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# KNIT-PICKING

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*A Story by Joanne Peters*

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William Simpson placed his coffee cup and saucer carefully on the polished boardroom table and eased himself into the velvet swivel chair. He took a black leather folder from his briefcase and centred it in front of him, lining up two pens, one red, one black, beside it. He took a sip of coffee, put down the cup, sighed comfortably, and nodded to those already seated around the table. "Bill. James. Sam. Murray. Pierre."

It was good to see all the old faces, to feel that sense of secure belonging, to know that one was still doing a useful job. William Simpson reflected, as he did every second Wednesday of the month, on his career from runner to clerk to assistant manager, to branch manager, and so on. Until finally, to President of the Bank, and then on retirement, to member of the Board of Directors and his duly earned place among these people, all of which somehow renewed his faith in the divine order of the world.

This divine order manifested itself in the uniformly well-cut three piece suits worn by the men around the table. It was mirrored in the glassy mahogany furniture. It supported the faithful with the comfort of plush velvet upholstery and brass tubular arms of the chairs. Portraits of several generations of Bank Presidents looked on approvingly at the assembled group, clearly defining an expectation of so-onness, for ever and ever, . . . and ever . . . William's glance continued around the table. He nodded to Charlie, and to John. John was beginning to look his age, must be seventy-eight if he was a day. But then, we're all getting on, if the truth were told, white hair and walking canes. Only Pierre's hair was still brown, but you know what they say about the French. Still, one mustn't subscribe to gossip, not the thing, people in glass houses and all that, eh?

Down at the far corner, another Director was leaning across to put a leather folder on the table, fishing into the side-pocket of a briefcase for pens. William's facial muscles tightened as he acknowledged the new arrival. Margaret MacKinnon. Ms Margaret MacKinnon. Ms indeed. What the devil was wrong with Mrs, he'd like to know. After all, had she been married to Jim MacKinnon for thirty odd years, or not? Oh sure, she had had that dress design and marketing business of her own, but could she have done it without Jim's shoe company as collateral? Jim had always been generous in his praise of her, almost made it sound as if he owed his success to her, but a man has to be nice about the women, wives, secretaries. And look how she repaid him, selling out to that American conglomerate not two months after Jim copped it to a coronary, and making a profit of over three million. Anyway, business sense or no business sense, a woman had no damn business on the Board of the Bank.

Margaret responded to William's terse nod with a gentle smile, and walked over to the coffee pot. She exchanged a few words with Pierre – in French, William noted, – and returned to her seat

just as Smithers, the Executive V.P., called the meeting to order. She opened her folder, and made a check-mark on her copy of the agenda. William felt a twinge of annoyance as he watched her. As always, her papers seemed to be arranged in perfect order. She never paddled helplessly in a sea of papers. Why did she never have to ask for an extra copy of some item, no matter how many mailings there had been in the preceding month?

William rifled through his own papers to find the agenda. By the time he had found it, the motion to adopt had passed with none opposed. Minutes of the last meeting. Ah, here they were. No. Those are the December ones. Here they are. What? Yes, seconded. Have to make sure one gets one's name into the minutes, just in case the myopic secretary doesn't see one when she takes attendance. Wouldn't do to have to create a fuss to collect one's fee, not at all the thing. Now what?

Margaret's hand is raised. She is politely correcting the recording of the matter a third of the way down page 5. How on earth does she remember those things? Must have a secretary's mind. They always remember details. Now look at her. She's taking out her knitting. Twenty years as chairman of her own company, and she still knits her way through every one of these meetings.

Pierre glanced across at Margaret. Pushing his chair back, he could see her legs under the table. How old is she? Fifty? Maybe fifty-five? With a woman like that, sometimes it's hard to tell. They say she was once the love of Toronto, if Toronto could aspire to love. Now, Montreal, that would make more sense. Even now, those ankles, the smooth hands caressing the yarn into loops around the knitting pins, the curved shape under the wool dress, a man could think about that.

She checked another item on the agenda, and Murray, sitting next to her, did likewise. Murray felt the way he did in grade school, always following the kid sitting next to him, hoping the teacher wouldn't notice. Funny how those feelings return after all the years of success. Who should question Murray's ability to keep up with the newest releases, the latest trends? Who in this room could deal, buy on the up, sell at the top, deal again and undercut the competition as Murray could? Who else could have dealt the way into the Establishment, into the Boardroom of the bank to which he had once gone begging for that first loan? Yet, except when he sat next to Margaret MacKinnon, Murray knew he belonged here on the second Wednesday of each month.

As the meeting moved on, Murray pondered on the feelings of inadequacy he felt as he watched Margaret negotiate her way through the agenda. She was so much at ease with the procedures, with Robert's rules, with commercial law. But that wasn't it. It was the knitting. Fifty years Murray had been in the garment trade, but he had never seen anything like the products of Margaret's efforts. Sometimes he thought it might be a glove.



Illustration by Paula Youens

Then she would cast off and begin as if she were rounding off the heel of a sock. Murray knew he could never ask. The subject was as taboo as the book Miss Smithers used to read while supervising his grade three arithmetic tests, the book about which all the kids joked in the yard at recess. Some questions you don't ask, some questions you don't want answered.

The meeting droned on, a seemingly backdrop to Murray's reminiscences of grade school, to William's sense of orderliness, to Pierre's musings about men and women and the world. Motions were carried unanimously, or with an occasional abstention preceded by pompous announcements of conflict of interest. Major decisions about expenditures of millions of dollars were made quickly, while a myriad of questions arose about minutiae. William always questioned about the more trivial matters. He could always rely on support from Charlie, and it was good to show that one knew what was what. Margaret obviously thought these things important too, for she always wrote a note on one of those little sticky-note things that editors use, and stuck in on to the appropriate briefing page. Not that one valued her opinion, but a bit of unanimity never did any harm.

Apart from writing her notes, Margaret did not participate in these flurries of activity. She seemed absorbed in her knitting as they eddied around her. She knew that her face would betray her feelings if she looked up. Instead, she measured her knitting with a tape measure. Many years earlier as the first woman Board member of a social service agency in Trois Rivières, she had learned accidentally about knitting as a weapon. She was not a good, nor a dedicated knitter. She had been forced to knit mittens from cheap yarn for her two small children who seemed to have an infinite capacity for losing those essential winter garments in snowdrifts. So Margaret would knit her way through committee meetings, often producing half a dozen mittens of the same colour. In doing so, she had discovered that she could knit a myth, a barrier between the sharpness of her mind and the needs of her fellow Board members not to examine the issues they debated.

Margaret went on knitting well after her income enabled her to buy hand-knits from Italy. She only did her knitting in meetings.

She never used a pattern. The work was not a distraction from the meeting, only for the minds of the men who sat around the boardroom table with her. Her needles clicked out a defensive cloud between the incisive probing of her intelligence and the shapeless arguments about ill-defined issues put forward by her colleagues. From behind this cloud Margaret could monitor the discussion, allowing the less important points to pass, but focusing in on more crucial, precedent-setting issues. Without her knitting, Margaret was threatening as a fox among the pullets. Behind it she could act and react logically, pragmatically, unobtrusively.

The needles clicked on, marking the time which the expensive clock was too polite to tick about. In that lost limbo, three-quarters of the way through the agenda, when the executives could rely on post-prandial drowsiness to set in, this would be where attempts would be made to slip new policies past the Board. Margaret stopped knitting for a moment to write in shorthand on a lemon-coloured edit-note. Picking up the knitting again, she looked over the top of it at 'young' Mr Thomson who was beginning to clear his throat. 'Young' Mr Thomson was nearing retirement, and contrary to current policy, was hoping for a place on the Board. Charlie moved for acceptance of the "Consultants Report on Re-organisation and Structures." Murray seconded the motion.

"Then, if there is no further discussion . . . ?"

Margaret glanced at Pierre and frowned. He looked puzzled. Charlie cleared his throat, about to call the question. No one had noticed. Perhaps no one had read the report. Margaret raised her hand.

"On a point of clarification, Mr Chairman, I would like to know whether my interpretation of paragraph three on page 17 is correct. As I see it, this would mean . . ."

The rustle of papers shuffling roared in young Mr Thomson's ears. Charlie did not seem to have his copy of the report. William dropped his spectacles in the effort to find the page. Margaret began to write notes on the yellow papers which now decorated page seventeen. She smiled encouragingly at the Chairman - like a teacher eliciting an answer from a rather slow pupil, thought Murray.

She resumed her knitting as the debate heated up around her. "Implications far beyond the realm of this Institution . . ." "Raises the issue of the integrity of the consultants employed . . ." "at the very least . . . further discussion . . . fact-finding . . . Task Force . . . Ad hoc Committee . . ." "Amendment to the motion . . ."

Forty minutes later, "That we adopt the recommendations of the Report, with the exception of those concerning . . . as detailed on Page 17, paragraphs three and four," motion was carried with two abstentions.

After several more routine items the meeting ended as the sun disappeared behind the shimmering glass towers of Bay Street. By the oak and chrome coat rack, Charlie and William agreed to go for a drink together. As always they invited Margaret to go with them. Once she had accepted. From that experience she could anticipate the re-hash of the meeting and the gossip about young Mr Thomson and the girls he chased around the photocopying machine. She politely declined the invitation. Pierre held her soft wool coat while she put it on. She took her gloves from her briefcase, checked that she had her car keys, and walked towards the elevator. Pierre pressed the call button.

On the subway train which left from the station underneath the bank tower, she studied her fellow passengers, mostly expensively dressed men commuting homewards. At High Park she hurried to her car.

As she closed the door of her house against the chilly evening outside, Margaret smiled to herself and sighed with pleasure. She leaned one shoulder against the rosewood-panelled wall to support herself as she removed her boots. She hung the fashionable wool coat on a padded hanger in the hall closet, and savoured the aroma of Boeuf Bourignon. Passing through the kitchen to the alcove by the dining room window where her desk stood, she flicked on the oven light. Like everything else in her well-ordered life, the meal would be perfectly done and exactly on time.

She sighed with satisfaction at the feelings of that absence of frustration which comes from knowing that there is no one to untidy one's own tidiness, no one to disturb the calm of a comfortable and comforting haven. She reviewed the afternoon meeting. How nice to be able to arrange for just the right amount of frustration, almost to order, predictable – like calling for a pizza without anchovies.

From one compartment of her briefcase Margaret took the royal blue leather folder with her notes from the meeting. She sorted the papers into several piles on top of her desk, then three-hole-punched each group and placed it into a section of a blue three-ring binder. Next she took the neat ziplock plastic bag containing her knitting from the other part of the case.

She cast off the stitches and replaced the knitting needles in the Number 7 plastic sheath. Reaching forwards to a wicker basket beside her chair, she picked a crochet hook from a pouch inside the lid. She worked deftly to link the three segments of knitting together, the two pale lemon globes like sock heels detached from any reality of feet or legs, flanking the single finger. Then she took

a ball of yellow silk ribbon left over from the last pair of booties made for a then unsexed grandchild and snipped off a piece. She threaded the silk ribbon through holes at the upper edge of the garment.

From the papers already filed in the binder she carefully removed the lemon coloured correction stickers. She read the shorthand notes written on each one before folding it neatly into half and then into sixths. With a grin she popped the notes into the matching knitted receptacle and pulled the ribbon tight.

On the wall of the dining-room just beside the window alcove hung an oil portrait of a Victorian lady, smiling coyly. Margaret slid her fingers down the righthand side of the heavy gilt frame. There was a barely audible click as the painting revealed itself to be the door of a concealed cupboard. The back of the shallow closet was fitted with pegboard upon which were impaled rows of little hooks.

On each hook dangled a knitted object like the one Margaret now held in her hand. Above each was a gummed file label telling the date of a meeting. Twenty-six hooks were filled. A pattern of colours emerged. Orange, brown, gold. Red, white, grey-blue. Then lemon, pale green. Months symbolised. Meetings remembered.

Margaret added the new member to the gallery, writing above it the day's date. Then she closed the closet, took a ball of pale green yarn from the wicker basket and put it with the number 7 needles in the ziplock bag. From the bottom drawer of the desk she selected a pale green pad of sticker-notes, and placed it in the folder marked Materials for the Next Board Meeting.

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## REFLECTIONS

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### *A Story by Zoë Landale*

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"Do I tilt you back?" my sister asked. She sounded dubious. Shame ambushed me. Why did people never remember? "That's right," I said. I could hear the patience in my own voice. "Back like a baby carriage. "And we go up with me facing forward, please. Otherwise you'll flip me out."

"I don't know why these wretched shopping centres never have ramps," Jeanna grumbled. Her voice was light and strong; worried for me. Quickly and competently she tipped the wheelchair and set the small front wheels on the pavement, pushed, and I was up.

Most of the time I could walk. I limped heavily, but I was still able to move about under my own power. The problem was since I'd developed arthritis in my spine, I could no longer move far unassisted. Leaning on a cane helped, but I couldn't even make it around the perimeter of a supermarket anymore.

"Not even a jar," I said. Approving.

"Course not," Jeanna said. "I want you to be in good shape for the party. I'm getting excited, aren't you?"

In the shop windows, Jeanna's face looked animated. If I glanced sideways I could see her profile, like a strong cameo. She was wearing very dark lipstick that year; it set up a resonance between the definition of her lips and her Nordic-white skin. Across either cheekbone, an artistic wedge of colour had been brushed. Her coppery hair had just been cut to shoulder-length the week before, and its usual waviness had tightened into a mass of curls. You could tell from the confident way she moved, and the long extended lines her body fell into, that she was pleased with her appearance. Jeanna was only twenty-one, five years younger than I was. Sometimes she seemed very young.

"Only two more days till Halloween," I said. "We've got a lot to do."

"I know," Jeanna said. "The decorations. I'll come over tomorrow, if that's okay. I want to arrange those spiders in the doorways – aren't they awful? And we have to put up the cut-outs and the crepe paper. Have I left anything out? What about the balloons?"