

DON'T LET ME GO

Once a month Stanley slides behind the steering wheel of his old Ford and drives me to the state mental hospital, his white knuckles clinching the wheel, his jaws set like a snapping turtle. My stomach is in knots. Neither of us says a word. What could we possibly say about my sister Blanche that we didn't shout back and forth until our throats were raw.

Stanley waits in the car during my hour long visit to what he calls the loony bin. He is not permitted to accompany me inside even if he wanted to, which he most certainly does not. I have begged him to teach me to drive so I can make the trip without him, but the car is his passion. No one else has ever been allowed to drive it.

While he waits for me he spends the time reading articles on automotive maintenance in Popular Mechanics. I gave him a subscription last Christmas. It's the only thing he reads besides newspaper headlines if he happens to walk past a newsstand. I'm not supposed to know a bottle of bourbon is stashed under the seat. If I am on edge on the way to the sanitarium, I am absolutely terrified as we weave our way back to our apartment in New Orleans. I dare not open my mouth or he will explode.

It broke my heart to send Blanche to the asylum, but I'm beginning to think it is the best decision I ever made. She seems calmer and happier now that she is off the booze. She looks years younger. No one would guess she is five years older than me. Blanche takes after the DuBois side of the family that produced generations of petite women with the delicate beauty of Southern Belles. I am tall and big boned with unremarkable features like my mother and her Irish kin.

Blanche was a clever, precocious child who nevertheless presented herself as a wide-eyed, vulnerable ingenue. I, the stropy, down-to-earth pragmatist felt I needed to protect her. It wasn't until she came to live with Stanley and me in New Orleans that I realized I had failed to protect her from herself.

Blanche lives in a romanticized version of the past. We spend our monthly visits reminiscing about our childhood at Belle Reve, the plantation in Laurel, Mississippi that was in our family for generations—until it wasn't. We had a happy childhood until things fell apart when I was eleven years old and Blanche was sixteen. Mother's tuberculosis flared up that year. She was an invalid for the rest of her life. Free of Mother's oversight, Blanche eloped with a sensitive young man who wrote poetry. She has blocked out the messy unpleasantness of her early marriage and her husband's suicide.

When we were little girls one of our favorite pastimes was playing dress up. Mother let us wear old silk dresses, satin lingerie and lace shawls stored in a dusty trunk in the attic. Blanche pretended to be Cleopatra or sometimes the tragic Mary Queen of Scots. I was relegated to lady in waiting. I didn't mind. Blanche always included me, made me feel I was an indispensable part of her life. Those were the clothes and trunk Blanche brought with her to New Orleans. I don't know where the pearls and furs came from. It was the jewelry and furs that set Stanley off. His

mind was filled with the notion Blanche squandered the last of the DuBois fortune to indulge in luxuries.

Blanche never mentions Stanley or my baby son during our visits. Before I sent her away she claimed Stanley raped her the night I was in the hospital giving birth. I don't believe it for a minute. He hates my sister. Besides, Stanley and I have a robust sex life that satisfies his "animal instincts" as Blanche called them. I understand why she doesn't want to acknowledge my husband's existence and it is possible she may not remember my precious Little Stan who was only a few months old when she was bundled off to the state mental hospital.

As usual, Blanche is delighted to see me. "Stella, my baby sister. I'm so glad you're here." She opens her arms for a hug, an exuberant show of love that somehow seems excessive. As long as I agree to take responsibility, she is allowed to go outside and walk around the pond with me or sit in the shaded gazebo. Three old ladies have already claimed the gazebo. Blanche, always the socialite, gives them a cheerful hello. Proudly, they point to their knitting baskets and tell us they are knitting sweaters for the soldiers. They are not aware that the war ended months ago.

Blanche says the pond reminds her of the gravel pit at Belle Reve and the crippled dog she called Mister Darcy after one of her favorite characters in the novels of Jane Austen. Blanche craved beauty and perfection but she made an exception for Darcy. And for me. She rescued Darcy when she heard him whimpering near the small branch of a bayou that ran through the twenty acres that remained of our property. Our ancestors began selling off parcels of land when the price of cotton plummeted after the Civil War. Darcy's left forefoot was caught in a rusty old alligator trap placed there illegally by a poacher. I watched in awe while Blanche maneuvered a stick in the mechanism that released the trap's jaws and set him free. I have no idea where she learned how to do that. There is much about Blanche that mystifies me.

Daddy said we couldn't afford to take a mangy stray to a vet but Blanche pleaded with him until he gave in. After the dog's leg healed, he followed Blanche everywhere, hopping around on three legs.

We weren't allowed to swim in the old rock quarry. Daddy told us it was too dangerous and full of cotton-mouth pit vipers. Blanche learned from a local farm boy who regularly went for a dip in the quarry that he had never once encountered a snake there. Snakes preferred the shallow bayou. After that we sneaked off and dived in whenever Daddy was away drinking with his friends at a tavern in Laurel. The first time we went there with Darcy, Blanche tried to coax him into the pit to swim with us but he whimpered and bared his teeth. After that, he always waited patiently at the lip of the crater in the blazing sun while we swam below.

"Stella honey, I want to see if the boulder Daddy set on top of Darcy's grave is still there," she says while we are rounding the pond. "I'm going to be leaving this place soon. You and I can live in Belle Reve again."

Generations of ancestors, and finally Mamma and Daddy were buried in a private cemetery on the property but Blanche doesn't mention any of them or a desire to visit their graves. She once

cut me to the quick when she said she was at the bedside of loved ones who pleaded with her not to let them go, while I was spared the trauma and only came home for funerals.

It has never occurred to her that when she eloped to marry the husband she described as “just a boy” that I was left alone with the ghosts of Belle Reve and a hard drinking, abusive father. After “the boy” committed suicide Blanche, under what seemed to me improbable circumstances, enrolled at Old Miss where she dated Shep Huntleigh, the scion of an oil fortune. Every girl on campus was envious when she wore his fraternity pin, a sign that she and Shep were engaged to be engaged. Or so she said. During her final nervous breakdown at my apartment in New Orleans she fantasized that Shep had invited her to cruise the Caribbean with him on his yacht.

Whether Shep ever existed I will never know. I do know that she graduated and taught high school English for several years before she arrived on my doorstep in the French Quarter. She said she was exhausted and taking a short leave of absence. Stanley did a little detective work and found out she seduced one of her students and was fired.

I don't have the heart to tell her Belle Reve slipped through her fingers and is owned by the bank that holds the mortgage. Stanley, who most of the time behaved like a clueless brute when he was around Blanche heard about the Napoleonic Code and checked to see if there was anything left of the old plantation for me to inherit. The house was already in serious disrepair when I left. Land prices are down and the bank does not seem to be in a hurry to sell a twenty-acre parcel with a derelict mansion that will either have to be gutted and rebuilt or torn down.

Caregivers in the asylum are fond of my sister who is quiet and undemanding. They call her “Pretty Lady” and fuss over her while those in far worse need are left to doze in their chairs with spittle running down their chins. She loves the attention. If she is manipulating her keepers for special favors, they are not aware of it.

While we are saying our goodbyes, Blanche tells me that the next time I come she will no longer be sleeping in the ward. The doctor has promised to give her a private room. “He thinks it will be best if he visits me in private.”

Something inside me crumples when I hear that. Blanche thinks the doctor is in love with her. If he does indeed plan to visit her in private it can't be good.

I hope Stanley is still napping in the car. He will not be happy if I extend my visit beyond an hour but I must have a word with Doctor Antoine.

“Misses Kowalski, so good to see you.” He looks like a bank manager in his tailored alpaca suit and his manner is coldly professional, yet I sense a glint of sympathy in his soft brown eyes, an expression Blanche has sadly misinterpreted as a sign of love and desire. The crisp white lab coat he wears when visiting patients hangs on a peg by the door. “I've been meaning to call you to set up an appointment. There are things I need to discuss with you and your husband.” He gestures for me to take a seat in a worn tufted leather chair.

He twirls an old-fashioned ink pen in long fingers with carefully manicured nails as he talks to me. “State funds are running low and we are being forced to limit inpatient treatment to shell shocked war veterans suffering psychological stress. You will have to send your sister to a private sanitarium.”

My shoulders relax but there is still a knot in my stomach. I am relieved to hear he isn't planning to place my sister in a private room so he can take advantage of her illusion that he loves her. But there is no way Stanley and I, especially with a new baby to provide for, can afford my sister's private care. Stanley would never agree to it anyway.

I haven't told Stanley that I have been spending two mornings a week at a secretarial school. Eunice, my upstairs neighbor, looks after Little Stan as if he were her own. It will be a blow to Stanley's manhood if I get a job but this time I am determined to stand up to him. I doubt I could earn enough to pay Blanche's medical bills even if Stanley didn't insist that according to the Napoleonic Code he is entitled to half my salary.

I slump deeper into the over-sized chair and try to concentrate. For some reason, my memory is crowded with the vision of Blanche pretending she is the Virgin Mary. I can see as clearly as if I'm staring at a photograph: Blanche dressed in a long blue dress with a white collar that smelled of starch and a white lace shawl covering her golden curls.

Religion was a fraught subject in the DuBois household, one of the few things my parents argued over. The DuBois were French Huguenots who fled the country to avoid persecution by the Catholic government. My father married an Irish Catholic woman because they were hopelessly in love. My mother's people, the O'Connors, made a fortune bootlegging gin and whiskey during Prohibition then lost it all in the Great Depression.

Reluctantly, my father agreed to let Blanche and me attend a convent school until he decided the prayers and ritual were having a bad influence on us, especially on Blanche who even then tended to have a scrambled sense of reality.

“Misses Kowalski?” The doctor senses my mind is wandering and raises his voice to jolt me back to the present. “I have done some research and highly recommend a residential mental health treatment facility not far from Laurel where you and Blanche grew up. I personally visited the place and talked to the psychiatrist in charge. Your sister will be well looked after. She is in excellent physical health now that she does not have access to alcohol. And I have restricted her cigarettes to two a day. He lowers his eyes and scans her records. I wonder if there is more he wants to tell me about her condition and expel an audible sigh of relief when he closes the file and sets it aside. “The psychiatrist at the Laurel sanitarium has more time to spend with each patient than I have here. It is possible that with rest and medication she may regain her sense of reality and no longer need to be institutionalized.”

If the pearls and furs in Blanche's jewelry box had been real I could have sold them to pay for her care. Stanley took them to an appraiser the minute she was hauled away and found out they were knock-offs. But I was one step ahead of him. I had hidden what I was certain was a rope of

beautiful South Sea pearls with a diamond clasp that Mother wore on special occasions. I meant to keep them, the last of the DuBois legacy, to pass down to a daughter I hoped to have someday.

I skipped a class at the secretarial school the morning after my talk with Doctor Antoine and walked all the way to Royal Street during a light drizzle to have the pearls appraised at a high-end jeweler I hoped might buy them. I could tell by the gleam in his eye when I extracted them from a velvet pouch that they were indeed a fine vintage piece. With a lighted jeweler's loupe pressed to his eye like Galileo looking through his tiny telescope, the gray-haired gemologist examined the clasp, then went over every pearl to look for scratches or cracks. As I had hoped, he took them to the shop's owner who was personally wrapping a dark blue sapphire and diamond ring for a client. They went into his office and closed the door. A few minutes later, the owner himself made me an offer that was even higher than I expected. It would pay for Blanche's private care for at least a year. With luck, that might be all she needed.

I didn't dare ask Stanley to drive me to the sanitarium near Laurel. He would think I had conspired with Blanche to hide our inheritance from him. How else could she afford to be living in a private sanitarium?

Two months passed and I worried about my sister every day. She was allowed to call me once a week. I knew the calls were monitored because I could hear whispers in the background. I was skeptical of everything she told me until during the last call she ever made to me she asked about my baby boy. Maybe, as the psychiatrist had said could happen, she was regaining her sense of reality. "I will be out of here by Christmas," she said. "We can celebrate Christmas together again, Stella. I'm going to bring a big red fire truck for your little boy. I'll stay at a hotel. I know your apartment is too crowded now with the baby and all."

I should have been happy and excited the morning I received my diploma from the secretarial school, but I dreaded the inevitable showdown with Stanley if and when I succeeded in getting a job.

I was unbuttoning my heavy winter coat and starting up the stairs to pick up my baby from Eunice when I heard the phone ringing in my apartment. It kept ringing as I mounted the steps so I turned around and went in to answer it. It was the sheriff of Jones County. Belle Reve had finally been sold. The new owners were filling in the old gravel pit when they discovered a body. Blanche had dived in the shallow end and hit her head on a rock. The man operating the forklift recognized her. He was the one who told us the pit wasn't a snake pit all those years ago.

Stanley spotted my diploma on the table when he came home for dinner. I had placed it there when I answered the phone and was so unnerved I forgot to hide it. He was about to tear it into pieces when he heard me sobbing in the bedroom. "So, you've been deceiving me again and now you regret it. Is that why you're bawling your eyes out?"

“Hold me, Stanley. Hold me.” I got up and threw myself into his arms.

Eunice kindly agreed to give Little Stan his dinner while I set out some cold cuts for Stanley and me to eat while I told him everything. He shoved his plate aside. Said he wasn't hungry. I confessed that the real reason I no longer needed rides to the asylum was not because the psychiatrist said my visits unnerved my sister and were interfering with her recovery, but because I had placed her in a private sanitarium where she would get better care.

“Who in the hell is paying for that?” Stanley glared at me across the kitchen table. “So you and your damned sister lied to me. You knew she squirreled away the money she got when she sold Belle Reve.”

“She didn't lie about Belle Reve. The bank foreclosed and left her destitute.”

“Then where on God's earth did she get the money for private care?”

I reached across the platter of cold cuts and gripped Stanley's hand hoping that would soothe him while I confessed what I had done with Mother's pearl necklace.

Stanley jerked his hand away and slapped me hard across the face. “You lied to me,” he screamed. “And your damned sister escaped from a hoity-toity loony bin and walked all the way to Belle Reve. Sounds like a law suit to me. We're gonna sue the hell out of that damned place for letting her sneak away.”

I searched his face for at least an inkling he was aware of the pain tearing me apart. The sting where he slapped me was nothing compared to the turmoil inside me. I had lost the person I had cherished most in this world, practically from the day I was born, and long before I fell in love with him. I gleaned not a shred of evidence that he sensed my grief.

This time I vowed not to let his brutality clutter my emotions. I refused to endure another cycle of abuse followed by apologies, regrets, and the rough sex we both enjoyed. I still loved my achingly handsome, virile husband. But my baby and I deserved a life free of simmering violence. Ironically, Blanche lived in fantasy land but her death freed me from my own delusions. As long as I live she will be remembered with love.

