



Margaret's Big Family

by Juliana Barnet

CHAPTER 1

Margaret shuffled along the dirty sidewalk. Heat rose around her in waves she could almost see. She wrinkled her nose and imagined a bright, crisp autumn day. It was unfair to waste those gorgeous days on school, she fumed, and give us these sweltering ones for our vacation.

One of her sneakers stuck to the dirty pavement. Lifting her left foot, she saw the gray strands of melted chewing gum. She growled, scraping her foot on the curb, knowing she would have to endure several blocks of feeling like her foot was being grabbed by an unseen pavement monster every time she put it down.

Augusts in Washington, DC are notoriously muggy, and this one was worse than usual. Still, she wanted to make the most of the afternoon to explore the neighborhood, for once unhindered by her four year old brother, Donny, because their mother, Allison, was giving him a haircut.

Not that Margaret disliked being with Donny. He was a smart and fun person, for four, and Margaret believed she had taken care of him pretty well. He had only gotten one bee sting and two broken teeth the whole summer. The bee and Donny had been eating the same egg salad sandwich and Donny accidentally bit the bee. Then the bee had bitten Donny back, just the way, Margaret thought, some people hit you back on purpose even when you only bumped them by accident.

“See, that’s why it’s not good to hit or bite someone back when they *accidentally* do something to you,” Margaret had tried explaining to Donny, as she had led him home, his fat lip stuck about three inches in front of his howling face. He kept howling, and she had decided to postpone sharing any more philosophical observations with him.

As for those broken teeth, well, he shouldn’t have jumped off the wall before she was ready to catch him, and anyway, they were only baby teeth. She figured these trials were good for his character. “You should’ve seen all the hard knocks I got when I was your age,” she lectured him from her pinnacle of nine years and ten months. She wanted to make sure he was ready to face the world and defend himself. Margaret’s mother, Allison, claimed that he was a bit young to be facing the world, but Margaret felt you could never start too soon.

zFACT SECTION: VITAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE PROTAGONIST

DO NOT BE ALARMED: This narrator is not the irritating kind who is always butting into the story, giving away the plot in advance or saying “little did they know what was in store for them.” This one time only, I am following the express wish of Margaret, also known as “the protagonist,” to ensure that you have the necessary background data.

Name: Margaret Hera, Age: 9 and 3/4

Date of Birth: October 23, 1973

Place of Birth: 22nd and Pennsylvania Ave, Washington, D.C, three blocks from George Washington University Hospital. That day her mother-to-be Allison had had a fight with Margaret’s father (see below, eventual outcome of their marriage) and he had stalked out. When Allison went into labor soon afterwards, she decided to drive herself to the hospital. She almost made it, despite the extreme discomfort, but parking was beyond her. Things began happening so fast that she stopped the car—it was a Honda Civic, two-door—in the middle of the street and was considering how to get into the back seat so she could have Margaret right there, when a couple happened by, noticed her condition and called an ambulance, where Margaret emerged very shortly thereafter. Neither mother nor baby suffered long term effects, though Allison did wonder whether her daughter’s love of roaming the streets might be due to her being born on one.

Ethnic Background: Greek, Italian, Jewish, Rumanian, Spanish, Iranian. A Mediterranean tossed salad, her grandmother always said.

Physical Description: Face—darkish, olive complexion, very dark curly hair and eyes, both unruly (you’ve never seen unruly eyes?); mouth and nose—rather large. Lower lip--inclined to stick out when subject is expressing a firm opinion (which was most of the time).

Build: “Diminutive and airy,” according to Margaret. “Short and skinny” according to Margaret’s brattiest neighbor, Scott.

Family:

Allison, 36. She ran a nursery school in the basement of their house. Margaret's brother Donny was one of the pupils. Allison was also an artist, but that was very difficult because people didn't understand women artists, especially Margaret's father. Allison's great uncle and aunt had moved to Hawaii years before Margaret was born. Once Allison had visited them and learned that the Hawaiians believed everyone was family. She had loved this idea and adopted it ever since. "All children are your brothers and sisters," she often told Margaret, "and adults are your aunties and uncles." "Just remember, though," she usually added, "families can be weird, so it doesn't mean necessarily that you trust them."

Armed with this contradictory information, Margaret began considering everyone her relatives. Some of them were not all that nice and she didn't care to have much to do with them, but knowing they were connected in one big if crazy family did make people seem less scary.

Albert, 36. Albert and Allison were born on the same day, and their names began with the same two letters. This had seemed a good enough reason to get married, but not quite good enough for the Long Run, as Allison said sometimes. Since leaving the household when Donny was a newborn, Albert made occasional appearances and brought presents. Margaret liked the presents, but knew that they made her mother furious because she was left with all the diapers and doctor's appointments and other things that were part of the Long Run, which made Allison very tired. After Margaret heard a song with an Uncle Albert in it, she began thinking of Albert as her uncle instead of her father, so that he could just blend in with the rest of the big family. She encouraged Allison to do the same, and possibly she had.

Donny, 4. He was a sturdy little guy, which made him harder to push around than might be expected in someone so small. Fortunately, he was usually ready for anything and not much of a crybaby except when his body parts were swollen or broken.

Place of residence: A rowhouse--one of those dwellings that go up instead of sideways and almost every room is on a separate floor. Many of the "hard knocks" that Margaret had had in mind while lecturing Donny were gotten bumping, slithering or tumbling from one floor to another. Donny, being less airy than his sister, was quick to learn respect for the law of gravity and the advantages of using the feet rather than the head or bottom to descend the stairs.

Street: Lanier Place, NW

Neighborhood: Adams Morgan—Margaret's favorite place, where she had lived all her life. Full of people of every color, country, language, size, shape and persuasion all jumbled together, with all of the corresponding international jumble of stores, restaurants, music and clothing. It had many beautiful old buildings and row houses, many in disrepair, but Margaret knew that a long time before rich people had lived there. Lately some people having been buying them and fixing them up, leading to another kind of mixing: poor people who live in the beat-up houses, and wealthy people who live in the fixed up ones. People fond of long words called this "gentrification." Gentrification often led to problems for poor folk, such as Margaret gets mixed up in later in the story. (This is the one little-did-they know moment, also known as foreshadowing, that this humble but omniscient narrator plans to indulge in.)

City: Washington, D.C. (Google it for details)

Zip Code: 20009

Country: The United States of America

Continent: North America

Hemisphere: Western (though, Margaret argued that if you were standing on the globe upside down, as people often did, what made one side more western than the other?)

Planet: Earth.

Solar System: That of the Sun, a pleasant yellow star. Margaret had read about stars and knew that many of them would not make comfortable homes, even 93 million miles away so she felt lucky that humans had gotten such a nice one.

Galaxy: Milky Way, about two thirds of the way out on one arm of the pinwheel. Sadly, you couldn't feel yourself spinning around, but you were.

The Universe: A big empty place, even with billions of enormous stars all through it. You'd think there would be room for everybody, Margaret often thought.

Our protagonist wanted to be certain you had the facts and details. She is available for further clarifications, within reason.

END OF FACT SECTION. Please proceed to Chapter 2.