

Miss Belle Rankin, Truman Capote

Miss Belle Rankin

I was eight the first time I saw Miss Belle Rankin. It was a hot August day. The sun was waning in the scarlet-streaked sky, and the heat was rising dry and vibrant from the earth.

I sat on the steps of the front porch, watching an approaching negress, and wondered how she could ever carry such a huge bundle of laundry on the top of her head. She stopped and in reply to my greeting, laughed, that dark, drawling negro laughter. It was then Miss Belle came walking slowly down the opposite side of the street. The washerwoman saw her, and as if suddenly frightened stopped in the middle of a sentence and moved hurriedly on to her destination.

I stared long and hard at this passing stranger who could cause such odd behavior. She was small and clothed all in black, dusty and streaked—she looked unbelievably old and wrinkled. Thin gray wisps of hair lay across her forehead, wet with perspiration. She walked with her head down and stared at the unpaved sidewalk, almost as if she were looking for something she had lost. An old black and tan hound followed her, moving aimlessly in the traces of his mistress.

I saw her many times afterwards, but that first vision, almost like a dream, will always remain the clearest—Miss Belle, walking soundlessly down the street, little clouds of red dust rising about her feet as she disappeared into the dusk.

A few years later I was sitting in Mr. Joab's corner drugstore, swigging on one of Mr. Joab's special milk shakes. I was down at one end of the counter, and up at the other sat two of the town's well-known drugstore cowboys and a stranger.

This stranger was much more respectable in appearance than the people who usually came into Mr. Joab's. But it was what he was saying in a slow, husky voice, that caught my attention.

"Do you boys know anybody around here with some nice Japonica trees for sale? I'm collecting some for an Eastern woman building a place over in Natchez."

The two boys looked at one another, and then one of them, who was fat with huge eyes and fond of taunting me, said, "Well, I tell you, Mister, the only person I know of around here that has some real purty ones is a queer old doll, Miss Belle Rankin—she lives about a half mile out from here in a right weird lookin' place. It's old and run down, built sometime before the Civil War. Mighty queer, though, but if Japonicas is what you're lookin' for, she's got the nicest I ever peeked at."

"Yeah," piped up the other boy, who was blond and pimply, and the fat boy's stooge. "She oughta sell them to you. From what I hear she's starvin' to death out there—ain't got nothin' 'cept an old nigger that lives on the place and hoes around in a weed patch they call the garden. Why, the other day I hear, she walked into the Jitney Jungle market and went around pickin' out the old spoiled vegetables and makin' Olie Peterson give 'em to her. Queerest lookin' witch you ever seen—looks like she might be a hunnerd in the shade. The niggers are so scared of her—" But the stranger interrupted the boy's torrent of information and asked, "Well then, you think she might sell?"

"Sure," said the fat boy, with the smirk of certain knowledge on his face.

The man thanked them and started to walk out, then suddenly turned around and said, "How would you boys like to ride out there and show me where it is? I'll bring you back afterwards."

The two loafers quickly assented. That kind was always anxious to be seen in cars, especially with strangers; it made it seem like they had connections, and, anyway, there were the inevitable cigarettes.

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It was about a week later when I went into Mr. Joab's again that I heard how it turned out.

The fat one was narrating with much fervor to an audience consisting of Mr. Joab and myself. The more he talked the louder and more dramatic he became.

"I tell you that old witch should be run out of town. She's crazy as a loon. First of all, when we get out there she tries to run us off the place. Then she sends that queer old hound of hers after us. I'll bet that thing's older than she is. Well, anyway, the mutt tried to take a hunk out of me, so I kicked him right square in the teeth—then she starts an awful howl. Finally that old nigger of hers gets her quieted down enough so that we can talk to her.

Mr. Ferguson, that was the stranger, explained how he wanted to buy her flowers, you know those old Japonica trees. She says she never heard of such goin's on; besides, she wouldn't sell any of her trees because she liked them better than anything else she had. Now, wait till you catch this—Mr. Ferguson offered her two hundred dollars just for one of those trees. Can you tie that—two hundred bucks! That old goat told him to get off the place—so, finally we saw that it was hopeless, so we left. Mr. Ferguson was purty disappointed, too; he was really countin' on getting them trees. He said they were some of the finest he had ever seen."

He leaned back and took a deep breath, exhausted by his long recital.

"Damn," he said, "what does anybody want with those old trees and at two hundred berries a throw? That ain't corn."

When I left Mr. Joab's, I thought about Miss Belle all the way home. I had often wondered about her. She seemed too old to be alive—it must be terrible to be that old. I could not see why she wanted the Japonicas so badly. They were beautiful, but if she was so poor—well, I was young, and she was very old with little left in life. I was so young that I never thought that I would ever be old, that I could ever die.

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It was the first of February. Dawn had broken dull and gray with streaks of pearl-white across the sky. Outside, it was cold and still with intermittent gusts of hungry wind eating at the gray, leafless limbs of the huge trees surrounding the decaying ruins of the once majestic "Rose Lawn," where Miss Rankin lived.

The room was cold when she awoke and long tears of ice hung on the eaves of the roof. She shuddered a little as she looked about at the drabness. With an effort she slipped from beneath the gay colored scrap quilt.

Kneeling at the fireplace, she lit the dead branches that Len had gathered the day before. Her small hand, shrunken and yellow, fought with the match and the scraped surface of the limestone block.

After awhile the fire caught; there was the cracking of the wood and the rush of leaping flames, like the rattle of bones. She stood for a moment by the warm blaze and then moved uncertainly towards the frozen wash basin.

When she was dressed, she went to the window. It was beginning to snow, the thin watery snow that falls in a Southern winter. It melted as soon as it hit the ground, but Miss Belle, thinking of her long walk to town that day for food, felt a little dizzy and ill. Then she gasped, for she saw down below that the Japonicas were blooming; they were more beautiful than she had ever seen them. The vivid red petals were frozen and still.

Once, she could remember, years ago when Lillie was a little girl, she had picked huge baskets of them, and filled the lofty, empty rooms of Rose Lawn with their subtle fragrance and Lillie had stolen them and given them away to the negro children. How mad she had been! But now she smiled as she remembered. It had been at least twelve years since she had seen Lillie.

Poor Lillie, she's an old woman herself now. I was just nineteen when she was born and I was young and pretty. Jed used to say I was the most beautiful girl he had ever known—but that was so long ago. I can't remember exactly when I started being like this. I can't remember when I was first poor—when I started getting old. I guess it was after Jed went away—I wonder what ever happened to him. He just up and said to me that I was ugly and worn and he left, left me all alone except for Lillie—and Lillie was no good—no good—

She put her hands over her face. It still hurt to remember, and yet, almost every day she remembered these same things and sometimes it drove her mad and she would yell and scream, like the time the man came with those two jeering oafs, and wanted to buy her Japonicas; she would not sell them, never. But she was afraid of the man; she was afraid he would steal them and what could she do—people would laugh. And that was why she had screamed at them; that was why she hated them all.

Len came into the room. He was a small negro, old and stooped, with a scar across his forehead.

"Miss Belle," he asked in a wheezy voice, "were you gwine to town? I wouldn't go if I was you, Miss Belle. It's mighty nasty out there today." When he spoke, a gust of smoky steam came out of his mouth into the cold air.

"Yes, Len, I have to go to town today. I'm goin' in a little while; I want to be back before it's dark."

Outside, the smoke from the ancient chimney rose in lazy curling clouds and hung above the house in a blue fog, as if it were frozen—then was whirled away in a gust of bitter wind!

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It was quite dark when Miss Belle started climbing up the hill towards home. Dark came quickly on these winter days. It came so suddenly today that it frightened her at first. There was no glowing sunset, only the pearl grayness of the sky deepening into rich black. The snow was still falling and the road was slushy and cold. The wind was stronger and there was the sharp cracking of dead limbs. She bent under the weight of her heavy basket. It had been a good day. Mr. Johnson had given her almost one-third of a ham and that little Olie Peterson had had quite a few unsalable vegetables. She would not have to go back for at least two weeks.

When she reached the house, she stopped a minute for breath, letting the hamper slip to the ground. Then, she walked to the edge of the land and started picking some of the huge rose-like Japonicas; she crushed one against her face but she did not feel its touch. She gathered an arm load and started back to the hamper, when suddenly she thought she heard a voice. She stood still and listened, but there was only the wind to answer.

She felt herself slipping down and could not help it; she grabbed into the darkness for support, but there was only emptiness. She tried to cry out for help but no sound came. She felt great waves of emptiness sweeping over her; fleeting scenes swept through her. Her life—utter futility and a momentary glimpse of Lillie, of Jed, and a sharp picture of her mother with a long lean cane.

I remember it was a cold winter day when Aunt Jenny took me down to the old run down place where Miss Belle lived. Miss Belle had died during the night and an old colored fellow that lived there on the place had found her. Just about everybody in town was going out to have a look. They hadn't moved her yet because the coroner hadn't given permission. So we saw her just as she had died. It was the first time I had ever seen a dead person and I'll never forget it.

She was lying in the yard by those Japonica trees of hers. All the wrinkles were smoothed on her face, and the bright flowers were scattered all over.

She looked so small and really young. There were little flakes of snow in her hair and one of those flowers was pressed close against her cheek. I thought she was one of the most beautiful things that I had ever seen.

Everybody said how sad it was and everything, but I thought this was strange as they were the ones who used to laugh and make jokes about her.

Well, Miss Belle Rankin was certainly an odd one and probably a little touched, but she really looked lovely that cold February morning with that flower pressed against her cheek and lying there so still and quiet.

The End