

BRINGING BACK THE
Magic
A Transformational
Memoir

MARGARET T. WRIGHT

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Mama Dear's garden

MY GRANDMOTHER'S GARDEN

I love animals. I have always loved animals. Sometimes I think that I get along with them better than people. They are patient and giving, and they allow me to be myself, warts and all. Circumstances of my early childhood led me to hide from life, but my closeness with animals helped me twist and turn, and work through these behavioral phobias and fears, to become a participator in life and advocate for my special little friends. This is the story that I want to tell...

My earliest memories of my alliance with animals are from my early childhood between four and six years old. Besides my doll babies, my closest friends were my albino rabbits. My best friend rabbit named Mr. Tewillager and I had a special relationship. He and his girlfriend lived in a pen outside, but my parents would let me bring them up into my bedroom to hang out. We loved to play little hide and seek games. I remember placing little paper bags in areas of the room so that they could run and hide. It was so amusing to watch them jump up in the air, twist and turn, and run in circles right around me and the room. They would look up at me with their comical little faces, which

made me laugh. Then we touched noses. Sometimes I liked to wiggle my nose at them and giggle. They brought such joy to my life.

I always saw Mr. Tewillager as magical because I thought I could hear his voice. He spoke to me telepathically. I don't know what he talked to me about but I shared with him my deepest feelings and wishes. Sometimes I built little tents in my bedroom, where pillows and chairs were placed strategically apart and a sheet was thrown over them. Mr. and Mrs. Tewillager and I crawled under the sheet to hide from the rest of the world. I hugged them, and we snuggled and wiggled our noses. I giggled. That's where we shared our deepest secrets.

When I think back to my early childhood, my first thought is always of Mr. Tewillager, my magical, white rabbit companion. He represented everything that was good.



Since I could not pronounce Margaret, I called myself Monty Wright. I was very active, always exploring and getting into everything. Similar to the energizer bunny that keeps on going, I was curious and into everything in my path that was not nailed down. My personality was befitting of the name Monty.

I also was a little prissy and particular about things. For example, most women appear to be obsessed with good hair. What's even more amazing to me is that this pattern appears to go deep down into the female psyche, to little girls. Right down to the early years, it was also my obsession. I remember being jealous of



a childhood friend who had beautiful curly, blonde hair. Mine was mousy brown and straight as a board; but I pretended that it was beautiful anyway. My grandmother, whom I called Mama Dear, would drop by with her house man chauffeur Elijah (nicknamed Lige) to take me for afternoon car rides. Of course, I made her keep the car windows closed so that the wind “did not blow my curls.”

I cannot remember how or why I gave my grandmother the nickname of Mama Dear. Nicknames are very descriptive of personality. Mama Dear was too refined to be called grandma, gramps, or granny. She was a genteel Southern lady who loved nice things and to give grand parties. She had porcelain skin, white-silver hair, and baby blue eyes. When I think of her, I think of flowers and the color of lavender.

Accordingly, I nicknamed my grandfather Papa Dear. I didn't know him very well because he was bedridden with late stages of the Alzheimer's disease. I remember visiting him every Sunday at lunch.

Mama Dear loved to spoil me, her first grandchild. I remember every Christmas of my childhood, she sent Lige over to our house to deliver laundry baskets filled with presents for my little brother Thomas, who was two years younger than I, and me. Those were the days.

On most Sundays after church we went to Mama Dear's house

for lunch. My parents dressed up Thomas and me to the hilt. I remember wearing these frilly, froo froo dresses, which I am sure were the big brand names of the time. That kind of stuff was never really important to me, but nevertheless, we had to be dressed for the occasion.

Mama Dear and Papa Dear lived in a beautiful house on a two acre lot. Mama Dear loved flowers and landscaping, so it was always like visiting Wonderland for me. The brick walkway up to the front door was lined with beautiful pink, red, and white azalea bushes. The front yard was sprinkled with magnificent oak trees and smaller bushes. But the most exciting part was her backyard, which consisted of a side yard to the right and then a private little flower garden that was located directly behind her house. The side yard consisted of a large green area, which had groupings of small bushes and flowers scattered in the open area. A narrow brick walkway led to a little path, probably four feet wide, which encircled the large green area. The path was formed by a combination of trees with thick branches and little flowering bushes, all scrunched and huddled together on each side. It felt as if I were walking in a dark, cozy tunnel. It was a place where I could go hide. No one could see me. No one could hear me. No one could find me, except for the little backyard animals... and the imaginary diva spirits.

Even though the garden behind Mama Dear's house was small, it felt like acres to me. It was made up of four main quadrants containing the most beautiful flowers, with vibrant colors of indigo, red, violet, orange, and white. Each of these flowering quadrants was lined with ivy. They were separated by a little red brick pathway that formed the symbol of a cross. Then there was

a water fountain bird bath in the middle of the garden, placed at the cross intersection of the red brick path. The fountain consisted of a statue of a little girl holding a container that spout out water into the bird bath. The little girl was named Margaret, right after me. Imagine! I wasn't even yet six years old, and I already had a "statue named after me."

My favorite activity at Mama Dear's house was to play in the yard, but I wasn't usually allowed to go out there until after lunch because I couldn't mess up my dress. So we sat around on Mama Dear's side porch and talked for a while before being called for lunch. Mama Dear's house man chef Lige would finally call us for lunch. We walked into a large formal dining room with a long, antique mahogany dining room table, which was covered by an intricately laced and designed white linen table cloth. On top of the table cloth were five settings of white linen place mats and a battery of silverware, all laid out for the various meal courses.

Sunday lunches at Mama Dear's house were quite spectacular. But the desserts were even better! We were served such dishes as Charlotte russe, chocolate souffle, and vanilla ice cream with homemade, thick chocolate sauce. And like the grown ups, I got my own coffee. Of course, it was a child's version of coffee, consisting of mostly milk with just a splash of coffee. Nevertheless, I was there with the best of them, putting on conversation and sipping my very own coffee.

Then after lunch, came the fun! Once we changed clothes, the adults escorted Thomas and me outside to play. As I got older, closer to six years, I could play with less supervision. This was my



Maggie Wright with her beloved fountain.



Mama Dear in the back garden.



Garden exploration after every Sunday lunch at Mama Dear's house.



"Monty" Wright at her second birthday party at Mama Dear's home.

most special childhood memory. As quickly as I could, I dashed for the secret, cozy path between the bushes in Mama Dear's yard. My favorite place to hide was in a little indentation between some azalea bushes and under a banana shrub tree. I grabbed a few of the banana tree fruit and squeezed them in my hand. They looked to me like little white pistachio nuts, except they were soft and gave off the most beautiful banana fruit fragrance. Then I huddled there quietly between the bushes, waiting for the backyard animals to come out. Of course, my parents knew exactly where I was, but they never disturbed me.

I remember watching a sparrow couple build their nest. One flew off into the nearby bushes and picked up a short piece of stick, or pine straw, and returned to place it between the leaves of a tree branch diagonally across from me. One at a time, each bird brought a new piece of something to place in the nest space: a little bit of string; a few twigs; a few dead leaves from the previous year; a few feathers from other birds.

Then I watched the little chipmunks scoot between the bushes. One of them darted across the path and then froze under a bush a few feet from me. Then the other one came, and they made little jibber jabber squeaks at each other. They reminded me of little toy motor cars that I played with in my bedroom. Once they were wound up, they scooted across the floor and froze immediately, when the energy ran out.

When it was time to go home, my mother and I walked to Mama Dear's flower garden so that I could pick some pansies to take home. Pansies were my very favorite flower because they had such beautiful faces. They seemed like little fairy folk, and it

felt as if they were smiling and talking to me. On windy days, their little heads swayed back and forth in the breeze, as if agreeing with my pontifications. The pansies that were lucky enough to be picked were placed in little Dixie cups with water. Then they were taken home to live in my doll house, where they became make-believe children, right along with my doll babies.





Maggie and a favorite doll baby

THE MAGIC ENDS

Childhood in the fifties was so different from today. Back then, you had to rely on your imagination and playing skills. I always wanted to be a teacher, so in my early years (and older), I spent many days in my bedroom classroom teaching my doll babies and pansies how to read and write. They were lined up in a row and given pieces of paper and pencils. Then I pretended to grade their papers and lecture them about things.

I also loved music and dancing. I spent hours spinning in circles with a sheet over my head, singing to Rodgers and Hammerstein show tunes that were played full blast on my little Victrola music box. Of course, I didn't know the words at that age or what they really meant... but that did not matter.

Imagination was also spent in Nature. There was a vacant wooded lot beside my house where I would sometimes go to hide and observe the movement of the birds, chipmunks, and squirrels around me. On dark rainy days, I spent hours

and hours sitting on the floor in our den, huddled securely between the window sill and draped material of the window curtains, so that no one could see me. I remember staring at the puddles outside. The circular motion of the raindrops falling into the puddles transformed into flowing ball dresses of beautiful fairies dancing the waltz in the puddles. Their gowns were gorgeous, with every color of the rainbow; they were having such a wonderful time!



I grew up in Wilmington, North Carolina, and my early childhood was so happy and magical... then one day, it stopped. My Mother died of colon cancer when I was six years old; she was only 34 years old. She died within four months of the discovery of the cancer.

My father and mother's doctor made the decision not to tell Mother that she had cancer and was dying. So neither she, nor my four-year-old brother Thomas and I, ever had a clue that she was dying, until the last minute. We never had time to say good bye. I'm sure she knew, but she also knew how devastated Daddy was. Not talking about it was the only way he could handle it and stay together, and so she did not force the issue. I'm sure I knew too, at least subconsciously.

I have vague recollections of her. I remember her as a beautiful, tall, dark-haired lady who was so vibrant and full of life. I remember hanging out with her in her bedroom when she was sick from the cancer. A friend had given her a Gift Tree, and my very important job was to open a new present for her every day. The tree was about three feet tall,

with many little packages wrapped in lavender and pink paper with silver ribbon hanging from limbs of the tree.

I remember being spanked when Thomas and I would chase each other in the hallway. Our noise made Mother nauseated, but we didn't know; we were just children. Daddy was so torn apart; he had to carry this devastating secret deep in his heart, day after day. He had no one to tell. He had no one to talk to, except Mother's doctor, and it must have been a gnawing burden for him.

I vaguely remember when Daddy broke the news. On Wednesday morning, May 9, 1956, Thomas and I were sent to stay with our babysitter at her family farm, because I had just contracted the mumps and Mother had drifted off into a coma, and at 7 p.m. that night, she died. On the following Saturday, which was the day after Mother's funeral, Daddy picked up Thomas and me from the farm; and before going directly home, he parked the car in a parking lot of a local shopping center, so that he could talk with us.

“Children, there's something I have to tell you,” said Daddy. He paused and turned in his seat to face us. “God wanted your mother to go live with him. So she's gone to live in God's house,” he added with tears dripping off of his nose. He pulled out a handkerchief from his pocket, took off his glasses and wiped his eyes. “Mother's body is living in the ground. But her soul, her spirit, and her heart have gone to live with God. Now, she is an Angel, just as beautiful as ever.”¹

That's a lot for a six-year-old and a four-year-old child to comprehend. It was like ice water in our faces. When we left, she was sick. When we returned, she was gone...dead.

According to my father's notes about that time, Thomas did not understand what Daddy meant; I had many questions. "Does she have one of those things around her head [a halo] like I wore in the Christmas play?" I asked.

"I promise you she does. She is a beautiful Angel in the sky, helping God do things for people," responded Daddy.

When we got home, he took us up into Mother's room to show us that she was gone. Her bed was all made up, as if she had gone on an errand. The room was completely tidy; her three-foot Gift Tree was no longer there. Then our maid Carrie joined us to go to the cemetery. Mother's burial site was covered by a canvas tent and there were hundreds of colorful flower arrangements all around her grave. Thomas ran over to the grave site... kneeled down and started digging at the dirt with his hands, screaming, "Mudder! Mudder! Mudder!"

When we got home, I started crying uncontrollably and ran back into my room. Daddy tried to comfort me but it was all too devastating. I asked him to let me be alone for a little while and to bring in my two rabbits, as my animals and I had a lot to think about. Moments later, the bedroom door opened and Mr. Tewillager and his girlfriend were brought in to be with me. We sat together, huddled on the floor... with the lights off.

The reality had finally sunk in. I was never going to see my mommy again. What was I going to do? How was I going to survive without her? How was I going to carry on? I had so many questions in my head. Who was going to take care of us? Why did mommy leave me? What did I do? I want her back.

Carrie came into my room to give me some lunch. I had so many questions to ask her. She sat patiently on the floor with me and Mr. and Mrs. Tewillager. She held me for a few minutes and said, "Baby, don't you cry." After lunch that day, Carrie knocked on Daddy's door. "Mr. Wright," she said. "I'm so sorry to bother you, but Margaret has a question, which I cannot answer. Do you have a moment?"

Daddy looked up and smiled, "Yes, Carrie. What is her question?"

Carrie took a deep breath and sighed. "Mr. Wright, Margaret asked when you were going to marry again so she could have a new mommy. I didn't know how to answer a question like that."

Daddy looked down and wiped a tear from his eyes with the soiled handkerchief in one of his trembling hands. He stared into space for a moment and looked back at Carrie. "Tell her that I'll think about it."

Later that afternoon, I went downstairs to join Daddy. Mother's Day was the next day. "Daddy, what are we going to give Mother for Mother's Day?" I asked.

“What do you want to give to her?” Daddy answered in a trembling voice.

“Flowers,” I said.

“What kind?”

“Pansies.” So Daddy ordered some pansies to be delivered to Mother’s grave.

I tried hard to sleep that night, but the deep depression kept waking me up. I cried for my mommy. Please come back! The next morning, on Mother’s Day, Thomas and I went into Daddy’s room to wake him up. Daddy’s eyes were red and wet; all three of us were so sad. “Daddy, I don’t want you to marry anyone else,” I said. “We couldn’t find anyone as sweet and pretty as Mother.” Daddy hugged me and trembled.

Later that morning, we went back to the cemetery to visit Mother for Mother’s Day. Thomas and I placed our flowers by her grave, and mine were the pansies. Thomas and I had more and more questions. Daddy tried to help us understand that Mother’s body was there but her heart and soul were living with God to do good things for the world. She was a beautiful angel, just like she had been on earth. The more questions Daddy got from us, the more unraveled he became. He squatted beside us by Mother’s grave, and he kept looking at the ground. His eyes were full of tears and sadness; his nose and glasses were dripping from the tears; he choked and wept, and could no longer speak. Carrie noticed

that he was about to break down, and so she guided Thomas and me back to the car. Daddy stayed for a few more minutes to regain his composure and to have personal words with Mother's soul... on Mother's Day.



Weeks later, in late June or early July, there was a heat wave in the area. The temperature had skyrocketed to August levels in the high nineties. The air was thick and listless, and it was hard to breathe.

Mr. and Mrs. Tewillager lived in a pen located under a shady oak tree in the backyard. On extreme heat and humid days, they were given relief by the mist from a revolving backyard sprinkler that was turned on every day; but for some reason on this afternoon, someone had forgotten to turn on the sprinkler.

Thomas and I returned with Daddy from an errand, and as we drove into the carport, we noticed two white carcasses lying motionless on the ground. No! Not my best friends too! I jumped out of the car screaming as I ran over to my bunnies' bodies. They were stiff as a board. I hugged Mr. Tewillager. There was no voice coming from his body; there was no life. I held him and Mrs. Tewillager and curled into a ball on the ground. Clutching them to my breast, I closed my eyes and sobbed hysterically.