

Margaret

by Richard Gilzean

Arriving punctually at the agreed hour, I press the brass doorbell at the gate and check for any fluff on my deep purple shirt. I chose my most lurid coloured shirt in the hope that Margaret Fink, a woman with an eye for fashion, might appreciate my dress sense. Margaret's cottage is tucked away in a cul-de-sac, a stone's throw from the sandstone walls of the National Art School and where she studied to be an art teacher after completing her 1950 Leaving Certificate. On the other side of the cottage gate, a woman asks "Who is it?" The gate opens and Margaret stands before me in a long white cotton nightgown. She is a small woman with a pageboy haircut and an impish face. Beside her stands Busy, her pet Schnauzer. The dog looks up at me and tilts its head, slightly curious. An awkward moment passes before Margaret recalls our 10am appointment. "We had a party last night and I didn't get around to checking my diary. We're just having some breakfast. Would you like a cup of tea?"

I am ushered into the lounge room and Margaret introduces me to her friends. "This is Bill." Bill is her boyfriend. Somewhere in his early fifties, he stands a good head and shoulders above her. "And this is Andrew." Andrew is a guest who has been staying with the couple for the past week. I then turn to face the third person.

"And this is . . ."

"Germaine," I say, thrusting out my hand.

"Hello. Have we met before?" I say no.

"Margie. What have you let yourself in for now?"

I take a seat next to Germaine Greer. I had recently read some of the public vitriol that this woman had dished out on a writer for publishing an unauthorised biography about her few years ago. I wonder how she feels about me trying to write a piece about one of her oldest friends. According to Anne Coombs in her book about the Sydney Push, *Sex and Anarchy*, Margaret's late husband, the property developer, Leon Fink, had known Germaine from their days together in Melbourne before they both came to Sydney in the mid 1950's. At the time Leon had a reputation amongst the Push as the man who had deflowered Germaine. The Push was a bohemian and anarchic network encompassing journalists, artists, students, office workers, academics and eccentrics. To belong, you needed an inquiring mind, an adventurous spirit and a preparedness to spend hours leaning on the bar at the current Push pub. The men and women of the Push were opposed to the State, the Church, the wowsers of the Menzies era, and censorship; and they lived out the sexual revolution a good fifteen years before it hit the rest of society.

Margaret's own introduction to the Push came whilst she was still a seventeen-year-old student at Sydney Girls High. Coombs writes about the night that Margaret was at the Sydney University Arts Ball when she came across Darcy Waters. Darcy was twenty-one and already a university veteran, with fame and a following as one of the leaders of the Push. He did not have a ticket to the ball; he has probably never bought such a ticket in his life.

This stunning dark-haired, dark-eyed girl remembers Darcy sauntering into the ball with a few of his followers behind him. There was no grog at such occasions, so "they just went from table to table eating the sandwiches and checking out the chicks. Darcy

grabbed hold of me and pulled me outside and with a great deal of charm but also his straightforward manner, asked me for a fuck.” She thought he was the best thing she’d seen in her life. But she didn’t go that far. “Stupid bitch!” Margaret says of herself, recalling the event forty years later. She still remembers his wonderful singing voice. “If only he hadn’t been so lazy.”

Germaine pours my tea into a china cup, as Margaret tells her that I am a student working on a fictional screenplay about the Sydney Push of the 1950’s.

“Plenty of fictional characters in those days,” Germaine says, then turns to Margaret. “Remember that Norton woman?”

“Roxie Norton,” Margaret answers, referring to Rosaleen Norton - the artist and infamous ‘Witch of the Cross’. “I think Kylie Minogue would make a great Rosaleen.” Margaret fixes me with her gaze. “She has the eyes.”

“God Kylie,” Germaine cries as she rolls her eyes. “I always associate the name Kylie with my childhood and those incontinence sheets. You know the ones that soak up your urine. I’ll always remember my mother telling me “Don’t forget yer Kyylie.”

Margaret, spectral-like in her nightgown, glides backwards and forwards between the table, the kitchen and the upstairs bedroom. I see through the French louvre doors into a small courtyard and an Italianate fountain. The walls in the lounge-room are covered with framed etchings, portraits and small watercolour landscapes. Bill appears from the kitchen with a basket over which a blue cotton cloth is draped. The cloth is drawn back to reveal a stack of hot toast.

“Thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump-thump.” Busy scratches himself with his hind leg on the wooden floor.

“Hey there,” Germaine calls out. “Margie’s trained you to know better than to do that. Not in front of guests anyway.” She leans forward, looking into Busy’s eyes. “There he is,” she coos. The schnauzer stops scratching and pads across the wooden floor to his admirer. “He looks just like Harry Hooton.” Harry Hooton, the Push poet, was Margaret’s first real love. She regards their relationship as the most important of her life. They met in 1952. She was a nineteen-year-old bohemian art student: he was a forty-four year old anarchist and poet with a difference. Harry thought there was nothing wrong with people; people were perfect and did not need to be governed. Margaret first heard Harry’s name mentioned as she was travelling down Oxford Street on a double decker bus after a day at the art school when a friend asked, “Have you heard of Harry Hooton?”

“No”

“He’s a genius.”

“And I remember looking out the window of the bus and thinking, “I hate that word.”

Not long afterwards, as noted in *Sex and Anarchy*, Margaret and a friend ended up at Hooton’s house in Chippendale. “It was about three in the morning,” Margaret recalls. “When we got there Harry was still up. He was reading. He came to the door and – I don’t care how corny it sounds – it was an electric moment.”

Margaret and Harry lived for several years in a flat in Wylde Street, Potts Point. Often the women would gather in the sitting room, talking and drinking tea. While they sat and talked, Harry could be heard typing in the other room. Margaret apprenticed herself to a tailor for while, to learn cutting, then got herself a job as an art teacher at a private girls' school in Strathfield. There were several other Push women teaching there. "At one stage," Margaret says, "we were all up the duff at the same time." Multiple abortions for Push women were an inevitable part of the lifestyle. Push men dismissed condoms out of hand, and if a woman should fall pregnant, then the men would raise a collection (weekend poker games were a popular method) in order for the woman to 'have a scrape'. The best of the abortionists was Dr Crowe in Curlew Street. "He ran a very good private hospital for women. The nurses knew what they were about. I'll always remember a couple of them standing over me, discussing some horse or other's prospects on the track that weekend as I'm slowly drifting off under the pentathol."

Margaret, now a mother of two and a grandmother, realised early on that Push men were more or less unreliable when it came to commitment in relationships. In her words the whole thing became reduced to "a poke and a smoke and a poke and a smoke and a poke."

The racing game held little interest for Margaret. Nevertheless she often joined with the other Push women in accompanying their men to the track on a Saturday. They would look on as the men studied the form guide, placed their bets with the bookies and hoped that they were not about to blow that week's rent. Harry's book of poems

21st Century Poets was financed on the back of a particularly successful Randwick meet.

The relationship with Harry lasted for several years until, at a Push house party Margaret met Barry Humphries. She followed him to Melbourne – a move she soon came to regret. Just before Harry died of cancer in 1962, Margaret oversaw the publication of his final collection of poems *It's Great to be Alive*. Although Hooton was much appreciated for his conversation, not much notice was taken of his writing. “The Push never took Harry seriously,” Margaret says.

“What’s the problem with Harry? The problem with Harry is that he’s a dog.” Germaine bends down to Busy, cups its hairy face and nuzzles its bewhiskered Schnauzer snout with her own nose. I look more closely at Busy and recognise the Hootonesque features; the deep-set eyes, the bushy eyebrows and moustache.

The phone rings and Margaret answers. The caller on the other end of the line is checking the details of Margaret’s credits as a film producer. “My Brilliant Career . . . The Removalists . . . Eden’s Lost – that’s an apostrophe ‘s’. It was based on the book by Sumner Locke Elliot.” It was after seeing Jean Renoir’s film *The River* that Margaret found the artistic outlet that enabled her to give up her misplaced ambitions of becoming a painter. She decided she was going to be a filmmaker. Nobody would take her seriously; the idea of anybody wanting to be a filmmaker in 1950’s Sydney was beyond most people’s comprehension. In 1965, Margaret picked up Miles Franklin’s turn of the century, semi-autobiographical novel, *My Brilliant Career*, and was so inspired by the character of Sybylla, that she transformed her passion into a

successful career at the vanguard of a new wave of Australian filmmaking. It was to be fifteen years before the novel and Margaret's *Sybylla* reached the screen.

My cup of tea is now empty and Margaret has found her diary. She asks me what the population of Sydney was in 1950. I admit to not being sure. "Well you should know!" she snaps back. She flips open her diary and writes *population 1950*, telling me that it is a bit of information that she would be very interested in knowing for herself. I stand to leave, thanking her for the tea, then say goodbye to Germaine and the others. Margaret guides me to the door. She is a woman who keeps up a busy diary: novels to be adapted into film projects, dinner parties to organise and friends with whom to argue and share memories.