

Ron Rodgers

SEARCHING FOR HIS SISTER

It's a wet night, with myself and Pete sitting in the local bar. I've just knocked off work with the rest of the local fettling gang. Pete's sixty, ten years my senior, his liver on the blink, drinking against doctor's orders. We're the only customers, sitting there sipping our beers when this joker, looking to be around my companion's age, comes in out of the rain. He's small, dapper, sporting a ginger moustache and goatee beard.

"Hello, Pete," he greets us, "have you seen — or heard anything — "

Pete, knowing what's coming, shakes his head, and interjects, "No, Taffy."

The joker draws a couple of photographs from his breast pocket, spreads them on the bar and indicating the first, a slim blue eyed brunette, declares, "My sister, Margie. She disappeared from here thirty years ago, in nineteen sixty." He's looking at me and, like Pete, I shake my head.

His finger moves to the second snap, a buxom middle aged woman hanging garments on a clothes hoist. "Our mother, taken when she was fifty, Margie's present age, and looking as Margie probably looks now?"

Again we shake our heads and the joker, mumbling, "Thanks anyway," pockets the snaps, and departs into the night.

My companion reaches for his beer, swallowing half a glass in one mouthful, looking shaken, unsettled, perspiration glistening in his receding hairline. "Taffy turns up every five years or so," he explains. "Always brings out the photographs. The picture of Margie never varies — but the mother's snap is always replaced by a more recent, elder version of the woman."

"Did you know Margie, Pete?" I inquire.

"Margie's dead," he says.

"Why didn't you tell her brother — for Christ's sake?" I'm baffled.

The old timber cutter sighs. "It was a long time ago — and I've got no proof..."

"Tell me about it," I urge, and when Pete inclines his head, I beckon the barmaid, who's occupied herself polishing the fridge, to replenish our drinks.

"Karl, the kid and I were cutting timber," Pete begins, "camped about forty miles out on the bank of a little creek. We lived in two bond-wood huts set facing each other, with a roofed-in kitchen area between. Margie was a barmaid here at the hotel." He pauses, sips his drink, elaborating, "She was on with Karl, spent her time off, often four days straight every fortnight, out at the camp — I had a Ford utility at the time, and I used to drive her out. The arrangement was the kid and I shared one hut, Karl and Margie the other, with Margie doing all the cooking."

"Sounds cosy," I murmur.

"Far from it," Pete disagrees. "They fought like cats and dogs. Hardly a night went by that he didn't give her a flogging. But come morning they'd be all lovey dovey again."

At this point I get exasperated, intervening, "What happened to her, for Christ's sake?"

Pete frowns at me, the frown implying that this is his story, and he's going to tell it his way, or not at all. Taking my silence as acceptance, he resumes, talking for fifteen minutes or more, the narration punctuated by sips of beer, and sucks on a cigarette. When he finally runs out of puff, I persist, "So every second Monday at 10.30pm, after her stint behind the bar, you picked her up?"

He nods.

"And you claim that nobody ever got wind of this?"

"If they did," he counters, "they never reported it to the police."

"And neither you nor the kid ever discussed the arrangement with anyone else?"

"They had no worries on that score. Karl and I had been mates for years, and the kid idolised both of them. Six months back we'd been working miles from camp, in scrub too thick to breathe in, when the kid fell and broke his leg. Karl hoisted him up on his shoulders and carried him all the way back to camp, where Margie strapped his leg up, before I drove him in to the hospital."

"And the fights — what caused the fights between them?"

"I don't know, but I'd say rum had a lot to do with it."

"Then late Friday night you drove her back to town, ready for her Saturday morning shift?"

Pete nods, takes a long pull on his beer, lights a cigarette, resumes, "The day Margie disappeared — "

At this point, observing the barmaid has moved closer to us, that the hand holding the polishing cloth has stopped moving, I suggest we buy a six-pack and adjourn upstairs.

Five minutes on we're on the verandah just outside our rooms, parked in layback chairs, taking the tops off stubbies. To the west we can discern the outline of the near mountains, stretching away north and south. "Now where were we?" says Pete.

I remind him.

"At the time," he starts again "we were working in pretty rough country: thick scrub, mountain gullies, using an old crawler tractor to haul the timber in to the main artery which, itself, was only a two wheel track. From there the mill truck winched it up and delivered it to the mill. Once a month we went in and collected our cheques. On this particular day the three of us left Margie in camp, piled into my Ford and headed for town. Usually we'd pick our cheques up from the mill, cash 'em at the bank, order our supplies at the general store — then adjourn here to the pub. The only thing unusual that trip was Karl walking up the street to buy a new dress for Margie."

Pete pauses before he goes on. "At about five thirty we call it a day, pick our order up from the store, start for home. The kid's riding up front with me, Karl's lying in the back with the spare tyre for a pillow, and a bottle of rum for company.

It's full dark when we get to the camp, so the kid and I go straight to bed and, despite the quarrel next door, are soon asleep — for how long I don't know. But I wake up with a jump, and yes, you guessed it, our neighbours are at it in earnest. I haul myself out of bed, grope my way out the door, around the kitchen table, into the other hut. Karl's got his pressure light burning, and the first thing I notice is that Margie's wearing his present, a new green dress, and he's got hold of her shoulders, shaking her like a rag doll. I grab hold of his arm, and shout, "What the bloody hell's going on?"

At the time I was a fourteen stone man, but Karl picks me up as if I was a feather, spears me straight through the door and I slide across the kitchen table to land on the floor outside my own hut. The last thing I remember was the kid putting me to bed."

I wait with mounting impatience for the rest, but the only sound is old Pete's snoring.

6-30am, after a restless night, I'm down in the kitchen cutting lunch, ready to go on duty, when Pete wanders in for his morning cup of tea and, against doctor's orders, his first smoke of the day. At first he's surly, reluctant to pick up the story, but gradually he comes around, resumes where he left off.

"The first thing I notice when I come round is the kid's not in his bed, and there's a severe lack of conversation from next door. Karl's at the kitchen table looking like hell itself. I fry us some bacon and egg, brew a pot of coffee, not a word spoken. I sit there sipping the brew, waiting for Karl to go for his morning crap and, when he does, I take a peep in his room, and discover the kid's not the only one missing...

Eventually we start off to work, cross the creek, start clearing a hauling track in to a big red cedar we're going to fell. Come lunch time we go back to camp, where Karl, as he'd never done before, flops on the bed. There's no sign of Maggie, and still no sign of the kid, so I go looking for them.

I start off along the town road, straight off finding the kid's boot prints. I keep walking in case Margie's taken to the scrub before she came out on the road. But by the time I've covered a half mile I'm certain the kid had been the only one to walk away from that camp."

Reluctantly, I leave him there, crossing the road to the railway line and a long day's work, constantly reminded of Pete's last statement — and its ominous implications.

Eventually the day passes, and we're in the bar again. "So you think Karl killed, and buried her, some where close to the camp?" I venture, getting back on track.

"Don't you?" he challenges.

I fall silent and Pete, easier now that he's unburdened himself, goes on, "It was a week before we came into town, but the place was still humming with Margie's disappearance..." He tells how the kid had been last seen boarding a south bound bus, then mentions his own confusion over why the police made no connection to Margie, and his relief when nobody came forward to reveal Pete's role as her chauffeur. Baffled, all in all, by police incompetence, he rambles on, until finally he bursts out, "It was a month before I found her."

"Found her?" I blurt.

"Her grave, I mean. I'd been searching round our camp, gradually working outwards, eventually coming to a little clearing where a plot of earth had been tampered with. Although the original spade work was old, there was fresh digging in the middle of the plot — and a Kauri pine sapling planted there."

Fascinated, I interrupt, "You think it was Karl?"

"Don't you?" he queries.

"Where's Karl now?" I ask.

"Dead. Died a couple of years back. He was riding in the back of another ute, swigging on a bottle of rum — choked on his own vomit."

"What about the kid?"

"Billy, that was his name, got his in Vietnam." He gives me a wry grin, "That's right, they're all dead, except me — and I won't be round for long.."

"You told me the camp was forty miles out, but you didn't say in which direction?"

"No — and I'm not going to."

Why?"

"Because I don't want you stirring things up. It was thirty years ago. The last time I seen that Kauri pine it was twenty feet high, and growing on land that's since become world heritage. And you know what that means?"

"That Margie's bones will never be found — and you think that's the way it should be?"

"Don't you?" He retorts.

"No," I say. "I think you should look Taffy up. Tell him what happened to her."

"I wouldn't know where to find him," evades Pete, "Besides —"

"Besides?"

"You heard what he said about Margie being fifty now — he believes she's still alive ..."

"You owe him the truth, Pete," I protest.

"What if I'm wrong?" he laments. "What if I stir things up so much that they get a court order, or what ever they need, to take out a world heritage tree — and what if they find nothing? Do I owe him that, too?"

At this point realising, for the first time, Pete's predicament, the pressure he is under, I decide to shelve my curiosity. I tell myself, "Let it alone and it will go away." But Margie will not go away and, strangely enough, it's Pete who keeps dragging her up, reliving events after her disappearance. How Margie had told her family and employer that she spent her off time with an aunt in the next town. The aunt, although admitting she covered for her niece, claimed she had no knowledge of where. Or who the girl was with.

Then there was the kid who, out of loyalty to Karl, had decided to run rather than reveal what he knew. And of course there was Karl who, Pete believed, had killed the girl, and frightened the boy away — Karl who never spoke of either of them again.

"He had to be insane," I stressed, "In fact, you both had to be insane."

Later on Pete admits, "I had another look in Karl's hut several weeks after her disappearance, when the police search was well and truly on, and Margie's clothes were still scattered around the room."

"All of them?" I ask.

"All except the green dress."

"Sounds like he wanted to be found out," I observe.

"You think I should have reported him then — don't you?"

"It doesn't matter what I think, Pete. You're the one that's got to live with it."

"It's all water under the bridge now," sighs Pete.

"Not," I argue, "where Taffy's concerned."

"What does it matter?" Pete says. "Neither Taffy, nor I will be here long..."

Months on I'm sitting beside Pete's hospital bed. He's been admitted a couple of weeks ago, sleeps a lot, doesn't have much to say, and I get the feeling that now the end is near, his conscience is bothering him. This particular night he seems extremely agitated, murmuring, "Maybe I was wrong? Maybe Taffy should see his sister's grave?"

I lean forward, asking, "How will he know the tree?"

"Someone carved her name on it."

"You think it was Karl?"

"Don't you?" His eyes by now are closed, voice barely above a whisper.

"Where," I probe, "is this tree?"

"Forty miles due — " he starts. I reach for the notebook and pen in my breast pocket and, leaning forward, straining to hear every word, carefully penning every detail, I record the location of the pine. Fold and tuck the page into my wallet, and prepare to say goodnight, but my companion is already in dreamland.

Pete passes away a week later and we bury him in the town plot. After the funeral the publican puts on a little wake. It's a light hearted affair, each of the boys giving a little reminiscent speech, all agreeing that the old codger could spin a good yarn.

"Yep," says one bloke. "He could tell you the most outlandish story, and have you believing it was for real." He touches his glass to mine, toasting, "To Pete."

"Then you think he told a few tall ones, Joe?" I probe.

Joe, looking highly amused, fires back at me, "Don't you?"

The years slip by and, before I know it, I'm a retired man, and although my obsession with Pete's story has receded, I still wonder about its truth. Was it just fabrication? Or had it happened the way Pete said and, if not, why had he brought it up on his death bed?

Comes the day when Taffy walks into the bar, the goatee beard's grey now, but it's Margie's brother all right, and to prove it he brings out the photographs. I watch him work his way towards me, see the head shakes. Then he's laying the snaps on the bar in front of me. "My sister, Margie," he says, going through the introduction, before moving to the second snap. At this time I realise that

the buxom woman at the clothes hoist has been replaced by an older, frailer woman. "Her mother," he identifies, "taken when she was sixty, and looking as Margie probably now looks — can you help me in any way?"

Suddenly I'm reminded of Margie's headstone, a towering Kauri pine, and about to reach for the location in my wallet, when my hand is stayed, old Pete's words resounding in my ears.

"And what if they find nothing? Do I owe him that, too?"

I shake my head in response to Taffy's question, and watch him walk out the door — still searching for his sister...

