

Ribbons for Magnolia

You have heard about Emmett Till who was chained to a generator for the final passage. But no one talks about the women who cradled their wombs, grave generators, as they sank to the bottoms of rivers.

Part 1:

Unlike most people she did not have to grow into her name. From birth she had a countenance to fit the name Magnolia Brown. Men called her Honey and thought of her as some elusive paradise both for the hue of her skin and for the milky whites of her teeth and eyes. If they had been at liberty to discuss this subject the black men and the white men would have agreed that she was a truth that had no regard to color.

Fighting the overgrowth Magnolia's house lay like a robin's egg that had fallen from the giant tree that stood beside it. A few steps to the left of her house were the railroad tracks that connected the surrounding constellation of poplars to the collar of the mountain where the trees stopped. On the other side of the tracks there was a break in the trees that Magnolia's grandmother had discovered before the track had been laid. She called it Freelan and for generations Magnolia's matrilineage had kept a precious secret of their bathing time together there in the river Amaranthine.



Double click in space above to see picture.

"Freelan"

Suzanah
woodblock and monotype print

The Moss patrilineage had kept the secret of Freelan just as well. There was a brotherhood in the Moss house that existed outside the tie of blood and surname. They had a fondness for dark beauty that was all, of course, relative. So it is not surprising that by the time James first discovered Magnolia under his first Knowing Tree the relation of their skin color was closer than to what the town was accustomed.

James had loved many women in his life. There was Prudence who shaved, Martha who went mad, and the girl from California that made him pay. But when Magnolia bathed in the river with the other women, she was the only woman. James simply could not see other women in her presence because she had skin that glowed under moonlight. She was some rare bird caught in his ribcage.

Every day James left a ribbon on a tree near the river for Magnolia. She could catch him in the corner of her eye. The sight of James startled her at first. "He fled like a little animal," she thought. Magnolia kept the ribbons hidden in a box.

Part 2:

In his dream the trees swayed to the rhythm of the train. There were birds in the trees that he could not name or see.

The clouds had grown heavy all around the river. The autumn air clung to the warmth of decay that made the forest tender. James woke up shivering under the tree that had hidden him. Magnolia was asleep beside him. He could not run because she would see him go. Magnolia opened her eyes; this startled James. James asked, "What are you?" Magnolia responded, "I am a girl... Magnolia." She did not know what he wanted to know. James continued, "No. What are you?" Magnolia now began to worry. She sat quietly looking at the boy. He too had a worried look. Magnolia said at once, "I don't know. What are you?" James thought it was odd that she should ask him what he was. No one had asked him this question before. He sat looking at the girl and he realized that he did not know how to answer her question.

The train ran down the mountain, whistled through the trees, startled Freelan, and passed through the town two times a day. The nose of the train pointed to Atlanta; few people from the town had ever followed the tracks to the East. The elders believed that the train would have to run across the ocean, Africa, the Orient, and Kingdom Come entirely if they wanted to come back from Atlanta. No one wrote from Atlanta. No one ever came back from Atlanta to this town.

Magnolia found her mother snapping beans when she arrived at home. She said, "Hello," and did not seem to notice that she arrived later than usual. As she turned to leave her mother said, "There is something on the table that I believe belongs to you." It was Magnolia's box of ribbons. "Where did you get them? Have you been to town?"

Magnolia could not speak. She walked behind her mother into town. Magnolia sorted the ribbons in her mind as she kept the box closed as she was instructed to do. The

clerk was closing the store as they approached the rear entrance. Her mother said to the clerk, "Pardon me. I know you are closing shop, but I have some business that concerns you." The clerk hurried them inside so that none of the townspeople would see him talking to the Browns. The clerk turned on the lamp that hung over the counter and told Mrs. Brown to "be quick about this." "My daughter seems to have taken something that does not belong to her." Magnolia placed the box on the counter at the store. The clerk opened it. "These are ribbons from my store, but none of this has gone missing. The Moss boy bought the entire spool of this ribbon for his mother." The clerk looked intently at the girl. He could not see how pretty she looked. She would not lift her eyes. Magnolia was looking at his hand. He was missing the littlest finger on his left hand. The clerk was sure he had never seen this girl before. Magnolia's mother interjected, "I am sorry to have bothered you. We will be going now." Magnolia's mother now wished that Magnolia had stolen the ribbons. Magnolia and her mother walked home quickly without the box. They passed James' house on the collar of the mountain. All of the windows had been broken on the day he was banished from the town. He had played songs in church. He had played songs in church that were not listed in the hymnal. It was vanity for him to know the notes that no one else could sing. He had made it all up; he had done a sinful thing. On this night he found bricks on the floor; the bricks were covered with tar. One of them had broken in the fall. The bricks were made of pale, yellow clay. He left it all there on his floor. Although the broken glass and bricks frightened him, they were, at the same time, quite beautiful. They reminded him of Magnolia. James made a necklace for her with this glass and some wire. He imagined that it would shine with the sun but the trees would not catch fire.

As the trees lost their leaves to the river Magnolia longed to catch them. She stayed at her mother's side through the winter. During the night Magnolia traced the broken pattern of vines on the walls of her house. While her eyes moved along the walls she thought of James and the river. She had startled him. She had held him tightly. She had held his fingertips to her neck. Her heart pounded with a rhythm that only love can inspire. The heat had overcome them and the scent of the Knowing tree beckoned them to sleep in the violet hour.

The shadows of the tiny bubbles that were suspended in the glass of James' new windows, appeared as pockmarks on his reflection. James followed the path from the river to Freelan. To both James and Magnolia, the Town, the Mountain, and Freelan looked strange. James found Magnolia pouring water from a kettle into a metal washtub. The knots of her breasts still looked like birch. Her slender arms and legs protruded from the tub; it was an uncomfortable fit. Magnolia stood and exposed her swollen stomach. James left the necklace that he made on the branch of the tree that stood outside her window. Magnolia found the necklace and a ribbon that read, "The streets are paved with precious stones. By the roadside of broken bottles and bones lies kingdom come. While the world fears thieves and Nostradamus you are rich and invincible in these rubbish diamonds."



Double click in space above to see picture.

"Rubbish Diamonds"
Suzanah
gold wire and tempered glass

Part 3:

The secrets she kept buried under her dress, they were like little cotton seeds. No one could pick them out and no one could leave them be.

It rains. James rolls a cigarette while his hands are shaking. Outside the trees sway in the same manner that they bowed in his dream. The wind blows the door open. James props a chair against the door to keep it shut. He returns to his cigarette only to find it has turned mostly to ash. He sucks the cigarette one last time, puts it out, and he stands on the other chair at the table.

Magnolia sweats and writhes as the baby comes. The Brown women are worried about the time that has passed. They want to call the Midwife. Magnolia's father objects. Father says, "God said to woman, 'I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.'" Mother says, "But she will die." Magnolia's father's face wrinkles with a look of familiar pain. He turns around. Mrs. Brown sends for the midwife.

The sides of James' feet fall to the floor as he coughs violently with a rope around his neck. James runs to the train. He waits for it. As it passes he closes his eyes and feels pulled toward it. He runs after the train but too much of it has passed for him to jump the train.

Part 4:

*Subpoena for a defendant to attend the Grand Jury
in the name of the people of the Town.*

To: Ms. Magnolia Brown
The Brown Settlement
Ab County

You are commanded to appear before the Grand Jury of Ab County, at the Grand Jury Room, Ab County Courthouse, Main Street, in the town of Ab, on the seventh day of November of this year, at the hour of 9:00 in the same day, as a defendant in criminal action prosecuted by the people of the State in the matter of;

Violation of Section 102 of the State Constitution which states: "The legislature shall never pass any law to authorize or legalize any marriage between any white person and a negro, or descendant of a negro." and for a failure to appear in court you may be further prosecuted and judged guilty of Criminal Contempt, a Class A Misdemeanor, punishable by a term for up to one year or a fine not to be exceeding one thousand dollars.

Dated in the County of Ab on the 1st day of October,

Signed
District Attorney
Courthouse
Ab County

Magnolia appears in court. She is alone.

Proceedings:

First witness: Official from the Bureau of Vital statistics:

The official presents genealogical research and census records of the Brown family.

There is no record of Magnolia's birth.

Magnolia's mother is an Octoroon (1/8th black).

Magnolia's father is Black.

Magnolia is classified as a Quadroon (1/4th black).

If baby's father is white the Baby is Octoroon (1/8th black).

If baby has a black father the baby is classified as Mulatto (1/2 black).

Second witness, doctor:

The doctor calls upon Magnolia to stand on a box before the court for examination.

She must strip down to her undergarment (a slip). The doctor examines Magnolia's physiognomy before the court with a caliper to find "Negroid features." These features include: "coarse hair, dark skin, certain head measurements, broad nose, big lips, large jaw, dark nipples, steatopygia (protruding buttocks), the Hottentot Apron (overdevelopment of the clitoris), and the Negro foot. The doctor finds the defendant to be an anomaly because her features of blackness are not as pronounced as is expected of the Brown people.

Third witness: clerk of the town store, called by prosecution:

Clerk states that Magnolia is a threat to the integrity and moral fiber of the town. He says that Magnolia is a "known fornicator and kleptomaniac." The clerk's account of the ribbon story is that Magnolia stole them from the Moss house.

The defendant's testimony:

Prosecutor: About the ribbons... where did you get them?

Magnolia: I found them.

Prosecution: It seems you found them quite nicely. But why would one hide something that he or she simply found? Oh, you cannot answer. Well, can you tell me where did you find all of these ribbons?

Magnolia: At the river.

Prosecution: (laughter) At the river. How could one find so many ribbons in such perfect condition at the river? Did you also find this baby at the river in a basket among the reeds?

[Judge issues warning.]

As one can deduce from Ms. Brown's testimony, it is clear that she is either a thief or a liar. As this tale grows more fantastic I fear we look like jesters in court.

Fourth witness: Midwife, called by defense. The midwife explains her relationship with the Brown family. Midwife: "I met Magnolia's mother because she had fertility problems. I gave her roots and herbs to help her get pregnant. Later I helped deliver Magnolia. It was a surprise Magnolia's mother had a complete pregnancy. But it was even more surprising that Magnolia's skin did not change shortly after she was born like normal. Mr. Brown attributed the discoloration to some sort of Voodoo. Not too long after this no more was spoken of Magnolia's color."

Defense: Why do you mention this?

Midwife: "Because during a birth you can see the most strange, beautiful, and private things in people. I have seen all of these things with this family... When Magnolia gave birth her mother was very distraught. I overheard Magnolia's father screaming, "We cannot hide them both! On her belly she will go! Magnolia's mother was not helpful during the delivery after that. Mrs. Brown cried all night long.

I have brought a lot of babies into this world, Black, Brown, and White. They all come out with a blue tint and in a few minutes they turn pink. After a while the baby changes into a combination of their parents, as everyone knows." Defense: And what is your opinion of the baby's color? Midwife: Magnolia had a beautiful baby just like her mother did. Mr. and Mrs. Brown are the leaders of the settlement. I can only say good things about their character. It will just take time for the baby's color to turn."

[Magnolia's mother enters from the back.]

"You don't have to wait. It should not be Magnolia on the stand. It should be me."

Fifth witness: Magnolia's mother:

[Judge quiets courtroom. Mrs. Brown takes the stand.]

Mrs. Brown: "Mine is not a long or complicated story. I was bathing by the river as all the women in my family have. A young man was hiding in a tree. He was very strong and fast. When I was young I could run fast, but now I was older. I could not breathe and when I stopped I still could not breathe with him on top of me. I broke free and took his little finger with me. And his screams were silent as the train passed. [the clerk quickly exits the courtroom.] When I discovered I was pregnant after trying so long I did not have the courage to tell my husband that the baby was not his. He would have thought that it was because he was not able to give me a child and he was cursed. Even after the child was born he wanted to believe it was his child. But then the baby never changed from the pink color and he knew. I had to tell my husband about everything and he took it hard. He did not talk much after that. The Brown settlement has been a quiet place for many years. We have been a hard working, peaceful family. We tried to hide her from the world. But you see! We could not hide Magnolia."

[loud murmur in the courtroom.]

Judge: "As the records show, Mrs. Brown, is classified as an 'Octoroon.' She is one-eighth black. Magnolia Brown, therefore, having a white father, is one sixteenth black. [looks over papers] Magnolia Brown is not included in a classified race as the law stands. There is the unofficial 'one drop rule' that the court could entertain; however, due to the unwilling nature of the defendant's conception the court will acquit the defendant of guilt for miscegenation. [Outburst in courtroom. The gavel knocks.] It is the court's advice that the inhabitants of the Brown settlement return to a hard-working and peaceable way of life. Let it be known that if any people of the town are found to have traveled to the mountain or the Brown settlement they will face banishment from this town. If any present or future members of the Brown settlement venture into town in the matter of any affair that is not business they will be further banished to the town of Atlanta."

Part 5:

*There were clothes clapping on the line,
like rows of hands and robes in church.*

He came to her under the cover of night. At first they thought of taking the train, but the baby could not endure such a voyage. There was a wooden boat at the edge of the town that had been abandoned. Magnolia always wondered how this boat had come to rest in the middle of the valley. She did not know that there had been a flood several years ago that only the elders remember. She did not know that the elders feared the river more than the train. The river seduced children to nakedness in the heat of summer. The elders knew it was a sinful place. They feared it because it had a will and strength that no one could calculate. After this flood the townspeople

renamed this river Amaranthine because no matter how low the waters receded they knew the river was without end.



Double click in space above to see picture.

“James and Magnolia”
Suzanah
collagraph print

In the morning Magnolia returns to Freelan with her mother and her child. Magnolia bathes the baby in the river. The baby lay peacefully in a basket of clothes by a clothesline. Magnolia’s mother approaches Magnolia and places her hands on her shoulders. She says to Magnolia, “When God made Man he pressed his fingers upon his shoulder blades so that the drops of weariness would have a place to rest. And God, when he made Woman he set the ears like saucers so that the earth would not be sewn with salt and stains. You must know, Magnolia, that in labor we let loose the weight of rivers and clay, yet the sea is not full.”

Part 6:

We see Magnolia as an old woman with knotted fingers trace the lines on the page as she reads aloud.

What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun? One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever. The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hastens to the place where it arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again. All things are full of labour; man cannot complete it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear filled with hearing.

Part 7:

You have heard about Emmett Till who was chained to a generator for the final passage. But no one talks about the women who cradled their wombs, grave generators, as they sank to the bottoms of rivers.