again. Let us sort it out.' She even tutted.

They looked, they pointed. 'Follow us. Do not deviate. Do not talk to strangers as you do too often.' They hurried, turning to check the idiot was still with them. They stopped to ask a nice man, who pointed and finally they reached Charing Cross, and walked to The Wellington, Granny still in tow. Then there was the time with Dick and the family, when Dick was driving them round Florence on a sort of ring road - but no, too painful...

Dick still won't speak of it, to this day, but he should have warned Margaret he might need directions. Instead he caught her on the hop. First she had to find the map, then get it up the right way, then work out where they were in order to give directions to where they were going, at traffic signals that were:

'Still – see – still on red, so would everyone stop shouting at me.'

Was it really her fault that lots of Italian cars hooted when the green light came on (they hoot a lot in Italy anyway, so there) and in a flurry Dick gave up on the navigator and went straight ahead, when it should have been right.

They had to go round Florence, again, but that was after the youngest child leaned over and snatched the map and told Margaret to let her sort it out.

She, of course, Miss Smarty-Pants, all of ten year's old, navigated them home to their holiday house, then folded the map, and handed it to Margaret and said, 'It's so easy. I don't see why you can't do it.' Margaret had nothing to say. Nothing at all, because words can hurt, you know. They really can.

Episode 28

Margaret and Dick took Rosie and Polly for their morning quickie walk during Covid to the Sports Village field just before dawn. There they see their chums, with their dogs. They chat, all distanced, and walk, and a little later the gorgeous LARGE leggy adolescent Cockerpoo, Murphy, arrives as dawn breaks. 'Murphy, Murphy,' they all call, and have since Covid started. Murphy rushes to join them all.

This morning, his owner, Mr Murphy (for they all carry the name of their dogs,) said quietly, 'But I just have to tell you, Mrs Polly, Murphy's actually called Paddy.'

Margaret, nonplussed, said, 'Are you sure?' Dick groaned.

'Yes, I rather think I am,' Mr Murphy grinned.

Margaret was struck dumb because she had introduced Murphy to everyone so now she would have to tell everyone she was wrong.

Margaret found her voice. 'But why haven't you said this before?'

'I didn't like to,' Mr Murphy said. 'You were so certain but now Paddy responds to Murphy, and really he's Paddy, so I'm Mr Paddy, not Mr Murphy, and I thought I should tell you and perhaps you could tell EVERYONE.'

Dick sighed.

Margaret looked around, her mind racing. Finally it came to her.

'Ah, I must have misremembered, and Murphy is Irish like Paddy, so I wasn't far out.'

Everyone was round them now, and had got the gist, and nodded.

Dick said, 'But you were far out, very far out. Murphy is nothing like Paddy.'

Everyone nodded again.

Margaret decided she wasn't on speakers with Dick. Then the dogs were all playing with Paddy, and that was that, because there was lots to talk about, (or shout about as they were all two metres distant) and she couldn't miss out on that.

Episode 29

Some years ago a wise woman shared with Margaret that when the weather grew cold, and Christmas was on the horizon she added a teaspoon of rum to her morning coffee. Margaret was in Aldi one morning in October ... She heard a voice calling ...

'Me, me me.' It was an extra thick carton of cream with Baileys which was perched on the shelf beckoning to her.

Dear friends Margaret bought it, and then another. She added it to her morning coffee.

'Maggie meant it to start at Christmas,' Dick said to Margaret.

Margaret explained, 'Thick cream with Baileys is like a dog, not just for Christmas.'

Dick sighed, and muttered, 'It's not cold enough.'

Margaret didn't reply. Margaret will buy more Extra Thick Cream with Baileys before it runs out, because it IS cold, so very there.

Episode 30

It was such a lovely morning during lockdown as Christmas approached. A practice zoom had been arranged with Margaret by the U3A doyen, Eric, her committee secretary, for a reading and bit of a talk she was to give the next week. 'Practise makes perfect,' said her mentor, setting her up as co-host.

Margaret was to read one of her Christmas stories for the U3A of which she was default Chair. She is always default, no-one willingly wants her in charge - such chaos - but if no-one else will she finds her hand going up. So, first she would read the Women's Weekly story written by her in 2018 as Milly Adams, and then 'how to do it' if anyone wants to know.

As she talks they will eat mince pies. She has decided she will have one too, and try not to splatter the screen.

All her short stories are based on uncomfortable truths. In this case a village Christmas Fayre, and a Santa's grotto at which there is always a fairy to control the children.

In the story, and her own memory of a certain day, no one volunteered. She wasn't aware that her hand had gone up, until there it was, waving about. A week later she found herself viewing the outfit in the lavs, the one she was to wear to be Santa's fairy in thirty minutes. Goodness, there were fishnet tights ... and a rather a short fairy frock ... and finally her own stubby heeled comfortable shoes. Not quite the ticket, but there was no way she was staggering about on stilettos.

So there she was, within two ticks, at the entrance to the grotto, short skirt, fishnet tights, with white thighs bulging through the holes, and a wand. All was total dreadfulness until one little boy of about 4 said, 'Oh look at that lovely fairy, she's so pretty, and she does magic.'

Actually Margaret felt it was a little boy of four who did magic that day.

Episode 31

Today is worming day for Miss Polly and Miss Rosie. Miss Polly is well trained, walks to heel, and can usually be relied upon to be biddable. So, Margaret wrapped the pills in special treat ham, placed each in amongst the biscuits in their breakfast bowls. Down the rabbit hole went Miss Rosie's. Miss Polly's remained, gleaming against the steel, all ham and biscuits eaten.

Margaret looked at her, she looked at Margaret. This wasn't going to plan.

Margaret tried the ham again. Nope. So it was time to place pill in mouth, shut mouth, stroke throat.

Let battle commence.

Some time later Margaret emerged looking as though she'd gone 10 rounds with Mike Tyson... Polly could at last have a good girl Dentistix. Oh really? thought Miss Polly, now not on speakers with Margaret. She knows how to hurt, and jumped on the male of the household's knee, with her Dentistix which she laid in his lap and dared anyone to take it. She glared at Margaret, who reminded her of how she traipses after her with a black plastic bag on walks, who grooms and feeds her.

Miss Polly continued to sit on Dada's lap and make the point that Margaret had ruined her day, perhaps her week, certainly her year.

She was still there, with lovely jubbly Dada at coffee time, so Margaret had two teaspoons of thick cream with Baileys in her coffee, so very there, having only just realised that Miss Polly is in dog years, an adolescent. Sigh.

Episode 32

It was mid December, Margaret was downcast, ashamed walking the aisles of Aldi having finished the 'save for Christmas' Baileys Extra thick cream... Even though she is on a diet to make room for Christmas.

As she passed the cream fridge she did not allow herself to look, but strangely, at the checkout there was an Extra Thick Cream with ... brandy. It had leapt into her trolley, eager to come back with fatty Margaret. When home, Dick appeared, and hovered as Margaret unpacked. And there was her sin for all eyes to see. Dick's eyebrows did a dance.

'Oh good,' he said, 'Sell-by is 9th Jan, so perfect for Christmas.'

It failed to last. It was delicious. Margaret bought another for Dick. Well, all right, two; one brandy, and one Baileys. Her horizons are widening by the day.

Episode 33

Margaret and Dick kitted up for a quick 'walkie walkie girls' taking in the beck as they made for the market square to buy last little bits at 7.0 ish in the morning, a few days before Christmas. Dogs felt the weather was a bit sharpish - 'quite frankly, Momma,' so were more than a bit sluggish.

Dick slip-slid on the ice as Polly did a poo, Rosie a wee. Then Margaret was busy with the black bag holding the torch in her mouth, and Polly's lead, until she found Polly's you know what. No-one looked after Dick who had twinged his hip. Margaret tied the bag, removed the torch from her mouth.

'Ouchy,' said Dick.

'Oh, take a paracetamol,' muttered Margaret, probably a bit sharpish.

You see there were the last bits of Christmas shopping and Margaret was frazzled enough without twinged hips, thank you very much.

Episode 34

Christmas 2020

Margaret and Dick had an interesting lunch on Christmas Day... (turn away vegetarians) Margaret collected the duck from the fridge, much, much anticipated by Margaret, Dick, Rosie and Polly, only to find ... it was 'off'.

Somehow someone (must have been Margaret as she is the one in there most often) nudged the fridge temperature thingy, and it was not quite cold enough. This time, the dogs were not on speakers with anyone, until Margaret and Dick took them for a walk while Margaret thought and thought. On their return, the ever resourceful Dick dug out the Tattinger champagne they had been saving for the - and Margaret whispers – duck, and Margaret dug out the butcher's sausages, bacon, black pudding, and eggs bought from a nearby egg stall, (often double yokes) and to add to the accumulated sins, chips. To make it legal, sprouts and carrots.

They had a grilled NAUGHTY, BAD for you, lunch, whipped up in minutes. It was sublime. No-one was not on speakers, Tattinger was a dream, Margaret forgot the tablecloth and decorations, (fail) such did the bubbles in the Tattinger fog the brain, but the video calls with family were quite delightful.

All in all, a success. They will try a duck another day.

Episode 35

What does Margaret remember about 2020? The kindness of strangers, the positivity and lack of grumbling, their local Aldi who went above and beyond, the endeavours of the small shops and businesses who turned on a sixpence to keep the community supplied: the cafes who delivered home cooked food, which kept not only their own heads above water but lots of people fed, the small businesses who started up to fill the gap when their jobs were in limbo, the memoirs written, the new hobbies discovered, the zoom calls which brought family and friends together, the community hubs everywhere, who looked to people's needs, the delivery drivers, the HGV drivers God bless their hard working weary souls.

On, and on, and of course, the ICU departments, the vaccines, the scientists, medical advisers.

She remembers the wonderful military.

There is no place in her memory for the negatives, it is the positives she take from 2020: the strength and courage of our people, the humour. It was breathtaking, moving and life affirming, an honour to witness and a privilege. Thank you all.

Episode 36

The snow brought to Margaret's mind this poem 'wot Margaret wrote' years ago. It was published but she can't remember where. It was, as all her writing seems to be, based on something she experienced, or saw, or knows. A German lad had come for lunch. He had blotted his copy book somewhat already, pre meal, when he talked of Liebfraumilch as the milk from 'ze mother's breast'. Margaret and her sisters thought their slightly Victorian dad would have a stroke. It could only get worse, and did.

Margaret's dad showed his approval or otherwise of his daughters' boyfriends by how many slices of meat he served them. It drove Margaret's mum mad. 'Now look here, Bill...' she would say. And she said the same on this particular day, which went much like this.

Table Talk

While our father carved, my first love said

'The coming of snow in our land

Is a wondrous time.

In the moonlight we run naked

Into the crisp cold. Roll and cavort

In powdered whiteness until, our bodies

Racing with heat, we withdraw.'

Then Heinrich smiled, and unashamedly, I glowed.

The carving knife clattered. My father growled

'Comes of eating too much meat.' He removed

A slice from Heinrich's plate.

'Here, in Tunbridge Wells, we wear

Wellington boots, coats and mufflers or

watch the moon through glass.

Margaret wears a thermal vest of course.'

Heinrich paled, and, ashamed, I wept.

Of course Margaret didn't weep but her Mum spoke sternly to her Dad. 'Now look here Bill... ' A slice was replaced on the German lad's plate, and conversation commenced. Margaret gathers that her Dad would otherwise have been sent sent to bed without any lunch. Her mother had been a nursing sister, and not be be crossed, not even by a Battle of Britain pilot. So very there.

Episode 37

A few years ago (BC Before Covid) Margaret's youngest daughter asked, 'Want to come to Blackpool for Strictly, Mum?' Margaret could hardly breathe. The daughter had fab tickets, courtesy of a friend (she knows people) and drove them from near London where most of the family lived. Margaret is not allowed to drive her family. She goes too fast, too slow, and has been known to suddenly panic, convinced they're going the wrong way, and take a left turn, any left turn. Neither is she allowed to navigate, thank heavens for Sally the Sat Nav. Up they went. It began to snow. Slow slow, no quick quick, slow. Would they get there in time? Would they get there at all?

Then they were through the falling flakes, past the slippery road, and at last in their places, alongside the judges' table, and next to the space through which Claudia and Tess would totter in the highest of heels to get on camera. There was only one row in front of Margaret and her daughter. Someone took a photo from the TV at home. Margaret cut out Claudia and Tess in case she was sued, not because she wants to be the star (certainly not - oh well, perhaps).

Then it all began, with quips to her right from Bruno, and amazing dancing. And ... And ... was it Paul Young to sing? She can't remember - oh Mum says everyone!!! Aljaz ripped off his jacket, and threw it at - her. Well, OK, she did have to hurdle over the seat in front, to catch it.

A bloke called from the left. 'Stuff it in your handbag, lass.' Lass? Oh how kind. But Margaret was dressed like a grown up; going out bra, smart frock, small bag. Had she her voluminous bag, taken even on a Canadian white water rafting trip, there would not have been a problem... Where to hide it?

A lady from costumes, snatched it off her lap. Snatched. There was an unseemly tug of war, but Margaret remembered where she was, and let go. The lady tottered back, losing balance, into Bruno's arms (Margaret made the last bit up, the lady merely walked off) until finally the stage was set for a big dance scene, but NO, Judge Rinder wasn't having any of it.

He realised people over the other side had their view blocked by the flats, or side panels as someone whispered. He said it wasn't fair. Oh yeah, you go for it Judge. The flats were moved.

Oh, the heaven of being there, the twirls, the people... One of the highlights of Margaret's life.

Episode 38

THE WATERWAY GIRLS audio by Milly Adams (Margaret) has arrived. How exciting. October 1943 19 year old Polly Holmes is joining the war effort on Britain's canals. Her companions on the narrowboat will be Verity, and Bet the skipper. How will any of them fare in this strange world of hardship, desperately hard work, and the awful 'bucket' for tiddles not to mention. No, Margaret told herself. No need to mention the Number 2s, Pike. Back at the start of the series the publishers wanted a change of name for the 2nd World War books. They therefore needed a biography.

Margaret suggested: Milly Adams is the only senior citizen still performing as a pole dancer. This brought forth frowns. Margaret wasn't taking this as seriously as one should. Though actually, her Grand had found a pole dancing exercise course, and thought she and Granny could go together, so who knew what could ultimately transpire. Just saying.

'This would not be the sort of person our readers would like,' came the publisher's reasoning.

How little they know about experienced women, thought Margaret.

Episode 39

The usual palaver getting the dogs, Dick, and worst of all, Margaret out of the house for the sunrise walk. Harness, leads, poo bags and lastly, Margaret's gloves. Hunt hunt. Dick ever the gentleman sighed, 'I'll look in the car.'

'No need, I have others.' But like a puff of smoke he was gone, screeching round the corner to the car. Door frozen shut. Wrench, wrench. LANGUAGE. Loud LANGUAGE. Finally, the gloves retrieved.

By now Margaret had found her alternative pair. She hid them because Dick had her proper pair. 'Your gloves,' Dick said in a slightly frosty tone. 'I will put them in the microwave.'

Dick screeched into the kitchen.

'No. No. They have sparkly bits.' Too late. Sparks flew - in the microwave, not between Margaret and Dick - yet.

Margaret said, 'You meant well.' As she looked at the charred remains of her gloves.

OK, perhaps it was an inflammatory remark, but that wasn't the only thing that was inflammatory, was it? Just saying.

Poor Dick, she can hear everyone say.

So, from one frosty atmosphere they stepped out into another, and slip slid along, not on speakers. BAD Margaret. Poor Dick. Poor poor gloves. (Just saying).

Episode 40

Margaret and Dick peered over the church wall at the snowdrops.

'Harbingers of spring,' said Margaret.

'What? You're mumbling,' said Dick.

Margaret remembered with startling clarity a few years ago when Dick started to say this rather a lot. So Margaret made a plan. She arranged a hearing test for them both. Margaret is clever, and told Dick she had concerns about HER hearing. Margaret fibs. They arrived in the room. Such a nice young woman, keen, enthusiastic. Margaret felt mean.

'I have come to keep Margaret company,' said Victor Meldrew, oh sorry - Dick.

'Oh, you have an appointment too, though,' she said. Then met my look. She understood. I went first. A bit of smudging of the edges of sound it must be said. TV up a notch then.

Dick put down his Electronics magazine, and took my place in the booth. 'I don't need to be here,' he announced.

'Of course' she said. She made notes. Then sounds came through into the booth, via Dick's headphones. When heard, a finger lifts and the young lady makes notes. She and Margaret looked through the glass. Dick's finger seldom lifted. She and Margaret looked at one another. She nodded. Margaret feared for the young lady's sanity as Dick came from the booth, and she gave the results.

Dick shook his head.

'There is, undoubtedly, a problem with your equipment,' he said.

Her keen enthusiasm looked in doubt as a lengthy explanation ensued from our electronics engineer as to how Dick's hearing is perfect but her equipment is not.

'Calibration,' the Master said.'

'Time we went home, Dick.' Margaret enunciated each word, loudly, clearly. Dick stood.

'Thank you,' Dick said. 'Very interesting I must say.'

He left. The lovely young woman looked at Margaret. Margaret looked at her.

'A strong coffee with a touch of brandy helps,' Margaret said. 'I drink it rather a lot.'

'I can't possibly comment,' said the young woman weakly. 'But perhaps ditch the coffee, stick with brandy.'

Margaret and Dick walked home. There was no mumbling. How could there be with with definitely no speakers. Margaret and Dick's TV is VERY loud now, but that's because Margaret can't hear either, although of course, she is quite perfect in other ways.

Let her say it for you. 'Poor Dick.'

Episode 41

Margaret strode down to the Post Office on slippy snow, and under falling snow, wearing the mountaineering grips the son who climbs mountains (she does wish he wouldn't) sent her. She made it without a slide, or a crash bang wallop, which is good as she has a tendency to do just that. She had one spectacularly hilarious 'trip' a few years ago, which she will tell you about but not now. Today she wanted to post some books. There was no queue. Mr M was behind the counter. 'Hello Mr M,' said Margaret. 'How's it going.'

'Oh,' said Mr M. 'I didn't realise it was you, masked and with a hoodie. I was reaching for the alarm button.'

Margaret laughed. 'In fact,' he said. 'As it is you, my finger is still hovering over the alarm button.'

Margaret chooses to think he was joking.

Episode 42

Margaret had a fabulous zoom talk yesterday with the U3A of which Margaret is 'Chair'. She gets to introduce speakers, and can string that out hogging the limelight (until she is hooked off). The talk was from Paul Robbins on English Eccentrics. He was hilarious. In particular Margaret felt akin to Sir George Sitwell, who had this notice at the entrance to his historic 'pile'.

"I must ask anyone entering the house never to contradict me in any way, as it interferes with the functioning of the gastric juices and prevents my sleeping at night."

This instruction didn't work awfully well yesterday evening. But Margaret will persevere. Of course, perhaps it was because Dick was already IN the house.

Episode 43

One has to be so careful with Valentine's cards. When Margaret was about 14 they had to go to one of 'those' dances where there was a little band - fundraising – with the parents in the village hall.

She wore an absolutely awful satin peach 'frock' and the girls from school sat, and sat around the room. Finally Margaret's Dad insisted Margaret dance with him because 'she couldn't be a wallflower all evening.' She could have died.

Then, God bless them, some of the lads, also 14, pushed by their parents, asked the girls to dance. The next week one sent Margaret a Valentine card in which he had written. 'To the juiciest peach I've ever tasted.'

Margaret's Dad demanded to know what exactly that meant. Margaret explained it was a waltz, and the lad had obviously got ahead of himself.

'I know what boys are like,' her Dad said, ominously.

'Well, I suppose you would, wouldn't you. You are one,' said Margaret after which she was, quite rightly, sent to her room for insolence, the cardinal sin of a teenager growing up with a strict father who had three daughters and was constantly swimming against the tide, or completely out of his depth.

Episode 44

'Long slow cooking in a small amount of water in a vessel with a tightly fitting lid.'

This mantra came into Margaret's mind out of nowhere when she produced a gloriously succulent stew (Yes, yes, all right then, this was her assessment).

At her school their Domestic Science teacher, Mrs Pots (yes, really) used to drum it into them for stews. Margaret learned a lot from Mrs Pots who said at a school reunion that Margaret almost 'broke her'.

As well as cooking she taught them dressmaking. Margaret forgets how many times Mrs Pots had to untangle the threads beneath Margaret's machine needle. Tension was always a problem, but then it is in novel writing. Not to mention life ... But now is not the time.

Margaret did well in sewing until it came to fitting the sleeves. They never quite fitted - what had she done wrong? Mrs Pots put her on to table napkins.

Then the cooking... Margaret was pleased with her soup, it looked grand. Mrs Pots came to taste, and rushed to the sink, spat, then sluiced her mouth.

Margaret felt it all somewhat unnecessarily dramatic, especially when Mrs Pots got a round of applause from Margaret's pals.

Margaret felt, when she tasted it again, that perhaps some salt was needed, and yes, the garlic was a mite strong. But the class soldiered on over the years. Margaret learned how to make a roux, how to make proper gravy, bake a sponge cake - all the basics, and how to make something out of virtually nothing.

Margaret never did work out the sleeves of a blouse, or the tension of the sewing machine. Could it have been that she talked instead of listening? Surely not. She does hope Mrs Pots remembers her as fondly as she remembers Mrs Pots, and that she hopes Mrs Pots is proud of her quite extraordinary turn of speed from Margaret's workplace to the sink. She almost hurdled the tables in her haste.

At the school reunion Mrs Pots did mutter that it was a shame Margaret hadn't chosen the Latin option, instead of Domestic Science, as it took quite a lot of effort to be a Domestic Goddess.

Au Contraire, Mrs Pots, Margaret has had her moments, (forgetting the Christmas duck) and the skills Mrs Pots taught all of them meant they could run a house with one hand tied behind their back. Frankly, Latin doesn't teach you 'Long slow cooking in a small amount of water in a vessel with a tightly fitting lid.' So very there.

Episode 45

Dick said, 'Have you noticed our tap is wobbling.'

Margaret had.

'I thought I would phone a plumber and ask him to pop in,' Margaret said to Dick.

'I'll have a go,' said Dick.

Dick is not a plumber. Margaret felt worried. 'Are you sure? I can make a call.'

'No,' said Dick.

He looked beneath the sink. Out came everything. He still couldn't get to the nut.

'Coffee?' asked Margaret.

'No,' replied Dick. Back under the sink.

'Pardon?' said Margaret, as other words were said.

'Not talking to you.' said Dick. Which was as well as he used LANGUAGE. He went to the garage to find a tool. He came back with a long spanner thingy and lots of sockets. Back under the sink he went. Even more bad LANGUAGE. Margaret stayed in the conservatory with the dogs. Margaret knows when to take cover.

One socket fitted. More words, loud LANGUAGE

'There,' said Dick, emerging dishevelled from under the sink. He pushed and pulled the tap.

Margaret pushed and pulled the tap. 'Wonderful. Very firm.' Margaret looked at his spanner thingy. 'Where's the socket?'

'Ah,' said Dick. 'Stuck on the nut, where it will have to stay.'

Of course, it will. As we all know, Margaret knows when to say nothing. Clever Dick.

Episode 46

Many years ago Margaret and Dick lived in a sweet little house near Chester with a sweet little bathroom, with a sweet LITTLE short bath. One in which one could not lie down to consider the ceiling, and life itself.

One bedtime Margaret remembered she had some baby oil a visiting daughter with babies had left behind.

'Ah, just the thing.' Into the water it went, into the bath she went, back she sat. Lovely jubbly. But time was awasting, and Dick's turn was next. Out she got, down the plug hole went the oily water. She sprayed the bath with hot water, then wiped it down.

'Ready,' Margaret called.

Dick usually had a shower which was at the tap end of the bath. This time he said, 'I think I'll just slip into the bath instead.' Seriously he did, honestly and truthfully.

Margaret busied herself elsewhere but then there was a terrible thump, a terrible bellow and a strange sort of gurgle from the small bathroom, with the LITTLE short bath. Margaret ran, opened the door. Clearly Margaret had not wiped the bath sufficiently well.

Dick had clambered into lovely warm water. Dick had slipped, ker-bang. Dick's head and torso was almost submerged, his legs were up in the air at the tap end. The children, alerted by the noise, peered in.

The children left.

Margaret felt for the plug, 'Ooops, sorry Dick'.

Margaret finally found the plug. Out gurgled the water. Margaret had saved Dick's life. He could breathe once more.

She pulled at his arms, his torso, his head, getting oily. 'Come on, help me. Try sitting.'

Dick used LANGUAGE because he couldn't get any purchase, and his legs were faffing about in the air.

'Push with your legs against the wall,' Margaret advised. She really hadn't wiped the bath down well, she thought but not exactly in those words.

'Get your legs against the wall,' Margaret repeated

Dick used LANGUAGE again, but did. Clever Margaret. Up he slid, rather fast, and out he came.

The children looked in again. Margaret was hot and bothered but laughing, laughing. BAD Margaret. Poor Dick.

Dick was not on speakers - not for days and days.

Margaret quietly put the oil quite out of sight. Good Margaret.

Episode 47

There they were, swans, in flight formation above Margaret, Dick, Polly and Rosie as they traipsed the footpaths early in the morning. Margaret groped for her phone which was in her pocket, out fell the gloves, the tissues, the crumpled poo bags, finally the phone. She switched it on. Polly was pulling on her lead, jiggling the phone.

'Take her,' to Dick. No 'please'. No time. How rude, but no time. Poor Dick. Quick quick. fiddle with the zoom.

'Oh, the leader's out of view, but most of the rest are in formation. How do they do that? So clever.' 'Just take it,' said Dick, sighing.

Margaret took the photo, there was only time for one before they'd gone from sight behind the skeletal oaks.

She pick up gloves, chased the poo bags caught by the wind, chased the tissues. gathered up Polly. Showed Dick the image. He knew better than to say -

'Bit blurred' he said. Bad Dick. 'But a good pic.' Good Dick

Meanwhile Rosie was rolling in something unmentionable ... Dick hurried hurried.

'Oh Rosie, Oh Lord above.'

Well, you get the idea. Typical morning walk. Further on, white and violet violets. Spring is upon us.

Episode 48

Margaret and Dick decided they would walk the dogs into Thirsk, for 'shopping'. Dick donned his backpack. Out they went. The hectic icy wind cut like a knife. Margaret pulled her hood tighter, and her hand knitted scarf. Margaret likes to knit scarves, they have no armholes, with which, as we all know, especially Mrs Pots, she has a problem.

Dick said, 'I wish I'd brought my hat.'

'Oh, why didn't you?' asked Margaret, warm and cosy in her hood.

'I didn't think I'd need it.' Margaret looked around at the horizontal bushes, the madly waving trees. Wisely Margaret did not refer to the fact that this turmoil could be seen through the kitchen windows.

'You should bring a hat with you always, and put it in your jacket pocket, for use when needed,' Margaret said.

'Easy to say. My pockets are too small.'

Perhaps unwisely Margaret said as they leaned into the wind. 'Well, you could make a habit of leaving it in your backpack, loads of room there. In fact, why did you bring your backpack?

'Stop talking,' said Dick.

Margaret did, then added. 'Of course, you could wear one of my handknitted scarves, see - I'm warm and cosy.'

'Cerise and red stripes are inappropriate,' sort of growled Dick. His white hair, uncut (for months) was billowing in tandem with the bushes and trees.

They walked into the town. It was quiet. They arrived, donned masks. Dick said he'd wait with the dogs while Margaret did what needed to be done.

'I will find shelter in the Market Square,' Dick announced, grandly.

Margaret shopped. But he had the backpack, empty - even of a hat (just saying).

In the co-op she waved at Mr M, but didn't need the PO today. He removed his finger from the alarm button. She bought a carrier bag at the cash desk

Finally out, Margaret peered across at the Market Place. No white hair billowing on any of the benches. No dogs either. She had no finger to text him, her warm gloves were not cooperating and she had no available other hand with which to tug off the glove. It was the hand, after all, which carried the heavy shopping. She could use her teeth but couldn't remember where her gloves had been. One can't be too careful with dogs.

She looked again, crossed the road, walked around the benches near the clock. No Dick but lots of Yarn Bombers' work on the bollards.

Then she heard much laughter from the bus shelter to the left of the square. She looked. Lots of ladies like Margaret who clearly liked doughnuts a great deal, and wore hats, hoods, scarves, Norah Batty tights and used shopping trolleys (which Margaret doesn't but is tempted), all standing or sitting masked in the long shelter, well distanced.

She looked again, and there was billowing white hair, and two dogs standing in the centre of these nice doughnut lovers; sheltered, conversing, laughing, needing to be dragged away from being the centre of attention (too much of that is not good for any husband).

Besides, he was needed for carrying duties. He was chirpy, and waved to his friends. Good, they'd be on speakers all the way home.

'So Dick, about that scarf...'

Episode 49

Margaret and Dick stared at the beck on a nice summer day.

'It's so sparkling in the sunshine,' said Margaret. Dick agreed. They walked on further where the beck slowed, became deeper.

Margaret said, 'Heavens, how clear it is. Tell you what, Dick. Why don't I lie down on the bank, hang my head and arms over it, and take a photo? You will kneel and grip my ankles to stop me falling in.'

Dick thought, then shook his head. 'It wouldn't work. I couldn't resist the temptation to let go, and, additionally, give the smallest of shoves.'

Margaret and Dick fell silent. Margaret decided to take the photo from a standing position, but first she moved out of Dick's reach. Margaret is not as daft as she sometimes appears.

Episode 50

Memories, memories. Margaret had been talking to someone who had loved *A Canopy of Silence*.

It made Margaret think of beloved Dinkie who helped her so much with the research for the book. Dinkie was a daughter of a Group Settler in Western Australia and was also a rellie of Margaret's village Post Master, in a Somerset village (yes Margaret does tend to get friendly with Post Masters - because they are behind a counter and can't escape).

The Post Master wrote to Dinkie about Margaret and the book she wanted to write. Dinkie wanted to help, so Margaret went out to where Dinkie lived in Margaret River, and she and her husband, Norm, took her all over the place. They showed her the dreadful effort involved in being a pioneer settler in the big tree country.

Dinkie then came to Somerset to stay with Margaret and Dick, so was able to be guest of honour at a big launch 'do' for *Canopy of Silence*. She was such fun because she didn't mind the press taking daft upside down pics of the two of them lying toe to head, to epitomise Australia and the UK.

Margaret remembers a very strange day, when Dinkie wanted to buy a VERY heavy canteen of cutlery for Lionel, her son and take it back on the plane.

They duly bought the oak canteen containing the cutlery, in Yeovil, and Dinkie insisted on carrying it to Margaret's car - no, she needed no help even though it was very heavy, but Dinkie tripped as they went down a deserted alley. Margaret grabbed her, but to no avail, and down they went together.

The canteen sprang open, shed its cutlery, Dinkie's handbag flew open, her purse too; coins, notes, passport, spilled all over the pavement. Margaret was so busy trying to haul herself to her feet - ouchy ouchy - and at the same time help Dinkie up, ouchy ouchy that she didn't see the gang of youths until they were upon them.

The boys said nothing. They just hurried to gather up the purse, passport and money, then the cutlery. Oh no. They had weapons now.

The boys came closer, then the collectors of the weapons passed the cutlery to one boy.

'Let's put it back in the canteen, easier to carry,' the leader said.

The others stuffed the money into the purse.

They reached for Dinkie and Margaret, hauled them upright. Left them to dust themselves down, looking them over as they did so.

'Does the older one need an ambulance?'

'No thank you, and I'm not much older than Margaret,' said Dinkie. A boy dropped her purse, and passport too, into Dinkie's handbag.

Margaret wondered how they would apply for a new passport? Should she snatch it back, run at them kicking and screaming, should sh-

The boy gave the handbag back to Dinkie.

'Shall we carry the cutlery canteen to your car?'

'Margaret will take it,' said Dinkie.

Margaret took it, staggered. How had Dinkie carried it? The boy took it, and said *he* would take it to the car.

The other boys called, 'We'll meet you at the corner when you've got them in their car.' They turned and went down the alley, the way Dinkie and Margaret had just come.

Margaret and Dinkie called, 'Thank you, thank you.'

The boys just waved.

'You shouldn't carry this at your age,' the boy said to Dinkie as they walked past the bank. Dinkie winked at Margaret. 'Really truly I'm not that old,' she said.

She, Margaret and the boy talked of Australia, where one day he wanted to go, and Lionel who he hoped would like his present.

'You will find me in Margaret River,' Dinkie said. 'Then you can have a cup of tea and scones, as a thank you.'

'No need for thanks. But you should clean your grazes when you get home.'

They reached the car. He put the cutlery canteen on the back seat. Dinkie reached into her bag, and took out her purse.

'No, you just look after yourself while you're here,' the boy said. 'Your son will be very pleased, but the knives and forks might not be in the right place, not sure about the spoons either. Best you check them, give 'em a bit of a wash.'

He waved, turned, and went back to the corner where his friends were waiting. They all waved. Margaret and Dinkie watched them as they went on their way.

Margaret felt so grateful, so proud of them because for a moment she hadn't been sure. Dinkie was so grateful, pleased, and proud of them too.

The boys have a corner of Margaret's heart now, and in Dinkie's too, though Margaret and Dinkie had not asked their names. They forgot, you see, because they were, secretly a bit shaken up, and had jolly sore knees, hands and bumps a daisies.

But it is a moment neither of them forgot – and talked of all the way home, and many other times – marvelling at the kindness of strangers.

Episode 51

Some years ago Margaret had a terrible (if she does say it herself) case of shingles. She had never felt so awful for so long in her life. It left her feeling glum, chin on chest sort of glum. Margaret even forgot how to laugh. To improve she set herself challenges. First was to train to climb Skiddaw.

Finally off Dick and Margaret went, to a nice holiday home. Next day they slogged up and up into cloud until they reached the top. Margaret began to pick up, the shingles the pain and glumness eased.

The next challenge was to go in a glider. So off she and Dick went, a pilot for each of them waited at the airfield.

'I'll love this,' Margaret said.

'Take a brown paper bag,' said Dick as he walked to his glider.

'No, no, I'll be fine,' said Margaret, merrily.

'Take the bag,' said Dick over his shoulder, in that voice.

The pilot said, looking worried. 'Better take the bag.'

Margaret did. Margaret was glad. The view was lovely, the pilot too, but Margaret felt the glider sway, sway, quick quick sway. Margaret kept the brown paper bag very very close, and was very glad to slip slide and bump into land.

Margaret handed the unused paper bag to Dick. 'I was fine,' she said. 'I didn't need it.'

Dick said, 'You are white and sweaty. You would have needed it very soon.' Dick was right - again. Margaret still likes gliders, but takes photos of them from the ground, and shows off by telling everyone about the day she slogged up Skiddaw, and then went in a glider. She does not mention the brown paper bag. Best not.

But there was one more challenge Margaret felt she needed...

Episode 52

Margaret determined to go to swimming lessons to challenge herself to get back to Tally Ho. So she booked.

She had found success in the water before, in the school swimming gala. She won the 'walking race' across the pool and was very proud. Her bestie Jan was a very good swimmer. Margaret was not. At the end, when everyone was packing up, there was the walking race - in the interests of inclusivity (yes, even then). The left-over mums watched, cheered, or looked at their watches. Then rushed the competitors to the changing cubicles where other people's talcum powder lay on the floor, and their daughters stood on their tips so as not to put their whole feet into the powder. Urgh.

So you see, Margaret knew what it was like to win but not to swim.

The first thing was to make herself put her face in the water. This Margaret could never do, because she thought she was drowning. It was also because it ruined her hair colour.

'But no, into the water their faces must go,' said teacher. Nice lady, barely a line on her face - at the start of the course. Margaret made a pal, too. A bloke determined to swim so he could teach his son. Margaret and Hugh worked on the coffee system: the one who did it first didn't have to buy the coffee.

So, in no time they were both doing the crawl, the backstroke, the butterfly, and into the water went the face. In fact, all the class were doing everything, but they hadn't yet learned to dive.

Then the news came, that there was to be a Swimming Gala the next week. No, no, not for the swimming group, but a proper swimming Gala, for proper swimmers.

Margaret thought she might watch, she even told teacher she might; sucking up. There were to be teams from all over. Serious stuff.

The day before the Gala the teacher's friend's team was short of two swimmers she told the class. Suddenly Margaret's pal was out of the door, and the rest of the class with him.

Teacher said, 'That leaves you, Margaret. So one place filled. And does your 'him indoors' swim?'

Him indoors is a fish. One of the other two team members had trialled for the Olympics, the other was also Speedy Gonzales and each only about 18. Margaret wasn't sure if she could even swim a length, as they had only done widths but it seemed surly not to do it. She said yes, and for Dick too.

She told Dick when she got home. He was quiet. He searched and searched for his trunks.

'Oh damn,' Margaret heard him say. 'I've found them.'

So there they were the next day getting ready for their crawl and breaststroke race. The Olympian trial lass was on the start podium, the referee was ready with the starting pistol, and all the other teams were crouched down ready to do lovely dives into their lanes. Off they went. Our team was in the lead, but then Margaret, who was second swimmer, was told by Dick to get on the starting block. As she's just told you, she hadn't done diving yet. So she belly flopped. It made a terrible splash and slapped and hurt her whole body.

Off she crawled, head down, blind as a bat, banging into the lane ropes, Was that a rope burn? Breathe, she was drowning. One length done. Turn. The other competitors were already nearly back at the starting blocks. Off she lunged again, the breaststroke, head bobbing up from time to time, sight restored, no banging into ropes, quicker, quicker, the

third swimmers were already off the starting blocks, heading towards the end of the lanes- oh the shame. Lungs bursting Margaret hit the end. Home at last.

In went Dick, diving over her head, zipping along while Margaret was hauled out, half dead and sat on the starting block, coughing. But no, she told a nice man firmly; she did not need resuscitating.

Dick was back in two ticks.

The other fab swimmer dived over Dick's head. They were making up the ground lost by MG. Margaret's team came second. The team were awfully nice about her laps:

'Without Margaret they couldn't have swum in the race,' they said. 'You were essential.'

Margaret felt proud. She expected a medal. But 2nd didn't get one, not even a badge.

The next Monday she was in the corner shop, and she saw the referee. She stopped him,

'I bet you were in awe of my performance.' The referee stared, blinked, stared again.

'Oh, I didn't recognise you with your clothes on,' he said. Yes, he really did. In a very loud voice.

That did Margaret's profile a lot of good in the village and it was better than a medal, she told Dick. 'Stop talking,' said Dick. She did, because he was very good to swim in the Gala, after all.

Episode 53

Margaret and Dick and the dogs went for a walk, a long one, so that they could all get fit. It was Margaret's decision, and not open to discussion.

They eventually reached the beck. Margaret chatted. Dick listened, perhaps.

'Let's go up and over the barrow' said Margaret, 'I must get back to going up hills. Good for the thighs'

Dick said, 'I will sit on the bench near the beck, with the dogs. You go up. Try running.'

Margaret is wise, she walked. She waved as she reached the top, but Dick was reading the news on his phone.

Margaret said sorry to whoever was still buried, though three skeletons have been found, and presumably put somewhere safe. She hoped so, or as always, she felt rude. She slipped and slid down to the bottom.

She shared her thoughts with Dick as they walked on.

Dick said, 'It's not as though they'll mind.'

Finally Margaret and Dick were on the home stretch, puff pant. They reached the place that sells free range eggs from an honesty stall at the entrance to the drive. To help with the honesty there is a CCTV camera.

Margaret put £1.70 for twelve in the tin. One egg box had an attached lid, but there was a loose cardboard lid on the other. Margaret often has elastic bands in her pocket for 'Eventualities'. This time she had none.

Dick was wearing a backpack, as usual. It was open, ready for the eggs. Dick said. 'What if the top comes off, and they tumble and break - in my backpack.'

Margaret explained that all would be well if he walked carefully, just moving his legs, not his torso, as good runners ran. Margaret had seen them on the sports village track.

Dick set off like John Cleese in the Ministry of Funny Walks but then he forgot. Margaret felt it best not to remind him because ... Well, Dick wasn't altogether on speakers

At home, Margaret unpacked the backpack

'Oh dear,' said Margaret. The lid had come off the top one, and 4 eggs had escaped, were broken, and oozed their innards onto the bottom box, which was soggy but unscathed, then flowed on to the bottom of the backpack.

'Oh, but look, Dick,' said Margaret. 'Eight are all right.'

Dick did not look. Dick left the room.

Margaret felt he had shut the door rather loudly.

'Well, you were moving your upper body, which was not as I advised.' Margaret said it quietly because nobody likes a smarty pants.

Margaret began to clean up the backpack. Margaret's mother had said that there was nothing worse than dropping an egg on the kitchen floor because the innards slid around and took ages to clean up.

Well, Margaret's mother was wrong. Broken eggs in a backpack are much much worse. In the end Margaret slung the backpack in the washing machine, inside out.

Margaret called up to Dick, who was in his study. 'All is well, your backpack is in the washing machine.'

Dick replied, 'You took my wallet out from the front pocket?'

It was only now that Margaret noticed the brown thing going round and round.

Margaret hoped the money would dry, and made sure to put elastic bands in her pocket for next time.

Chez Graham was very quiet for the rest of the day.

Episode 54

Margaret and Dick were busy in the garden. Margaret had Buddleia to secretly put into pots. Secretly because Margaret bought them on line, and too many arrived because she ordered the wrong number. Margaret is not very good with IT. So she will hide them along the side of the house, and then plant them in the garden in October, and say: 'Oh, look, Dick, the big Buddleia have made lots of babies.' Because Dick does not understand people who get muddled with IT.

While Margaret was working, she looked up and saw her reflection in the conservatory window. She was wearing short socks (after her walk this morning) she was wearing a floppy top, floppy bra, and well, all things were just ... floppy.

She said, 'Oh, what on earth do I look like?'

Dick was in the greenhouse tending his BIG tomatoes, his HUGE tomatoes.

Dick heard what Margaret said and replied, 'What do you look like? A bag lady.' Gasp.

Margaret wondered quite how the training of 40 years could result in Dick not knowing when to be truthful, and when not.

But Margaret knew that Dick was really cross because she thinks that if she is traipsing the countryside, it is good for Dick to walk too and he can't forget about the broken eggs.

Margaret finished the Buddleia, and hid them. She thought of looking like a bag lady, but then of her IT hopelessness, and how she needed Dick's nerdy bits.

Margaret appeared at the greenhouse door. Dick jumped in fright. Margaret smiled, kindly, benevolently. Dick shrank back. Margaret reached out. Dick flinched. Margaret said the immortal words, 'Your massive tomatoes are superb.'

Episode 55

Yesterday was a perfect day in North Yorkshire. Not a breath of wind, a gentle sun - under which it seemed the world stood still.

Margaret toddled off, she reached the barrow, climbing up and over, ('Sorry everyone.') She walked back through the buttercups, to find herself covered in yellow pollen, even her phone with which she took an image of the glorious meadow. She chatted to an old boy with a cross little dog who didn't want her butting in on their walk so barked: 'He's mine, he's mine.'

Then on, noticing a hot cow lying under a May tree still in blossom, while the calves entered the beck. The cow looked at Margaret. Margaret looked at her.

'Anything for a lie down and a bit of peace while they have a play,' Daisy's eyes said. Margaret gives everyone a name, usually the wrong one, like Murphy, but she doesn't dwell on that.

Margaret knew what Daisy meant, but had miles to go before she slept, to paraphrase the words of Robert Frost.

On she walked, back into the past, and was a kid again on just such a perfect day.

They'd reach the beck, their bikes were thrown onto the bank, leaving the wheels spinning - do you remember? Bikes that were already third hand, battered, but their gallant steeds. They had nets to catch minnows, and jam jars on string to put them in, and count who had the most. They'd lounge on the bank, eating bread and marge or dripping, letting the sun dry their legs, and arms, watching vapour trails in the sky.

'Where are they going?'

'We'd rather be here.'

They'd talk, listen, watch the kingfisher, the reflections on the water, and feel that the day would never end. But when it did, they returned the minnows to the beck, their skirts still tucked in their knicks, the boys wore baggy shorts, rolled up.

On and on Margaret walked, past others out on walks, and two ladies of a certain age sitting on a bench in a small copse of new trees. The bench was next to the fir tree that becomes a Christmas Tree each year, festooned with decorations. On the other side were young trees from which dangled teapots for nests, but none this year - maybe next.

Margaret called as she passed, 'Hello Girls, you should have brought a beer with you.' Laughter, agreement.

'Aye, lass,' one said. 'Then you could have a nip too. One of the best days since childhood.'

It was, it was. I do so hope you all have many of those too.