

Margaret's Magnolia
by Sarah Warburton

My sister Margaret has midnight hair she wears in a single braid down her back. She is an artist, but she looks like a portrait. She is the headliner, I am the barmaid. She is the movie star, I take the tickets.

My hair is an ordinary brown and so are my eyes, except for the summers I spend in Tunisia, in Greece, in Turkey. Then my hair, streaked by the sun, turns the color of an ancient gold coin, and in its reflection my eyes become tiger eyes. I am temporarily beautiful.

But summer is over as Margaret and I stand out on the back patio, which my Dad made himself when we were just kids. We smooth out a plastic tarp and sit with one of Margaret's art projects spread out before us. This is the first time we've both been home at the same time as adults, except for holidays, weddings, or funerals. I'm visiting between an archaeological dig at Carthage and the start of the semester at the University of Kentucky, where I teach Latin and ancient art.

Margaret hasn't told us why she has come home, but my mother thinks she's left her husband. Mama told me her suspicions last night in a rising whisper that culminated in the warning, "Don't push her, Eleanor. If she wants to talk about it, she'll bring it up."

Now I keep a wary eye on Margaret as she spreads out the tiles.

"How's this work again?" I ask.

We are going to tile a table for the back porch. Margaret has sprayed the frame metallic black, we are preparing to break bright Mexican tiles into smaller fragments.

"Put the towel on top, so you won't scratch them, and then hit them with the hammer."

I watch her as she demonstrates. She has to hit the tile twice to break it, then she lifts the towel off without a flourish and sweeps the shards of cobalt blue and terracotta to one side. I think she must have left Billy, and he must have done something terrible.

This terse woman with the thin lips is not my dramatic, vivid sister. Margaret is usually loud in her anger, unafraid to be ridiculous, prone as a teenager to stalking into the center of a room, spreading her arms wide and declaring, "I hope that you are all completely happy now that you have ruined my life."

I remember waking in the night when we were both in high school and hearing a noise from Margaret's room. When I opened her door softly, she had one leg over the ledge of her open window and was maneuvering onto the porch roof.

"Margaret" I whispered fiercely, afraid she would fall but too outraged to care.

She startled and pulled her leg back in, turning to sit on the ledge facing me.

"God, Eleanor, you scared me. What's the matter with you? What are you doing?"

"What am *I* doing? Why aren't you in bed?"

I knew what my younger, wilder sister was doing. The fast crowd—the cool kids—gathered down by the river, hung out by the rapids drinking and dancing to

someone's car radio. Or so I had heard a year or so ago, when one of them slipped in and drowned. My friends—the decidedly uncool kids—went to bed early, or stayed up late pouring over textbooks.

Moonlight from the window cast Margaret's face in shadow, but lined her dark hair with a tremulous halo.

"Look, it's no big deal. No one will ever know I'm gone. And you won't tell, right? I know you don't want to start telling things about each other."

She gave me a significant look, and I didn't know if she would tell about my crush on Brendon with his lean build and lazy intelligence, or if she would tell that I still slept with my faded teddy bear, or if she would make something up, worse, even more embarrassing.

I shrugged. "Whatever. I'm going back to bed."

"You do that," and as she swung her legs back over the windowsill the moon caught her face and flashed silver in her eyes.

I lay awake that night until she came back in, this time through the back door, creeping up the stairs. I imagined her dark hair hanging heavy, dripping river water down her back.

Now that we live apart and see each other only once or twice a year, our main contact is through phone calls a few times a month. She is the mistress of the strategic hang-up, often leaving me staring at the receiver in exasperated admiration. Margaret can be a complete bitch but I love that about her. She is as generous with her joy as she is with her anger, but I have never seen her hurt this badly before and she is holding it close.

On this day, our parents have taken a bus trip to Richmond with their church group. Mama wondered if they shouldn't stay home with us, but even as she offered, Dad was packing a shoulder bag with the camera, extra film, a water bottle, and a guide book. When he brought her jacket, she put it on and went out to the car with him.

Now that we're alone, I like the idea of making a mosaic together. Maybe breaking things will make Margaret snap out of her daze; maybe I can say something that will wake her up again. "When I was in Greece, in the mountains near Delphi, I saw a mosaic uncovered on a mountaintop in the middle of nowhere. It had footprints set into the floor for good luck. They uncovered and sketched it, but they were covering it back up again."

"Why?" Margaret hits another tile, its crunch muffled by the towel on top of it.

"There wasn't enough money to dismantle it and take it to a museum and they couldn't afford to make a shelter over it or preserve it. Best way to keep it safe was to cover it back up again."

We work in silence for a while. I break the tiles, then slide them off the newspaper we've laid down and into a shoebox. Margaret has traced the tabletop onto a piece of cardboard, and she slides the colored tiles into a swirled pattern on the circle she's traced.

"He wasn't good enough for you," I say, testing her. It's true. He was smart enough to recognize her worth, but not to understand her. When they got married I thought he was smart enough to know he would never be worthy of her, but some woman must have told him he'd gotten it all wrong.

“Maybe he was.” She sits back on her heels, looking down at the mosaic. She reaches out to move a blue piece and I see the long red line that goes from the fleshy part of her hand up to the base of her thumb.

“You cut yourself.” She’s an artist. I know she has art knives, but I’m not sure what she uses them for. Sharpening pencils, maybe, or trimming paper. Her eyes are bruised, as though she had stayed up all night painting like she did when we were younger, but I don’t know if she brought any paints with her.

“Yeah.” She doesn’t look up at me. “An accident.” But the cut is in a strange place to be an accident.

The first time she brought Billy home for Christmas, I could see why she liked him. He was tall and athletic, and with a kind of confidence that made me flush with pleasure when he agreed with me that British mystery writers are far superior to American ones.

The next year Margaret was quiet, but her eyes smiled as she watched him argue with my father over their favorite varieties of roses. Dad favored a multicolored climber called Joseph’s Coat, but Billy preferred Double Delight, a white rose with petals edged in deep pink. They poured over the garden catalogs as the wind whipped the bare branches of the trees. As Dad pointed out the plants he’d add in the spring, Billy made notes for his own yard.

When Margaret and Billy got married the following year, Dad gave them a magnolia seedling from his own tree.

“And that tree,” he told Billy, “that tree was once a seedling from a magnolia

growing on Boone Plantation down in Charleston.” When Billy’s face stayed blank, Dad continued, “You know, Twelve Oaks in *Gone With the Wind*. I went there on my honeymoon.”

“Whose honeymoon?” Mama came up behind him and took his arm, her face alight with mischief.

“Right, I should have said *your* honeymoon.” He shook his arm free of hers, then draped it across her shoulders. “After all, it was your idea to sneak onto the plantation in the middle of the night and steal that little seedling.”

She laughed, leaning in close as a climbing vine. “I spent half our honeymoon talking him into it and half trying to get him away from that baby tree. Once we had it in our hotel room, he kept fussing over it, getting more water, muddying up the bathroom, moving it closer to the window.”

Dad kissed the top of her head and Billy shot Margaret a look that promised a green and growing future.

Today, thirty years from that honeymoon, my parent’s tree spreads over the side of the patio. The broad leaves shine as though they’ve been waxed, but this year’s flowers are long gone, leaving only rosy conical pods which will deepen in color throughout the fall.

Margaret works quietly, but her movements are jerky and graceless. She puts a broken piece of tile down, then picks it up again, hesitates, and sets it back down in the same place. Her silence sets off a fluttering in my stomach and I rush in to fill her up with my own strange memories.

“When I was in Greece, the bus pulled up next to a truck labeled *metaphora* on a card propped up on the inside of the dashboard.”

Margaret stops working altogether and sits looking at the mosaic she's creating. “Like a metaphor?”

“That's what I thought at first. It didn't make any sense.”

We work in silence for a few minutes. “But it's just the Greek word for moving truck,” I told her. “Just a truck full of someone's boxes and furniture.”

Margaret doesn't tell me she's left Billy for good; she doesn't tell me she'll need her own moving truck. But the phone hasn't rung once today, and she drove up last weekend with three suitcases and no advance notice. I may be reading into the situation, but Billy has always seemed a little too assured of his own lanky charm.

I would never do anything to hurt my sister, but I'm no saint either. On the dig this summer, I had an affair with the British site photographer, Ian. We would sneak off site whenever we could, often back to the barracks to make love in the silty heat when dust turned the light to powdered gold and bronzed our sweaty skin. A few times we met at night in the chill of the Necropolis itself, where even through a blanket my skin would be scraped and bruised on the stones.

Once his mobile phone went off, and later when he checked his messages, he called his wife back and they talked for over an hour. We were on an archaeological dig, but we were still very close to Tunis, the capital city, and I wished we were excavating somewhere even more remote. After Ian took a call I could feel his wife hovering over the burial sites as we worked, her absence always with us, as my mouth and eyes filled

with grit.

I won't call him now that we were back in the States, and I won't think about his wife, that ghost on the phone, waiting for him all summer in Iowa. I wonder who Billy had on the side, and if she knows enough not to call the house.

I can't look at Margaret anymore, her pallid cheeks, her eyes veiled with tears. When I speak to her, she seems to answer by sheer will. Her voice is light, but her body shakes with the effort of normalcy. She has become another ghost on the phone, another photo fallen from a book. I run cold with anger, the world grows still. If Billy thinks he can keep his perfect house and his perfect lawn and put some new woman in Margaret's place, he is mistaken.

"Get in the truck," I tell her. We're taking a road trip."

She does what I tell her to do, as if we were children—although when we were children, she was never docile just because I was the oldest.

"You go stand under that tree" she told me when I was ten and she was eight. We were in the autumn woods behind the house, and it never occurred to me to question her. I stood where she directed and she shook the slender trunk of the birch until the yellow leaves filled the air around us. I looked up but the whole world had become a golden blur and I was amazed at what Margaret had done.

Night is falling as we take off in my truck down I 85 and burn the highway beneath us. Billy's house is in Alpharetta, north of Atlanta, and we make the trip in closer to three hours than the four it would usually take. Margaret appears to sleep for some of the trip, leaning her head against the window and closing her eyes. I keep the radio on a

station playing old country, Conway Twitty and Loretta Lynn. Normally I would sing along, "I'll fly away, O Glory," but I feel as though the same bad spirit that hijacked my sister has hollowed me out as well. I don't have enough breath to sing or enough lightness to fly.

When we get off the interstate, the roads narrow. I think the trees look fluid, like they might slide in front of the truck or close in tight behind us.

Billy's house backs up to a strip of woods owned by the power company. Used to be they were real woods, stretching back for miles, but now on a winter's day the houses on the other side show through the leafless trees.

Tonight the darkness fills those spaces and creates an infinite forest. A full moon lights the front yard, illuminating the landscaping Billy did himself. The house is a perfect square, with a small porch with four columns on the front and a screened-in porch along the back. The windows are dark; the driveway is empty.

I pull my cell phone from the glove compartment and call the house. No one picks up the phone, no lights go on, Billy's in someone else's bed tonight. I didn't think I could be angrier, but now I know I could tear Billy into bloody pieces with my bare hands. I could eat his heart, raw and dripping, for making my sister watch me stare at that empty house.

"Do you want anything from inside?" I ask Margaret, and she shakes her head, still looking down at her lap. "I'll be right back," I tell her, and I walk around the side of the house, past Billy's curving manicured flowerbeds, to the garden shed set back at the edge of the woods.

The shed is a miniature replica of the larger house—without a porch, but still small and boxy and white. The key is under the eaves of its sloping roof. I open the door and pass my hand back and forth through the darkness until I hit the string that turns on the light. I scan the contents of the shed, a lawnmower, an assortment of clippers on the wall, an ax, bags of fertilizer, until I spot the shovel. I grab it and leave the door of the shed open and the light on. Margaret is still in the truck, but her door is open and she sits sideways, facing the house.

“Come on,” I tell her. She’s going to have to help me with this.

Her eyes narrow and for a minute she coalesces behind them and comes out of her stupor.

“What are we going to do?” she whispers.

I beckon to her with my free hand, “Come on already.”

The magnolia tree is in the front yard to one side of the porch. Luckily for us it’s not as wide or as tall as our parents’ tree. This one is only five feet tall—still too young for blossoms or seed pods. But I’ve never so much as chopped firewood before, and the shovel seems much smaller than the tree.

Margaret slides out of the car and we stand side by side, looking at the tree. “Are we going to cut it down?” she asks, and her voice is high and shaky. “I don’t want to cut it down.”

“Margaret, it’s a shovel, not an ax,” and I move aside so she can see the shovel in my hand. “We’re just going to dig it up. We’re not going to hurt it.”

Turns out it’s not as easy as all that. You can’t just dig a tree up. Most of it is up

already and the part that's in the ground doesn't just grow down, it spreads out and through the ground, it holds on. Margaret isn't any help at all; she sinks down and sits cross-legged watching me dig the dirt off the top of the roots, dig out in a circle around the tree, try to pry it up a bit with the wide part of the shovel.

I shake that tree until the broken leaves litter the grass around us and the air is full of their lemony smell. Finally, I get the ax out of the shed in order to chop off some of the roots and make the tree easier to dig up.

For a moment I fantasize about chopping the damn tree down altogether, leaving the shattered corpse on Billy's porch. Lighting it up maybe, with the gasoline from the shed, the can that's meant for the lawnmower. I can just see that tree blaze, turning the rest of the world to shadow around it. But Margaret is looking up at the ax and suddenly I'm afraid, like I haven't been since I was little and woke up alone in the middle of the night.

"What the hell are you doing?" she asks, and her voice is strong, she is focused fully on the ax in my hands. She looks to the tree, the exposed roots, the leaves and bits of branch around us. I drop the ax and take a step back, aware that I have gone too far.

As I have left it, the tree is half naked, but it is still firmly rooted. If I had been strong enough, I would have ripped it out of the ground, thrown it into the back of the truck—roots to the wind, and driven it straight back to Charlotte, but I couldn't get it out of the ground without damaging it.

Margaret stands and picks up the ax. She swings it carelessly by her side as she steps towards me, and I step back, not entirely sure she won't take a swing at me. But she

walks past me and past the tree, right up the front steps of the house.

Taking the ax in both hands, she lifts it high over her head, pauses, and brings it down with her whole body, burying it in the front door of the house. The sound echoes against the night, and she takes her hands off the ax and steps back, looking at the handle sticking out at an angle.

We start the drive back home in silence. I left the shovel by the tree, the roots exposed. Billy will cover it back up when he gets home. The roots would have dried out in the back of the truck, the leaves would have been shredded in the wind on the highway. Better to cover up what you can't salvage, like the mosaic on the mountaintop or the statues we couldn't excavate before the end of summer. The necropolis must be silent again, the earth undisturbed, as empty as the highway ahead of us now.

The sun is beginning to rise, and we're about an hour outside of Alpharetta when Margaret starts to cry, softly at first, then loud rasping sobs. I leave the radio on and cry silently, keeping my eyes wide open, staring ahead at the road as the tears burn down my cheeks and thicken in my throat. In the rearview mirror I see my eyes flare gold in a street lamp's reflected light.

Margaret and I ride together in tears all the way home in the cab of the truck still filled with the lemony ghost of magnolia.