

Confidences

I think you never really get to know a person until you've been through something terrible with them. OK, I know that sounds ridiculous, but I believe it's true.

My name is Rob. I'm a first year teacher at a small rural school near the town of Trenton, and I was about to enjoy a particularly long and well-earned Christmas vacation. I was flying home to visit my parents, who I hadn't seen since August.

I'd arrived at the airport early enough to check my bags and get something to eat; I'm not a nervous flyer, but I like to relax and not be rushed when I'm flying.

I wandered into the airport restaurant, and chose something that didn't look more than a few days old. The cashier took my money, but couldn't help commenting. "Sweetie, you look like you really need a vacation. That bad, huh?"

Oh, yeah. The year had been like that so far. Several classes of Junior High kids who wanted nothing to do with the material I was trying to teach them. A trailer I was renting with a roof that leaked every time the sky got cloudy. And a school secretary who I was sure had the hots for me.

Not that I wouldn't have been interested, ordinarily, but my girlfriend had broken up with me after I had accepted this job, and I was still a little shell-shocked. Apparently she was unwilling to move anywhere further than a mile or two from the nearest mall, never mind marry me. I hadn't known that about her. But it was her loss, right?

"Yeah, I'm looking forward to a long rest." I smiled ruefully at her as I headed for a table.

During the past four months I'd been working pretty hard at trying to become a good teacher, which meant lots of lesson planning and plenty of marking. You don't really learn to be a teacher at college ... they just show you what you'll have to do, and let you practice it a little. You learn to do it well by actually doing it, assuming of course you can convince someone to hire you. I'd been lucky in that respect; not many new teachers wanted to work in a rural school, so after a pretty good interview, I'd been offered the job.

So far, with all the work I'd had to do as a new teacher, I hadn't had much time for socializing. I was hoping that would change in January. Maybe I'd even get to know the school secretary a little better.

I noticed that there weren't a lot of people in the cafeteria, but the one person I hoped wouldn't be there was sitting at a table all by herself. Wouldn't you know it.

Margaret was perhaps the most unpleasant person I had ever met. As a new teacher in a small school with just nine staff members, including the janitor, it's kind of hard to avoid someone you don't like. I didn't like Margaret.

I'm a pretty easygoing person, and I've always been able to get along with just about anybody. I once had a college roommate who wore the same pair of leather pants all year long and never washed them, and he was always eating my peanut butter. But we got along just fine.

Margaret, however, was almost impossible to get along with. She was a lot older than me, maybe forty or so. Old, anyway. She was a tall willowy blonde with severely short hair, and a perpetual scowl. As the Assistant Principal, she was technically my boss, but that meant she was also supposed to help me. In theory, anyway.

But on the few occasions when she actually visited my classroom, she would stay for thirty seconds, and then later make some negative comment about how a student in the first row wasn't paying attention and how I needed to keep on top of things like that to be a better teacher. Not very inspirational.

Other than the odd discouraging remark, she almost never said anything to me. And she frowned a lot. I don't remember ever seeing her smile. I still didn't know much about her, except that she was single and didn't associate socially with anyone on staff.

Generally I tried to keep out of her way, which isn't easy with a staff of nine in a small school like ours.

So now I found myself in the airport terminal with her. I prayed that she wasn't taking the same flight that I was. I sat down with my food and pretended to be interested in my slightly soggy hamburger, managing at the same time to avoid looking at her.

When the flight was called, I made my way towards the ramp. Margaret was several places in front of me in the line. There were only a few passengers on the flight, and by the time I made my way to my seat near the back of the plane, she was already seated across the aisle. I couldn't avoid making eye contact, but it didn't matter; she glanced at me once, frowned and returned to her book. I carefully ignored her.

This was a short commuter flight, just an hour and a half. I was connecting with a flight to Ontario, and I really hoped we wouldn't be late. The weather was terrible. Since it was snowing heavily and quite windy, I was surprised when we lifted off on time.

The flight attendant didn't waste any time bringing around the drinks. I don't usually drink much, but I really needed something to help me sleep; I was wiped. She served me mine, and then said to me "You look like you could use this, love. Tough week?"

OK, I knew I was tired, and I guess I looked it. Maybe crashing at my parents' house for several days would be good for me. I was looking forward to several days of doing absolutely nothing.

I closed my eyes and tried to get some sleep. It had been a difficult first semester; my students seemed to like me well enough, and I think I was doing a good job teaching them, but they didn't seem very interested in anything except partying on the weekend. Had I been like that in Junior High? Homework was a word that seemingly wasn't in their vocabulary. I had talked to the principal about this once. He was a nice guy, but not very helpful. He suggested I talk to the Assistant Principal.

Yeah, right!

About thirty minutes into the flight, my eyes were still closed and I was drifting off. But I was jolted awake by announcement from the cabin staff.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we are sorry for the inconvenience, but mechanical problems have forced us to return to Trenton. Please put your seats in an upright position and fasten your seat belts."

Oh, great. So much for my connecting flight! And what's with the 'seats in an upright position' thing anyway? I always figured that if a plane ever crashed, it probably wouldn't matter what position your seat is in ... dead is dead right?

So I sat there fuming about the flight I was going to miss, and wondering if they'd refund my ticket. Glancing out the window every once in a while into the blowing snow, it seemed to be a lot darker than it should have been, even though it was still early afternoon.

I risked a glance over at Margaret. She seemed nervous; her hands were gripping the seat rests hard enough to turn her knuckles white. Obviously she wasn't a frequent flyer. Not that I really cared.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please?"

The voice on the intercom seemed a little stressed this time.

"We are experiencing some mechanical problems, and the pilot may be forced to make an emergency landing. We would ask that you listen for further announcements, and be prepared to follow the directions of the flight attendant nearest you"

OK, this didn't sound that great. Like I said, I'm not at all a nervous flyer, but this had never happened on any flight I'd been on before. Maybe I should be worrying.

I was looking over at Margaret again, wondering how she was taking this, when all of the cabin lights went out.

The plane dropped in the air abruptly, and when it levelled off, it seemed that the engines were behaving erratically. At least, I assumed they were. The background

drone of a plane's engines is something you probably tune out after the first few minutes of flight, just like I do. But now the engines were sounding a lot rougher, and seemed to be increasing and decreasing in pitch every few seconds. That didn't make me feel any better.

Someone forward in the cabin was crying. And then I felt a tap on my shoulder.

"Excuse me, ... Rob? Would you mind if I sat in the seat next to you?"

It was Margaret. I motioned for her to sit down, and she buckled in. Just then the plane lurched downwards again.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if I could have your attention once more please."

This time the voice of the attendant sounded worried.

"We would ask you to prepare for a possible emergency landing, by assuming the following position."

Have you noticed that airline personnel never use the word 'crash'? But it was looking like that was exactly what was going to happen.

The attendant began to describe the crash position, which meant placing your head between your knees and holding on to the seat in front of you, or your knees ... I really wasn't listening. I grabbed a handful of blankets that the attendant had left on the seats across and just behind us. We were near the back of the plane, and I hoped that what I had always heard about this being the safest place was really true. I guess we might be finding out soon. In any event, I wanted to be ready.

I stuffed several blankets in front of me as I bent over, giving a few to Margaret at the same time.

"Here, hold on to these just in case. I'm sure everything will be fine" I said to her. OK, maybe that was a little lame. But she was shaking, and her face was white. "They're probably just being careful ..."

I didn't get a chance to say anything else. At that moment the plane hit some trees and pancaked into the ground. The sound of the wings being ripped off the plane and the tortured shriek of metal coming apart were the last things I heard before everything went black.

Have you ever had one of those dreams that are so pleasant, so warm and cozy, that you don't ever want to wake up? Well, this dream was just the opposite. I knew I was dreaming, but someone was pounding on the back of my head with a sledgehammer, and I just wanted it to end.

My eyes popped open.

At first I couldn't make sense of what I was seeing. In front of me was a field of white, with snow falling up. What?

Then I figured it out. I was upside down, suspended somehow from something ...

And it all came back to me in a rush. The plane in trouble, the incredible noise when we hit, and then the blackness. I must have been knocked unconscious. Certainly I'd been whacked on the head by something; I had a splitting headache. That explained the sledgehammer in my dream.

I looked around. I was definitely upside down, hanging from the lap belt on my airline seat. Beside me I could see Margaret in the same position – she seemed to be still out of it. Behind us, as best as I could tell, was the interior of the tail section of the plane, with the one row of empty seats, and then the back wall. Ahead of us was ... nothing but snow.

It looked as if the tail section of the plane had broken off on impact, and rolled over several times. Margaret and I had been the only passengers in this section. I had no idea where the rest of the plane was, but I figured we'd better get out of our seats and onto the ground.

I didn't seem to be injured anywhere else except my head, and feeling around my scalp revealed a nasty bump at the top, but no blood came off on my hand. Reaching up, I released the lap belt.

That was a mistake! I fell awkwardly onto the ceiling of the plane, or what was left of it, and landed on my head. What had been a splitting headache suddenly became a circular saw going to work on skull. I lay there for several minutes trying to come to grips with the pain.

When I was able to function again, I gingerly made my way over to the area of the ceiling directly below Margaret and reached up to unbuckle her. I was careful to grab her as she fell, but we still ended up in a pile together on the ground below the seat. She still wasn't awake.

I wasn't sure what to do next, but I knew that at some point we needed to get out of what was left of the plane and find some shelter. And hopefully make a fire - it was getting really cold. But first I needed to see what shape Margaret was in.

“Margaret! Can you hear me? Wake up!” I gently slapped her face a few times as I yelled into her ear. She groaned once, but her eyes stayed closed.

Checking out the rest of her body for injuries revealed what looked like a broken ankle, judging by the swelling. But there were no other injuries that I could see – at least, there was no blood.

Then her eyes came open, and she screamed.

“Margaret, take it easy. The plane crashed. I think we’re all right. But you were unconscious for a while. And I think you might have a broken ankle.”

She seemed to consider this information for a moment or two, and then she shuddered.

“We need to get some shelter” she said. “Find some trees”.

“I know that” I replied. “If you look over that way, you can just make out the edge of what looks like a forested area. Here, let me help you up, and we’ll head that way.”

“I can do it myself” she responded. But when she tried to stand up, she uttered a cry of pain and fell back down.

“Don’t be so stubborn. You probably have a broken ankle. Let me lift you up, and you can lean on me while we walk to the trees.”

Margaret grudgingly allowed me to lift her. After grabbing all of the blankets that I could see, and a magazine that had fallen out of a seat back, I put her arm around my shoulder, and together we stepped off the ceiling of the plane into the snow.

The snow on the ground wasn’t more than a foot or so deep, but it was bitterly cold out, and it was snowing hard, the snow whipping around us, propelled by gusting winds. Step by painful step, the two of us headed for the trees.

After the longest twenty minutes of my life, we eventually reached a cluster of spruce trees with wide boughs at the bottom. I was wondering what had happened to the rest of the plane and the few passengers and crew members who had also been on board, but that would have to wait for now. We needed to get warm.

Fortunately, both of us had still been wearing our coats, and I had my gloves stuffed in one pocket. Sitting Margaret down on the ground, I went to work clearing an area under the branches of one of the trees.

“You need to start a fire. I’m freezing out here!” Margaret’s impatience was annoying. I was doing the best I could. Just my luck to survive a plane crash and then have to wait

for rescue with the most annoying person in my life. Why couldn't it have been the school secretary on the plane with me!

"Don't get your panties in a knot! I'm working as fast as I can!" Unpleasant? I'd show her unpleasant.

"Well, you don't have to be rude. Just do it, OK? I'm really cold!" Margaret didn't sound too cheerful. Too bad for her.

Once I had a cleared area under the branches, I went to the next tree and stripped off an armful of boughs. I arranged these carefully in groups of three in a herringbone pattern on the area I had cleared, and then spread four or five blankets over top of them. It would be a little uncomfortable maybe, but we'd be off the cold ground. There were still a few blankets we could use to put over us, to keep off the wind.

I helped Margaret hobble over to the makeshift bed, and lowered her carefully onto it. She cried out once with the pain from her ankle, but when she was lying down she looked at me.

"Thank you, Rob. I know you're doing your best."

Well, what do you know. The 'Ice Queen' can actually be polite!

Now we needed a fire. This was the part, and I wasn't looking forward to it. I don't smoke, and neither does Margaret, so we had no lighter or matches. The airline security people probably would have confiscated them anyway ... what with the new security regulations, you're lucky to be able to bring your clothes with you onto the plane!

With visions in my head of Margaret getting on to the plane without any clothes on ... not really a pleasant image ... I set to work gathering materials for the fire that I would have to make. I had the magazine stuffed in my pocket, and scrabbling around with my fingers in my coat pockets I scrounged up a handful of lint and bits of tissue. From near the base of another tree I was able to scrape off quite a bit of dry mossy stuff. Things were looking up.

On my way back to Margaret, I spotted a deadfall full of dry branches, which supplied us with the fuel for the beginnings of a fire. I could come back later for larger branches. I also managed to find a reasonably flat chunk of wood, and a short straight piece.

I'd never started a fire with a bow and drill before, but I'd seen it done in a video once, so I knew how to do it. Sort of. The idea is to cut a notch in a flat piece of wood, and then use a bow made from a branch and a shoelace, using the lace wrapped around another straight stick to spin it back and forth. After a whole lot of spinning, theoretically the friction between the stick and the notch in the wood would create heat, smoke, and eventually an ember, which I'd have to transfer to a pile of lint and moss fluff. Blowing on that should produce a flame with which to start a fire.

That was the theory. Like I said, I'd never done it myself. The guy in the video doing it had made it seem easy. It only took about thirty minutes or so to get his fire going.

I made the bow from a piece of branch, put some fluff next to the notch in the hunk of wood, selected a stick, rested the top end of the thickest part of my glove, pushed the stick down into the cavity in the wood, and started to push and pull on the bow.

After a few minutes of fumbling with the tension in the bow to keep the shoelace wrapped around the stick and gripping it securely, the stick began to spin back and forth.

Piece of cake! All those hours spent watching survival shows on the Discovery Channel while preparing lessons were finally paying off!

But half an hour came and went, and I was still pushing and pulling on the bow, with no sign of smoke. I was sweating profusely ... it may have been cold out, but I wasn't noticing it. This wasn't anywhere as easy as I'd thought it would be.

After forty-five minutes or so, the first wisp of smoke finally appeared. Then things picked up a little. By now my arm was aching from the constant pushing and pulling, but the smoke was getting thicker, and I was sure I could see a glow at the bottom of the hole. Removing the stick, I blew gently on the cavity. Yes ... that was a spark in there!

Using a twig, I flicked the ember onto my pile of moss and lint, and blew some more. A small flame appeared. Carefully feeding it with tiny twigs, bits of paper, and eventually pieces of branch, within a few more minutes I had a small fire.

Thirty minutes later, after careful tending, and the addition of bigger and bigger branches, and eventually some large dry limbs, we had a roaring blaze!

Margaret was sleeping when I went over to look at her ankle, but she woke up, wincing in pain as I touched it. "I think we'd better leave your shoe on to keep it supported", I told her. "The swelling isn't too bad, but I'll loosen the laces a little just in case. How are you feeling?"

For a moment she said nothing. Then her terse reply "I'm fine".

Ah, the old Margaret.

Before resting, I made sure there was a big pile of branches for the fire. It was almost dark, and I didn't want to have to go looking for more later. And there was still the matter of the other people on the plane. At some point I would have to go for a walk and see if there were any other survivors. But if there were, they'd have to fend for themselves for now ... I couldn't do that in the dark.

I lay down on the bedding next to Margaret. I figured she would object (“Go make your own bed!”) but she didn’t. Maybe she was too tired to be unpleasant. In any case, I wasn’t leaving. I’d built the bed and the fire and I wasn’t moving, even for her. Especially not for her.

I started to think about our eventual rescue. I knew they’d find us sooner or later, even if the wreck site was covered in snow; planes have emergency beacons that would even now be sending out our location. The problem was the weather. With this snow and the wind ... and the dark ... I was sure that rescue wouldn’t happen any time soon. I doubted that search planes would fly in these conditions.

Then Margaret spoke. Her voice sounded weak, as if she was incredibly tired.

“Rob, I’m really thirsty. You must be too, after all that work. Should we eat some snow?”

I was pretty sure that wasn’t a good idea. Unless you’re physically active, the snow melting in your stomach would steal a lot of heat from your body. And we were just lying around. The fire was keeping the chill down, but we certainly weren’t toasty warm.

“I don’t think so, Margaret ... it would make us too cold. Let me think for a bit ... maybe I can figure out a way to melt some snow over the fire.”

But for the life of me, I couldn’t think of anything we could use as a container. If it weren’t dark, maybe I could find what was left of the front of the plane, and maybe locate a glass or cup that had been scattered ...

Hmmm. Cup? I had an idea. But it was a really scary one. It would probably take more courage than I had. No, I couldn’t do it.

“Uhhh, Margaret? I think I know how to make a cup to hold some snow that we can maybe melt for drinking water ...” I couldn’t go on.

“Well? Spit it out! What’s your idea?”

“Uhhh ...” I was going to just have to say it. There was no getting around it. I was thirsty too. “If you would, uh, take off your, uh, your bra ... I think I could put the halves together to make sort of a ... container ...”

I expected her to sneer. To call me an idiot in that condescending voice of hers. But, surprisingly, she did neither.

Instead: “Rob, that’s ingenious. I know you must have been embarrassed to ask. But you’re right, I think it will work. Turn around for a minute while I take it off.”

So I did, and she did. I wasn't even tempted to sneak a look, although I admit I was mildly curious. Anyway, after a minute or two she told me I could turn around again. She was holding her bra out to me, having put back on her sweater and coat.

All right, I admit it. I was blushing. Here was this sort of attractive older woman holding her bra out to me. What could I do?

I grabbed the thing, muttered a quick "Thanks", and started working on it.

Without my usual penknife (I hadn't even bothered to bring it. They would have just confiscated it, along with Margaret's ... no, let's not go there again) it was a little difficult separating the two halves of the bra. But my car keys helped. Eventually I had two, uh, containers.

All the while, Margaret was looking on with interest. I wasn't sure, but I may have noticed the beginnings of a smile, at one point.

Nahh, not possible.

The next step was to stick them together with something that would form a waterproof layer between the cups. I wasn't sure how well they would hold water.

I could have found some tree sap on the trunks of one of the trees, I suppose. That's the way Survivorman would have done it. (No he wouldn't. No bra. He survives alone.) But I remembered the two little plastic containers of peanut butter I'd stuck in my pocket that came with the crackers I hadn't eaten. I don't like to waste anything. It used to drive my girlfriend crazy when I'd save McDonald's ketchup packages. I have a whole box full of those little salt packets at home too.

I held the packages of peanut butter over the fire for a few seconds using a forked branch, and then opened them up. I proceeded to scoop out the softened sticky brown stuff and spread it over the bottom of one of the bra cups. Then I positioned that cup carefully inside the other to make a reasonably deep container, and dropped it in front of me.

"Do you think it will work?" Margaret asked me, and there definitely was the hint of a smile there.

"Let's find out."

Maybe it was ingenious. Or maybe I was just missing my girlfriend too much. But for whatever reason, my idea worked. Held near the fire, the improvised container allowed us to melt handful after handful of snow until it was full of water. I let Margaret drink first, since she'd provided the container. But it wasn't long before we'd refilled it and I had satisfied my thirst as well. While we were drinking, Margaret discovered a chocolate bar

in her coat pocket, and we shared that too. Just as well ... I don't think I'd have had the stomach for Survivorman's usual diet of bugs and dead things.

So far, so good. We had water to drink, we'd eaten something, and we had a fire to keep us from freezing. Margaret was even starting to thaw out a little, metaphorically speaking. At least she wasn't snapping at me.

We lay down next to each other on the blankets. I assumed we would both try to get some sleep now, hoping for rescue in the morning. But Margaret wanted to talk.

"Rob? Can I tell you something?"

"Uhh, sure, Margaret." I had no idea what she was going to say.

"You saved my life, today, did you know that? And I know I haven't been much help with anything ..."

"That's OK, Margaret. I'm sure you would have done the same for me." I didn't really believe that. "Besides, you have a broken ankle."

"Listen, Rob ... I know I haven't been very nice to you these past few months. You're a really great teacher, and I wish I'd told you that sooner. But things in my life have been ... difficult ... and it's been too easy just to keep everyone away. I'm sorry."

"Well, Margaret ... uhh ... thanks, I guess. And you really haven't been that bad ..." I was lying through my teeth.

Margaret laughed. I couldn't believe it. She actually had teeth! "Rob, you're so diplomatic. I've been terrible, not just to you, but to everybody on staff, and you know it. If you'll let me, I'd like to tell you why."

And so the 'Ice Queen' proceeded to tell me about herself.

"About five years ago, my life changed."

Margaret was going to tell me why she was such an unpleasant person. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear this ... I think I really didn't care that much. But what else did I have to do but listen.

"You think I'm not a very nice person, don't you, Rob? No, don't answer. I know I've been cold and aloof, and you didn't deserve it. Neither did anyone else. I'm surprised they haven't fired me by now."

I would have agreed with her. But she kept on talking.

“I wasn’t always this way. I was a kind, warm person once. I was in love with my husband, and he was in love with me, and we had two daughters. They played volleyball. We used to go watch them at their games ... they were so good.”

Husband? Daughters? I was pretty sure Margaret lived alone. OK, I was starting to understand. Maybe a nasty divorce. That would harden anyone.

“I was a good teacher in the school I used to be at, and when I became Assistant Principal six years ago I really tried hard to make a difference. I think I was good at it. At least, people told me I was.”

I was having a hard time picturing Margaret as a good Assistant Principal. I’d never been in her classroom, but as an Assistant Principal she was pretty awful. The only good one I had ever known was the one in my old high school, but he was in his fifties and going bald ...

“So how did your life change?” I was asking, but I don’t think I really wanted to know. This was the woman who, before today, had never once said anything encouraging to me. Or even nice, for that matter.

“All those girls on the volleyball team ... I’d taught them for years. They were all so sweet ... Kara, Penny, Sam, ... my daughters Patty and Dannie ... “. Margaret started to sob. I didn’t know what to say.

“My husband Dave was the team coach. He loved those girls as much as I did, all of them. On tournament weekends I used to go with them as a supervisor. Our school had this big van decorated with the team’s colours ...” She started to sob again.

“Margaret? What happened?” In spite of myself, I couldn’t help but be concerned. She was very upset.

“The last weekend of the season ... a trip to the Zone finals. I didn’t want to go, it was so cold and the roads were so icy. But the girls were so excited, and Dave was a good driver ... “

I knew what was coming next, but I hoped it wasn’t true. Please don’t let it be true.

“The van hit a patch of black ice, and rolled down a steep embankment. I was thrown out of the vehicle. The paramedics told me later I was lucky to be alive. Can you believe that? Lucky!”

Margaret broke down completely. I couldn’t say anything. I put my arm around her and tried to comfort her, until she could continue.

“Everyone died. My husband. My two girls. All the other girls on the team. I loved them all so much. And I survived. Not even a scratch” Now she was sounding bitter.

I remembered the accident. It had been on the news when I was in my first year of college. A whole high school girls’ volleyball team wiped out in a horrible accident on bad roads. They hadn’t blamed the coach ... it was just one of those terrible things that happened once in a while. Not long after that, school boards across the province started getting rid of school vans, and began using buses instead.

“Margaret ...” I still didn’t know what to say. But I had to say something. “I had no idea ...”

“You don’t want to know what that accident did to the town. And to me. I was off work for the rest of the year, half drugged out of my mind on antidepressants. I didn’t eat. I used to be a little chubby, did you know that?” She gave a half laugh, half sob. “I always was promising Dave I’d go on a diet ...” She broke down again.

Margaret didn’t say anything else for a while. We sat there like that for almost ten minutes, me holding on to her while she sobbed. I don’t know what I was feeling. How could anyone go through what Margaret had experienced and still be ...

She interrupted my thoughts. “Rob? I had to leave there, don’t you see? I applied for the position at our school, and when I got it, I promised myself I would try to start over. But I couldn’t. It was easier just to keep everyone at arm’s length ...”

I was starting to understand.

“ ... by being cold and distant. Then I wouldn’t have to care about anyone any more. It’s hard to explain. But I just didn’t want to care, ever again.”

By now there were tears in my eyes. I held onto her tighter. She was quiet for the longest time.

“Margaret? I’m sorry.”

“Rob? What are you sorry for?” She wiped away a tear.

“I haven’t liked you very much. I didn’t know ... I just didn’t understand. But I think I do now. I can’t imagine anyone having to go what you went through ...” I was openly crying now.

“Rob, it’s all right. Really. And do you know something? You’re the only person I’ve told all this to. I don’t know why I did ... maybe because you saved my life today. And you were so funny when you were trying to ask me for my bra ...” There was a small smile behind her tears. That made me smile too.

"We could have had a lot more to drink if you needed to wear a bigger one ..."

We both laughed.

Margaret continued. "I think I'm going to be a lot better now. It still hurts when I think about the accident, but it feels like I need to let it go. Talking to someone, finally, ... I don't know ... it makes it seem like a cloud has lifted off my head, or something. I need some happiness in my life again."

"That's good, Margaret. Really good." Again, I didn't know what to say. And then she kissed me on the forehead.

"You are a really nice person, Rob. Thank you for listening ... I promise not to be so nasty all the time. I need to make some new friends. I hope you can be the first one."

"That would make me very happy, Margaret. Thank you."

"And Rob ... stay away from the school secretary. She's not your type. But I have this gorgeous niece who just finished college. I could arrange something if you want ..." She laughed.

So I did. And she did. And we were laughing and talking when the rescue team found us. And the rest of the school year was wonderful.

And now you know why I said you never really get to know a person until you've been through something terrible with them. It still sounds ridiculous. But it's true.