

# Marianna's Father

The Sachs family was already poised for its second decline when I met them, or specifically, their eldest daughter, Marianna. I hung around on the edge of the student world, being no more than an apprentice carpenter. Through an interlocking network of student and Communist political youth movements, I got to know Marianna. She valued me highly for the one genuine worker she knew, and for my part I exploited it gleefully. The rewards could be a dependable sexual outlet and the occasional home-cooked meal. It was hope of the latter that gave me my first experience of life among the uprooted European Jewish intellectuals of the 1950s.

Being Jewish *and* a manual worker increased my shock value to Marianna. As a second-year Arts student, she flaunted me at parties where the philosophy was Andersonian, the wine rough and beer decidedly plebeian. It was all a dreadful pose, but if you lived in dreary boarding houses, as I did, it was a splendid relief. It was something like going to a different stage play twice a week and sleeping with the leading lady.

In the third month of my adoption by Marianna, she sat up in my lumpy bed and said, "Ben, you've got to meet Farty and Mutty."

"Can't stand dogs and cats, Marianna."

"They are my parents, you bastard."

I then realised she had dropped her Australian accent in

favour of some European way of speaking, a bit like war movie Germans. “Farty” with a throaty R was not the same word as in common English parlance; “Muttie” which rhymed with bookie was a new one on me so my response to Marianna’s statement was excusable.

“You’re kidding, Marianna,” I said. “You know bloody well what that would mean in the unwritten laws of Jewish society. We’d be doomed, done for, condemned to a life of *Shabbat* lunches, Sunday visits to relatives and God knows what else.”

I paused and looked at her, sitting naked and cross-legged in my room surrounded by Eureka Youth League posters depicting the young Komsomols devoted to their tractors and scythes. My tool bag lay in the corner and her clothes were draped across it, the personification of the class struggle!

With an arm around her I said, “Seriously, Marianna, you really don’t want me to meet your parents, do you? If I know anything about them, I’m not the sort of bloke any good Jewish daughter ought to be seen with, let alone take home and,” I mocked her, “God forbid should consider marriage to.”

She made several attempts to stem my theatrical outburst but I was well away.

“A Communist and a carpenter, no family to speak of – ‘Und vair duss he liff, ziss Ben?’ In a room in Darlinghurst. I can hear ’em now, Marianna. Struth, it’s just not on. You’d be locked up until you graduated and I’d get arsed out firmly but politely.”

I was warming to my flagellation role when Marianna screamed, “Will you for Christ’s sake shut up a minute? They are not like that at all. Father is a Doctor of Laws from Vienna and mummy is a – a darling,” she finished lamely. The fight went out of her and she pulled the blankets over her head and sobbed.

After a while from under the clothes, she whispered, “I

only asked you, Ben, because I'm terribly proud of you. It's been ages since I took any boys home and not for the reasons you think. Honestly, Ben, I didn't think they were worthy of meeting Farty." She sighed heavily. "Oh Ben, I don't want to get married, not to you and certainly not to any of those Bellevue Hill creeps with their ...” But my hand was gently over her mouth and we slid down beneath the grey army blankets.

A few days later, Marianna renewed her request; she was prepared to put a not too subtle pressure on me and was surprised when I agreed. We took the tram on the long, lovely ride around Sydney's harbour shoreline, looked down on the yachts glimpsed between the gardens and crenellated roof tops of the Darling Point nob until her tug at my sleeve indicated her tram stop. From that moment, I was on the defensive, even to the point of not walking hand in hand with her but lagging purposefully behind. Up the winding hilly road we went in that odd little pocket of houses between Double Bay and Vaucluse – houses that were better than Bondi but definitely not in the same class as the squattocracy of the 1900s.

The house she finally chose was on the high side of the road, sitting in all its dark brick ugliness among enormous hydrangea bushes whose dying flowers scattered their petals over the path. A few steps led up to a tiled verandah and as we got to the front door Marianna said to me, "My sisters will probably be at home too, Ben. And Ben, I know it sounds silly but please, would you address Farty as Doctor – Doctor Sachs. OK, Ben?"

I nodded and attempted a kiss before we entered but she had her key out and opened the door.

After the glare of the afternoon summer sun, the cool air that came from the gloom of the passageway was both welcome and disturbing. Marianna led the way calling softly,

“Mutt, Farty, where are you?” And in a stronger voice, “Isobel, Renate, I’m home.”

My eyes were everywhere, looking for clues that would alert me to what sort of behavioural pose I should adopt. The doors leading off the hall were closed and nothing helped until we came to the enormous kitchen dominated by an Early Kooka stove, a massive pine table with a worked runner on it and a pottery vase of trailing wisteria. On the wall was a framed tract of some kind; the Gothic text told me it was something serious, a statement perhaps, meant to inspire the family. I was trying to decipher the German when Marianna took my hand and said, “They must be in the back garden.” Desperate to find out what I was getting into, I pointed to the framed text and asked her what it said.

“Oh, it’s an old German proverb or something. I think it means that father is the head of the household, that he is wise and a good provider and,” she finished lamely, “that he must be obeyed.” She took my hand, furtively I thought, and we went out into the sunshine again.

If I had ever seen a Renoir painting I would have said the scene in front of me was a dead ringer for it. Grouped around a wooden table and seated in those hard, angular slatted garden lounges were people I presumed to be Mutt, Farty and Marianna’s sisters. Despite the beauty of the girls and the dolly-like prettiness of their mother, one had to look first at Doctor Sachs. There was no alternative.

The stature of the man, even half-reclining, was enough to isolate him from the others and from his surroundings. He sat as at the head of a triangle, on a higher piece of ground, his chair at a more acute angle. His heavy body appeared to resist the natural inclination to relax. I thought that approaching him

would be like entering a minefield. From where I stood, the book in his hands obscured his face from just below the mouth, leaving me to interpret a high tanned forehead, straight nose, a cheek with a thin scar across it and a mouth as thin as the scar. Below the book his body looked strong and his hands were steady.

I was unnerved. The man frightened me. He reminded me of a timber joist that, once fixed into place, would never move. Marianna, too, seemed a totally different person. She melted into her family circle and the mannerisms of her student life fell away, leaving a much reduced young woman who had a place in this hierarchy. Just where, I was yet to find out. Any idea I had of role-playing was quashed by her opening words.

“Farty, this is Ben. He’s a carpenter, well, an apprentice, and he lives in Potts Point.”

Potts Point? What was she saying? I lived in Darlinghurst Road among the pros and sly grog shops in a room next door to a crippled newspaper seller.

“Ben, I’d like you to meet my father, Doctor Sachs.” She added with gathering momentum, “Father is a lawyer but he doesn’t practise here. In Vienna he was like a – a King’s Counsel, weren’t you, Farty?”

I stepped forward with a conventional outstretched hand and the right responses; he only lowered the book an inch or two to acknowledge my presence. Marianna did not seem to find this odd. She rushed on introducing me to “Mutt” and kissing her at the same time, then to her sisters who merely smiled and tucked their legs tightly beneath them.

I turned to Mrs Sachs and remarked, “Great garden you’ve got here, Mrs Sachs, all those trees and things.” I waved my arms around stupidly and said to the obelisk, “Do you keep it going, Doc? I mean it must be hard yakka.”

The book came down an inch or two, his eyes moved to the right and in a careful, clipped voice he said to his wife, "I think it is time for tea, Mutty. Shall we go in?"

A procession began, as well ordered as a ranking military ceremony. First Doctor Sachs, then his wife, the two girls, Marianna, and me well to the rear and wishing myself a thousand miles away. Into the big shadowy kitchen we filed. One girl removed the flowers, another the runner; Marianna took the afternoon tea paraphernalia from a dresser while her mother quickly filled a kettle. All this time Doctor Sachs stood stiffly at the end of the table, waiting, waiting. For what, I wondered from the other end.

Then as if by silent commands, the women re-assembled around the table, their eyes on the father who finally withdrew his chair and sat down. The others followed in descending order with only fractions of a second between them but still enough to maintain the ritual. I sank into my chair in an ungainly fashion only to see Doctor Sachs looking down the table at me. I straightened up and fooled about pretending to hand the plates and cups around. It was all quite unnecessary; everything was done with precision and an ordained orderliness.

What followed around the table was a nightmare for me. My tea slopped into the saucer, the neatly cut piece of cake broke in my hand and my attempts to respond to Marianna's efforts to include me in the family small talk failed dismally.

Did I say small talk? It was more like courtroom procedure. Only after Doctor Sachs had been served, indeed only when he had actually completed drinking one cup of tea and eating one piece of cake, did any sort of conversation ensue. He did not ask for anything to be passed to him. Mrs Sachs anticipated his needs and he accepted it as a right. Having reached this point, he said, "I am very fond of good furniture, Mister Ben. From

Vienna I have brought my family bureau but *ach*, it looks not *gut* in these small rooms. Still, so many books I have, they must be protected.”

And that was all he said to me. To Marianna he turned accusingly. “You are home so late so many nights, are you with your books all the time? Examinations are soon, are they not?”

Marianna replied in German. I had a feeling that what she said was not entirely concerned with study because at one point his eyes shifted to me and he cut her off curtly, “*Nein, nein, meine liebchen.*”

With the same orderliness that marked its beginning, afternoon tea came to an abrupt end by Doctor Sachs simply getting up and leaving the kitchen to return to the garden. Mrs Sachs was left with the tidying up, the two girls disappeared, I don’t know where, and Marianna, by a series of signals, made it clear we should leave. She told her mother she had to go back to the library in town.

“Ben likes to sit with me while I read. Isn’t that nice, Mutty?”

Our fingers touched in a distant farewell and I left Mrs Sachs to her dishes. Marianna steered me out once more into the garden where Doctor Sachs looked as though he had never moved.

“We are going back to town now, Farty,” she said. “Perhaps I shall see you later tonight?” She kissed him on the cheek but he did not move.

I said, “Nice to have met you, Doctor Sachs, and thanks for the tea.” As I spoke I was already backing away as though from some important personage. Realising what I was doing I defiantly turned my back on him, squared my shoulders and marched off, with Marianna hurrying after me.

It was not just the steep road down the hill to the tram stop that made me hurry. I was anxious to be rid of Doctor Sachs,

his obsequious wife and, I had a feeling of foreboding, maybe even his daughter. Marianna caught up with me and held my hand tightly.

“Ben, there’s something, a lot of things you ought to know about Farty,” she said.

“Please Marianna, will you quit calling him Farty, couldn’t you just say Dad or Daddy or Pop or if you think that doesn’t square with the old bugger’s dignity, just settle for father. All this Farty rubbish is giving me the shits.”

The tram came, only this time I didn’t look at the harbour. I sat hunched up, confused and angry. Had I lost a battle with the upper classes or was it with her kind of people? Were they my people too? That’s the trouble with Jews, I told myself, they popped up on both sides of the class struggle, confusing simple artisans like me.

The tram trundled up to the top of Macquarie Street and we got off and walked in silence to the Mitchell Library. The last rays of the sun bathed the pompous building in golden light. I hesitated at the top of the steps; I’d had enough for one day and really would like to have been alone for a while. Marianna pulled me down on the steps beside her and snuggled into my side.

She began softly. “Ben, do you know that in 1938 he was about to be made a judge in Austria? He was the leading lawyer in civil jurisprudence. He believed in the law and in justice and in people and countries behaving in a civilised way to each other.”

“Comes the revolution,” I muttered.

“Don’t be such a smart arse with your hack party dogma,” she snapped. “I’m trying to explain father to you, if you’ve bloody manners enough to listen. In those days, Austria wasn’t Germany. It was a country of decent people he’d grown up

with, studied with – even defended in court. Look, I don't have to tell you, of all people, how the nice little Austrians couldn't turn their Jewish neighbours in quickly enough once Hitler got going."

"Yeah, I've heard about that sort of thing," I said, "but is he a solicitor or something now? Honest, Marianna I didn't take to him much. All that palaver at tea this afternoon – too rich for my blood. Still, I suppose he's a big wheel at his work."

Marianna turned away from me and stared over the Woolloomooloo chimney pots. "He doesn't work, Ben. He hasn't worked since we arrived in Sydney and that's oh, twenty years ago."

"Well how does he – how do you..." I stumbled.

"You wonder how the hell we live, Ben? How we come to have a decent house in a good suburb? How my sisters and I got a private school education and all the bloody trimmings? My father stopped growing as a man a few months after we got here. The law stunted his growth, Ben, the law that he lived for. The Law Institute said to him: "Now *Herr Doktor* Alfred Sachs, if you want to practise here you'll have to go back to University and get our degree." Oh, I know he wasn't the only refugee in that predicament but he thought it was below his dignity."

I stood up and shouted at her. "Do you call all that kowtowing and treating him as though he was the bloody Pope, dignified? Look at me, look at my hands – there's no shame in work." I shut up suddenly, realising that what I had said sounded like a bloody Party line speech.

Marianna knuckled the corners of her eyes but it wasn't the setting sun that made them wet. "I thought you'd understand, Ben; I told myself you were different from the others, that's why I brought you home."

A long silence followed and the sun dropped behind the

palm trees. The southerly wind was more noticeable now, chilling the perspiration on our bodies. I put my arm around her as much for her warmth as for my own; she shrugged it off.

“It was my mother, Ben, who kept us going. You wouldn’t believe it – my stupid little coffee-and-cake mother who knew not much more than how to bake a cheese cake and sew a straight seam. I’m not going to give you the whole rags-to-riches story but I’ll tell you this Ben: all the time she was building up a clothing factory she had to pretend that he was still the head of the household, still the one to make decisions and, oh I know you think it’s comical ...”

“He could still have taken a job,” I said doggedly.

She stood up and marched down a few steps then turned and shouted at me through her tears. “Farty was a great man and we love him.” She ran blindly down the steps and through the big iron gates into the Botanical Gardens.

Maybe I should have taken off after her. I don’t know. When you work all day with your hands as I do and the job grows slowly, acting impetuously is not your style. You turn the wood this way and that, consider its grain and, if it’s a knotty piece that’s going to give you trouble, you throw it away and select another bit.

That’s how I reasoned it out about Marianna and her father. Throw it away.