

Dear Johnny Boy

Synopsis

The longing for her has worn me down. I don't like to teach, I don't like to do any work at night in preparation. I feel life-less. But, for the sake of my boys I must rouse myself; yes, even forget myself, and carry on. They have as much right now as then to have a jolly, laughing daddy. They demand of me to be the same old pal I was. And that, of course, is not difficult, not to fine boys like mine. So I must act young and carefree; I must laugh and play; they mustn't be disappointed in their dad. They have all their lives before them; and I must not make them bitter or mar them in any way because I am sad.

JOHN BOSCHMAN'S JOURNAL, 14 SEPTEMBER 1940

On a summer day in 1940, a young wife and mother was instantly killed by a hit-and-run driver while her husband looked on in horror. The accident occurred in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, on what is now called Idylwyld Drive. Twenty-nine years old and six months pregnant, the woman was thrown twenty feet through the air by the force of the impact. A coroner's jury later exonerated the driver, a travelling salesman from Toronto.

The effects of this trauma on the young husband, a Mennonite country schoolteacher, beekeeper, and father of three young boys, carried on down through three generations of the Boschman family. Because what John Boschman did with this experience was to seal it in a wooden box. In this box with its precise dovetail corners he nailed shut everything pertaining to Margaret and their relationship: her wedding veil, birthday book, and black German Bible; legal correspondence and newspaper articles reporting the accident and coroner's inquest; a thick coil of black hair tucked inside a paper bag; their journals, photos, eighty-seven love letters in three languages.

When I first saw the box at the age of ten, it and its contents were a revelation: of a long-dead grandmother, of the love affair that brought my father into existence, and of the loss John could never square with the God he believed in. As a Mennonite, he

believed all his life in a deity who makes no mistakes, whose will is inviolable. The sudden death of Margaret was forced into this framework even though John himself could not possibly come to terms with such a God, and had written on Margaret's gravestone words that evoked what he called a "riddle": "God Alone Understands."

For a year after the death of Margaret, John recorded his bitterness in the journal they had shared, until another woman, Edith Marie Ewert, came on the scene and helped him salvage a life again. Then, sometime during the summer of 1941, one year after the accident, John sealed the box that would in many ways symbolize the contradiction he carried in his heart until his death at the age of 62. With Edith at his side in the hospital, where he had been admitted with a perforated ulcer, his last words were "That's enough."

I am currently at work on a collection of poems, a documentary film (forthcoming in 1999), and a book about this story. In all three ways, I want to reconstruct the lives and events of the Boschmans from the archives buried in the box for almost thirty years. And the story continues to unfold at the end of the century. In December 1998, in a crawlspace underneath the Saskatoon Courthouse, a clerk found the Coroner's report on the death of Margaret. "Willard's Dream" is one of the poems from my proposed collection.

Willard's Dream

He sees her going out to the threshers,
their rising dust and clouds of spelt,
each dish covered with a cloth.
She felt sorry for them, she wrote
in a letter to John, September
1932. "My Dear Johnny Boy,
I've never seen such dust," but felt
dread about coming to the city
to meet him. She feared
Saskatoon, its alien rhythms,

and didn't know where she'd
ever find a dollar. But she'd try.
"You will meet us at the station,
won't you, Johnny, cause if Mary
doesn't know more about the city
than I do—we'd be lost in no time."
They never arrived. At dawn
on the day of the journey into town,
she was stricken with Quinsy,
her tongue and throat swollen so badly
she couldn't even eat, "as Fate
would have it." Her cheeks went
hollow, her face all nose and eyes,
"you would almost be afraid
of me, if you should see me now."

When they stepped down into
the morgue, down in the basement
of the old City Hospital,
to look at her eight years later,
her head resting on a split
block of wood, and Johnny
going insane, the coroner said
her death had been instant
but didn't speak of the fetus,
it was just too much. Jacob,
her father, a bull of a man,
was angry with the driver,
a travelling salesman

from Toronto. "If I just
had the money, I would make
that man pay." \$500.00
went to the three boys,
dispersed by the man's insurance
policy.

My father was two
then, and would never remember
Margaret. He found her
half a century later
during that period in June
when the lilac comes out
in Saskatchewan—
as it must have been doing
in 1940 on the day
she and John drove away
from Rev. Nickel's—
all her letters and journals,
Bible and birthday book,
a blue leather manicure
set going to powder,
red and blue with bits of enamel,
all buried in the box, and
sealed shut with two little nails.

My father phoned smitten
with Margaret, twenty years
old in her letters to John,
written in three languages,
but with a single passion:

"I *never, never* want
anyone else but you."
Bedridden with Quinsy, and
missing John's play, "The Gypsy
and the Rover," she had
a hunch he wouldn't want her
again. But he wrote back
to say how wrong she was,
wrong: "we will
always face whatever comes,
together. But we're no longer
friends, there are too many bonds."

My father had a dream
once he'd opened the box
for himself in 1992
and read all 87 letters intact.
He woke in fear at 3 a.m.
wanting only to close it again.
For he'd seen the ground break up
and a casket coming flush
with the ground. In Willard's dream,
the casket looks like an
upsidedown bell, a great large urn
that is open, and inside is his mother,
Margaret,
wrapped in a brown fur cape,
her jet black hair lying
against the fur, her eyes wide
and gazing at the dreamer.

ROBERT BOSCHMAN