

MEMORIES OF MARGARET

by R.W. Schneider

Characters

MARGARET	39
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version 2

Margaret appears in a puddle of light.

MARGARET

Would anyone like to hear a recitation? Something from Shakespeare? Something from the Greeks? Antigone? Hecuba? Lear?

A light comes up on Doug.

DOUG

I saw her first on York Street, late in the evening in October. I'd attended a national conference of Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas—I was a member then. The conference had chartered a bus to Mystic Seaport for a farewell dinner, a chilly outdoor meal of clam chowder washed down with not nearly enough wine. The return buses dropped us off on York Street in front of Yale Drama School. The School, where I was trying to finish up, was the conference host. On the sidewalk in front of the building stood a tall, African American woman of indeterminable age. She wore a shapeless black sweater. Her pants were dirty and torn. She carried herself like a queen of Nubia.

MARGARET

Would anyone like to hear a recitation from Shakespeare? Or the Greeks?

DOUG

That voice! It flowed out of her effortlessly, even and low with no trace of dialect. I should have recognized it right away, but it took me a moment. She was speaking in RP, "Received Pronunciation," the supposedly class-neutral speech that acting students learn so they won't sound like hicks when they do Shakespeare. I'd only ever heard it on stage or in rehearsal rooms. Hearing it on the sidewalk was unsettling. Hearing it from a street person defied gravity; it shouldn't be happening.

MARGARET

Something from the classics? A recitation?

DOUG

The Dramaturgs and Literary Managers filed past her like sheep in loading shoot, eager for the warmth and safety of the building. She repeated her offer of a recitation one more time in a somewhat louder voice, paused with perfect timing, then strode up York Street with disgust dripping from her stride. Who was she? I asked Pam Jordan, the Drama Librarian.

Pam Jordan is a heavy-set woman with a world-weary air. She's putting stickers into old books.

PAM

That was Margaret Holloway. She was a student here.

DOUG

At the Drama School?

PAM

Before your time.

DOUG

She had this terrific presence, and that voice! You can tell right away it's a trained voice. And she's proud of it—no apologies, no mumbling, every syllable is shaped and *propelled*! And these dramaturgs and literary managers walk right past her. Theatre people! Theatre people who say they're always looking for a good story to tell. Here's a great one—and they walk right past her!

PAM

Maybe the irony was too much for them.

DOUG

They didn't ask her to perform. They didn't even ask what she could do.

PAM

Tragedy is different offstage.

DOUG

Yeah... tell me about tragedy. I've checked out every book you have on the subject of tragedy! (*A beat.*) So what happened?

PAM

Oh, God! Get me coffee, okay?

Doug exits and returns during the following with a paper cup of coffee.

PAM

Dean Brustein believed in her. He let her do a triple major: acting, directing and playwriting. She started out as a director but left. When she came back, he gave her this triple status. She began to fall apart as soon as she graduated. Schizophrenia and drugs. She got on disability because she's an addict. Did you know being a drug addict is a disability? The State of Connecticut says it is.

Margaret enters and takes in the library with an imperial regard.

PAM (CONT.)

She used to come in here, especially when it was cold. Sometimes she'd read, but mostly she'd just sit.

DOUG

What did she read?

PAM

Whatever was out. If there was nothing on the tables, she'd take something from the shelving cart. Never took anything from the stacks. After a while she started getting passive-aggressive. She would stare really hard at students and freak them out. There were complaints. I finally told her to stay away.

Margaret stares.

DOUG

If she was a director, she must have done a thesis show.

PAM

It's in the locked cage. You wanna see it?

DOUG

I would, yes.

Pam shuffles off. We hear an iron cage unlocked and opened. Pam re-enters with a thin folder.

DOUG

Her MFA thesis was skimpy, mostly a rehearsal journal of her final production as a director, written by hand on lined paper. I sat down at one of the long tables and started reading.

Margaret speaks what he's reading.

MARGARET

Blocking the first act. Most of the actors are off book. Tuesday, still blocking. I told Sally to get a different rehearsal skirt. Thursday, we began act two. The rehearsal process is continuing normally.

DOUG

It went on and on like that. Very few details. No emotion. Her thesis was written in the same chilly voice that I heard on the sidewalk. There's no clue to the person who wrote it.

PAM

You should ask Geraldine.

DOUG

Geraldine Channick, the head of Theatre Management?

PAM

Yeah, Geraldine keeps in touch.

DOUG

I don't know her very well. I never took her course.

PAM

She doesn't bite. (*A beat.*) How's the dissertation coming? Or shouldn't I ask?

Margaret picks up her thesis and leafs through it idly.

DOUG (*no enthusiasm*)

Sophocles and *de casibus*, the rise and fall of great ones, the protagonist confronts a chorus which first questions him, then defies him. The tragic hero struggles against decline and fails but, in failing, sets a new boundary post to the human condition... It's going like that.

PAM

A deep trench?

DOUG

A foul rut. A foul rut where other scholars have gone before and soiled the latrines.

PAM

You'll climb out of it.

DOUG

Ya think so?

PAM

Somebody told me once, or maybe I read it—but if I read it, I don't know where—they said “if you can figure out in what way your dissertation is autobiographical, you no longer have to write it.”

DOUG

Hmm. You think I'm writing autobiography without realizing it? You think I'm casting myself as someone out of Sophocles?

Margaret smiles contemptuously.

PAM

Or maybe you aren't. Maybe that's the problem. Maybe you're writing about something you know nothing about.

Silence

DOUG

Is Geraldine in her office?

PAM

You can try.

DOUG

Thanks for the advice.

PAM

Thanks for the coffee.

Margaret steps into a light as the library disappears behind her.

MARGARET

Monarch of Gods and Dæmons and all spirits
But one who throng those bright and rolling worlds
Which thou and I alone of living things
Behold with sleepless eyes! Regard this earth
Made multitudinous with thy slaves--whom thou
Rewardest for knee-worship, prayer, praise
And toil. To hecatombs of broken hearts,
Thou givest self-contempt and barren hope.
Whilst me, who am thy foe, eyeless in hate,
Hast thou made reign and triumph
Over mine own misery and thy vain revenge.

She strides off. Lights back to Doug.

DOUG

Mind you, I was part of that group on the sidewalk, that gaggle of dramaturgs and literary managers, those connoisseurs of dramatic irony who were too cowardly to ask for a recitation. I was an apprentice member of that organization, not yet employed in the field, still working on my dissertation and so, still striving for the position that would allow me to call myself a specialist in drama, a parser of plots and a critiquer of characters. She was standing on the sidewalk and I'd walked right by her. No, not exactly. I'd come back on an earlier bus so I got to watch the idiotic spectacle from a few yards away: my fellow conferees ignoring drama so they could go inside and talk about *drama*. I felt as if the world had just given me a pop quiz. And I failed.

Geraldine enters with papers and a telephone.

GERALDINE

What is it Doug? I've got about three minutes.

DOUG

Prof. Channick...

GERALDINE

"Geraldine," please.

DOUG

Thank you for seeing me. I wanted to ask about Margaret Holloway.

GERALDINE

What about her?

DOUG

I want to know what happened.

GERALDINE

Life happened. It's a long, sad story.

DOUG

I understand she went to Smith College for undergrad?

GERALDINE

Nope, Bennington, but the same *milieu*: preppy, exclusive and very arty. She'd done a year or two at Carleton before transferring. Probably the only Black girl at either school. She did quite well.

DOUG

Well enough to come here.

GERALDINE

Brustein was an asshole about a lot of things, but he wasn't wrong about Margaret; she had real talent.

DOUG

I would say she still does.

GERALDINE

So you've seen her perform?

DOUG

Not yet, but I'd like to.

GERALDINE

Look for her in front of Willoughby's in the afternoon when it's sunny. Give her a nice tip if you can afford it.

DOUG

I can afford it.

GERALDINE

I've got a meeting. Tell me what you think, and we'll talk some more, okay?

Geraldine exits.

DOUG

Willoughby's coffee shop on Church Street was her warming hut. They gave her free coffee and old pastries. She never recited inside, only out front.

Lights change. Margaret is there.

MARGARET

Tremble, thou wretch,
That hast within thee undivulgèd crimes,

Unwhipp'd of justice: hide thee, thou bloody hand;
Thou perjured, and thou counterfit man of virtue;
Rive your concealing continents, and cry
These dreadful summoners grace. I am a woman
More sinn'd against than sinning.

Doug gives her money. She doesn't thank him. She adds it to her stash and counts it.

DOUG

Her acting was declamatory, intense, almost spasmodic: a style that cherished individual syllables and wouldn't let them go. She loved to do Lear, but also Medea's last speech to Jason. She liked the witches from *Macbeth* and Ariel from *The Tempest*—characters that were either possessed themselves or agents of possession in others. At the hems and seams of her recitation I caught a glimpse of the furies that possessed her. I started to understand why the dramaturgs avoided her that evening. Margaret Holloway was frightening.

MARGARET

You fools! I am myself
A minister of Fate: the elements,
Of which your swords are tempered, may as well
Wound the loud winds, or stab at water
As diminish one filament of my plume.
Your swords are now too massy for your strengths
And will not be uplifted. But remember—
For that's my business to you—the powers,
Do incense the seas and shores against your peace!
Lingering perdition, worse than any death
Can be at once, shall step by step attend
You and all your ways!

Lights change. Doug is in Geraldine's office

GERALDINE

I hope you tipped her.

DOUG

I did. I'm afraid she'll use it to buy drugs.

GERALDINE

Why "afraid"?

DOUG

Isn't she an addict?

GERALDINE

Aren't we all in some way? You're addicted to Greek plays. I'm addicted to spreadsheets.

DOUG

I mean she has a physiological dependency.

GERALDINE

You mean she *needs* them? You're right.

DOUG

To self-medicate?

GERALDINE

To put a mask over the horror. The drugs help. She's better now, but for a while she was getting in people's faces—really aggressive, just wouldn't let you go. One year I gave her a hundred dollars to leave my students alone. I had to show her who they were.

DOUG

Why hasn't she been arrested?

GERALDINE

She gets arrested a lot—in and out of jail all the time. When she's not in jail or in the psych ward at Yale New Haven, she lives in a crack house next to the Great Wall.

DOUG (*out front*)

The Great Wall is a cheap and delicious Chinese restaurant well known to graduate students.

GERALDINE

Like I say, she's better now. The horror has abated. (*A beat*) How's the dissertation coming?

DOUG

A different kind of horror. I'm totally stuck. I mean, what do I know actually know about Sophocles?

GERALDINE

I guess that's what your faculty aims to find out. Is that all?

DOUG

Yes. Thank you... Geraldine.

GERALDINE

Back to the library with you!

DOUG

I'm heading there now.

Back to the library. Doug hands Pam several note cards with call numbers.

PAM

Geraldine left out some stuff. Margaret used to do tricks for crack. She got really sick.

DOUG

She seems possessed—in the literal sense. Like Medea possessed by a daemon of vengeance. But what's she taking vengeance *on*? Schizophrenia? An accident of brain chemistry? Or maybe “brain chemistry” is just a fancy name for fate?

PAM

This building is full of possessed people. Have you noticed how many of them want to be *actors*? Margaret was one of them. She needed an audience—still does.

DOUG

She gets one in front of Willoughby's. The undergrads call her “The Shakespeare Lady.”

PAM

That's on a good day. You don't want to see her on a bad day. (*RE: the cards.*) Nobody's checked out these books in forty years. Are you sure you want them?

DOUG

I'm stuck, Pam--totally stuck. I'm hoping some of the older writers will give me... perspective.

PAM

They're in the Library Shelving Facility. I'll have them sent to Sterling. You can pick them up tomorrow at the Circulation Desk.

DOUG

Thank you.

PAM

Good luck finding... perspective.

Lights change. It's night. Sterling Library. Margaret is standing in the entrance.

MARGARET

Hey, gimme ten dollars.

DOUG

Good evening, Miss Holloway.

MARGARET

Don't give me that crap. Gimme ten dollars.

DOUG

I gave you five the other day. You recited the storm scene from *King Lear*.

MARGARET

I'm not on tonight. I need the money. I know you have it.

DOUG

Look, I just want to use the library. Could we do this another day?

MARGARET

No. Fork over.

DOUG

Can I buy you a sandwich instead?

MARGARET

I'm not hungry. But I'm getting pissed off; you're wasting my time.

DOUG

You used to study in this building. You went to the Drama School. I do, too...

MARGARET

Well, give you a Tony for that! I bet you're a dramaturg! You look like you been licking dust jackets and whacking off in the stacks. Now give me my money.

DOUG

Why should I pay you to insult me?

MARGARET

‘Cause I won’t do it for free, dumbass! That’ll be fifteen dollars—my consulting fee.

DOUG

Margaret... I recognize you as an artist. I...

She spits at him. He turns and retreats.

MARGARET

I recognize you as a turd.

Crossfade to the present.

DOUG

I avoided her after that, even on good days. (*A beat.*) I decided to take my dissertation in a new direction. I’d been writing about Sophocles generically, spinning my wheels, looking for a way into the subject. About this time, I realized that tragedy doesn’t require *hamartia*. Crap, I have to explain that. “Hamartia” is an archery term. It means “missing the bullseye” or “wide of the mark.” It’s usually translated as “a tragic flaw.” But the point is you can be “wide of the mark” intellectually, not just morally. But I digress. I’m sorry. What was I saying?

MARGARET

No change, no pause, no hope! Yet I endure.
I ask the sea, in storm or calm,
Have its deaf waves not heard my agony?
The crawling glaciers pierce me with the spears
Of their moon-freezing crystals, their bright chains
Eat with their burning cold into my bones.
The ghastly people of the realm of dream,
Mock me: Yet I endure.

Her light fades out.

DOUG

The thing is--you don’t have to *deserve* tragedy. Just being human is *hamartia* enough. In the same way, tragedy doesn’t require the attention of a savage god or a vengeful spirit; it’s here already, waiting within. Call it the Daemon, the wrath of Apollo—the absolute shit storm that comes down at any moment, even on the head of one hitherto favored by the gods.
The Greeks understood.
The Greeks understood.

End of play