

SHORT STORY

Sweet Magnolia

by J.B. Polk



"Chalice" by Fabrice B. Poussin

The day Magnolia was born, my universe erupted into a thousand colours and turned into a dazzling impressionist painting. Now I'm not even sure if there are a thousand hues in the colour palette but that day, I saw them all — the vermilions, the limes, the amaranths, the chartreuses — each one separately and all together, blending into Monet's "Garden at Giverny". On that day, my world was bright and happy.

We decided to call her Magnolia but first had gone through other flower names such as Rose, Margarita, and even Hibiscus, but none seemed to fit the vision we had of our yet unborn baby.

As soon as they sent Laura, my wife, back from the birthing room, Magnolia, zipped up in a yellow sleepsuit, settled quietly in her arms, babbling softly like a duckie. All I could see was her wrinkled face and hairless skull bundled up in a raspy hospital blanket.

Inside, I was melting with love. "You are one ugly kid, but I would die for you right here and now. I am your daddy, kiddo. I will love you no matter what — just please get rid of the wrinkles and grow some hair, life is tough for ugly kids," I said in my head because love needs no words. A look or a touch are enough.

Laura passed me the well-wrapped package. I took her carefully into my arms and crooned into her ear my very own version of a well-known nursery rhyme, and when I gave her my finger, she grabbed it greedily as if her life depended on it:

Dance to your Daddy,

My little lady.

Dance to your Daddy,

My little baby

I thought the song made her smile as I returned her to her mother but maybe it was just a reflex of a newborn or, as Laura insinuated, the kid was simply passing gas.

I had to leave right away — there was a bushfire 50 miles west of Riddells Creek where we lived. Captain Farrell was revving up the engines and paging me to join him.

I left Laura cradling Magnolia and telling her how much we loved her. By the time I finally caught up with the crew, the fire had already devoured a hundred acres of bush and scorched dozens of wallabies and kangaroos including several joeys still in their mothers' pouches. I'm not normally overly sentimental but this time I thought of Magnolia and wished I could unsee the charred remains. Or at least forget them. But I couldn't do either. The paternal instinct had already kicked in.

Two days later, Laura was back home from hospital. After dinner consisting of celery, cucumber, and goats' cheese salad plus a celebratory bottle of wine, the three of us sat in the dining room, planning Magnolia's future. Well, Laura and I planned, and the baby just listened. She basically agreed with everything we proposed — including the school she'd go to (the pleated uniform skirt just above the knees and shiny patent leather shoes), the flowers she'd carry to her graduation party (magnolias, of course) and how we'd select her first boyfriend (no tattoos, a decent haircut, and a non-smoker).

“You think she'll be OK with the plans?” Laura asked, munching on the last celery stalk while I drained the rest of the wine.

“Of course she will. She's our child and she'll do just as she is told,” I said, and my gaze rested lovingly on the little monkey face that was slowly beginning to shed the afterbirth wrinkles and was turning pretty. No hair yet, but I was hopeful.

As she grew, so did my love for her. I'd never imagined that love for one's child could swell so much that it would take up all the space in the heart and leave none for any other feelings. None whatsoever and for no one else — not even for Laura. And neither did I imagine that it could ever end — I sort of took it for granted because it was always there, a fixture, like a fridge or a towel rack and as firm. And you simply don't think that a towel rack could ever disappear.

We did a million things together — sweet Magnolia and I. We built motorways and skyscrapers from Lego bricks under the roofed terrace when it rained. We watched television and laughed at Thomas the Tank Engine. We baked Lamingtons and Tasmanian apple pies. We even joined the Adopt a Koala Firemen Support Foundation and held raffles and fundraisers.

But the garden was always the best place. We'd walk through the tall swishing blades of grass, Magnolia always tripping over something, to our chosen spot by the pool where we'd spread a blanket under a maple tree and relax while Laura read a Beatrix Potter story and Magnolia got drowsy and rested her head in my lap. In the garden, we had picnics and played chase with Sharkie, the dog. We got our hands dirty with wet soil planting carrots and celery (for Laura's beloved salad). And when I sang, she danced barefoot to my version of her favourite nursery rhyme: *Dance to your daddy, my little lady...*

I wished she could always remain daddy's little baby. I wished I could always take care of her, like when she had a cold or a bruised knee, but as she grew older, she started to get annoyed at being fussed over.

“I’m too big for silly dances now, daddy,” she sulked, and it hurt. She was barely eight. For comfort now she sought out Sharkie the dog, who didn’t embarrass her in public or ask her to dance with him. He just yapped, wagged his tail, and left her alone.

Laura took our daughter’s growing up process much better than I did — rolling her eyes, she said I was wasting my time trying to stifle Magnolia who had a mind of her own, and in the future she’d probably choose a boyfriend with a dozen tattoos and dreadlocks. And maybe even a smoker.

But in the end, she never got to choose her graduation dress or even go on her first date. Three years later, aged eleven, we found her floating face up in the pool — dressed in her yellow jammies, her skin milky pale, the hair the colour of wheat straw in autumn and her cornflower blue eyes wide open, staring directly at the sky. Sharkie the dog was sitting by the poolside, strangely quiet.

We never really knew why she’d gone to the garden in the middle of the night. Maybe she’d had a nightmare, had gone looking for Sharkie and tripped, once again, on the hem.

I sat cradling her wet body until the police came, Sharkie the dog at my side, knowing Sweet Magnolia would never dance with me again. All I could do was croon into her ear hoping she could still hear me wherever she was.

For me, the world was over, or at least the impressionist vibrant Magnolia world was. It now resembled more the darkness of Munch’s “Scream”. I became an individual immersed in a loop of despair, chaos, and hopelessness.

Uninhibited emotions had always embarrassed me — I was supposed to be a tough fireman and grief was an indulgence that ranked low on the list of public rituals. And because I was so tired of talking, I simply went silent for several months while Laura cried. Then she said that although she fully identified with my sense of loss, she could no longer stand my black despair and my silence.

“You think you hold the monopoly on grief — no one’s pain is as big as your own, no one can or will ever understand it so there is no point in trying. You’re convinced that if you grieve long and hard enough, you’ll manage to conjure up her ghost,” she said bitterly. And then she left, taking Sharkie the dog with her.

But I wasn’t alone. Magnolia visited me nearly every night: shoulders too slim to carry the weight of the world, skipping along to the tune of my song and tripping on the hem of the yellow jammies.

In some dreams, I could not see her or hear her or help her, but I knew she was there because I could feel her presence. The vision was so vivid that, if I only dared, I could stretch my hand towards that faint presence and touch her. But I didn't, fearing that by doing so I would bring back not my little cornflower-eyed baby but that last dark and sombre image — Magnolia floating in the pool with her hair trailing behind her like sun-kissed seaweeds.

Sometimes, she'd come in the middle of the day, no matter where I was or who I was with.

"Please come back. I miss you," I begged, feeling my throat and my heart hurt as if they were jammed full of cactus spines. But she never answered.

Laura finally moved away from Riddells Creek and got married again. I heard she and her new husband had two boys. I, on the other hand, remained alone and kept working for the same Fire Department — only the station was new now and purpose-built and the fire trucks got bigger and equipped with fancy computers.

It was on a beautiful January evening when the pager beeped again, and Captain Farrell called me to join him and the crew to fight yet another bushfire. We set off in two trucks — Jim Henderson with four rookies in the bigger one and Captain and I in the small one. We stopped at the Granville junction where three roads led away from us — Captain and I took the one to the left while the others went straight ahead.

"We'll keep in touch by radio," Captain had said before we parted.

The sky was grey with dark, tattered clouds scuttling across the horizon, but if we were lucky, we would get some rain soon.

A mile ahead, Captain stopped the truck and we jumped out.

"Get the gear ready while I check how far the fire reaches," he ordered.

In front of us, sparks crackled and spat. Spouts of flames licked eucalyptus trunks and bristled up trying to escape the confinement of the bush and expand towards the hills and even further on — towards the houses in Riddells Creek. Unless we could cut it off. Or unless it rained.

Just as I got the rest of the gear out, I saw Captain disappear into the darkness behind the burning trees, right into the orange centre of the fire, where the flames arched like a cat's back. His head, still wrapped in the helmet, came into view, then an arm flapping to the background of the blaze as if he were greeting me or calling me to follow. The flames leapt, devouring feverishly everything around them. There were several yards between me and the inferno, but I could feel the heat hiss against my skin. Then there was no more movement. I lost sight of Captain.

It was completely dark — the smoke was so thick that I could no longer see the orange tongues of the flames. And that is when my shortwave radio crackled, coughed, and spat out some sounds. I expected to hear Henderson and his crew, but I heard her voice — Magnolia's.

“Walk right through the smoke, daddy. Go straight ahead until you see a clearing. No trees are burning there — it is just a big empty space. Then turn right and walk a short distance, to a small brook. No more than a minute and you'll be safe,” she said.

“Right through the smoke? No way. It's where I saw Captain get burnt to a crisp,” I answered in my head.

“Trust me, daddy. A few yards are all you need, “she coaxed in that sweet childish Magnolia voice.

“Don't you believe me? Here... I will show you...”

I saw a silhouette, sharp and clear against the thick black smoke — dressed in her yellow jammies, the skin milky pale, the hair like wheat straw in autumn, looking over her shoulder, her cornflower-blue eyes wide open and staring directly at me.

“Just follow me,” she called, tripping slightly on the hem.

So I followed. First one reluctant step, then another. It took a few seconds for my brain to catch up with my eyes — yes, it was there, the clearing. No trees, no dry grass licked by flames, only a lot of fumes. Now I should turn right, just like she said.

I walked on till I came upon the little brook - it was what stopped the fire. The curtain of smoke was right behind me, the heat still fingered my shoulders, but I was safe. I had no idea how, but I had walked through the very epicentre of the blaze without a single burn.

The radio crackled again. I expected to hear her say something but heard her sing instead.

Dance to your Daddy,

My little lady

Dance to your Daddy

My little baby

I stood quietly hoping to see her silhouette again, a flash of yellow, that skipping gait... But as much as I strained my eyes, the only thing that I could see was the moon playing hide and seek with the clouds and all I could hear was the faint fizz of rain that was beginning to softly extinguish the burning bush and the wistful hum of wind that broke the silence.