

Miss Bizzy
Belle

by

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Dedication

To my granddaughters, Julia, Jenna, and Abby

Spread your wings!

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Part I: The Redheaded “Scarlet Woman”

I’m what?

Thumbing through a magazine in the waiting room at her doctor’s office, Nurse Michelle Bell saw a cartoon with a smiling newborn. Fresh from the womb, the baby was clutching an IUD. The caption underneath grabbed her attention. *Hey, Ma. Look what I found.*

Turning the page, she grimaced. “That’s not funny.” At that very moment, Michelle was waiting to have an intrauterine device removed.

“The pill” had been on the market for a few years, but the nurse was not convinced of its safety. When she and Walt Williamson moved in together in June of 1968, she opted for a more judicious form of birth control. Michelle was a nurse at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C., and he was an army counselor. She had no way of knowing that she would need the device for such a short duration. Yet, nothing was certain during those turbulent times.

When it came to medical procedures, being a nurse did not necessarily guarantee preferential treatment. Neither did it relieve the anxieties surrounding them, and it possibly even amplified them. A half-hour after the customary lab tests, Michelle was growing impatient. By the time her name was called, she just wanted to get the deed done and get on with her life.

The matronly office RN was old school. Her starched dress was pure white, and her traditional cap was neatly situated. Insisting on more relaxed attire, Michelle’s generation of nurses was making waves. One of her colleagues irked the supervisor when she showed up at work wearing sneakers.

The wait was still not over. Michelle sat in the examining room for another fifteen minutes. It startled her when the door opened abruptly.

The physician’s nurse declared gently. “Dr. Orlando will see you now.”

After making eye contact and nodding, he gestured for his staff nurse to stay. The middle-aged OB/GYN did not speak immediately but continued perusing the lab reports. Peering at his patient over his reading spectacles, he then addressed her impassively.

“Ms. Bell . . . The procedure is going to be a little more complicated than we initially anticipated. You’re pregnant.”

“I’m what?”

Michelle tried to stand, but she collapsed back in the chair. Her face flushed as indiscernible emotions flooded every corner of her being. The doctor was droning on about something, but his voice seemed distant.

The brain does strange things in response to shock. The young

woman's thoughts went not to what was implanted inside her womb, or to the embryo's father, but to the magical moments when she made love with the love of her life. How could she ever forgive herself for betraying her one and only?

When Michelle's consciousness rejoined the others, the nurse was standing beside her holding her hand. They were waiting for her to say something, but no words came. The RN handed her a tissue to corral the tears. The doctor started going over the options, but all she wanted to do was get out of there. Without a word, she bolted from the room, rushed past the perplexed receptionist, and raced to her American Motors X Model.

Michelle's emotions were engaged in an all-out tug of war. Instead of rejoicing over a new life growing inside her, she was rather languishing at the thought that her own life might as well be over. The preliminary skirmish ended almost as soon as it began. Nevertheless, her insides were still not ready to declare a truce. The battle was far from over.

Getting the IUD removed was supposed to be a breakthrough. She had held on long enough to what might have been. The simple procedure was to be the milestone, the marker indicating that both she and Walt had moved on. He might have, but Michelle Bell's being was now and forevermore entwined inextricably with Walt Williamson's.

Panic took precedence over everything else. She had to get out of that parking lot. Her keys? Where were her keys? The angst-driven woman thrashed about in her purse. She dumped the entire contents of her bag in the passenger seat. No keys.

Michelle took a deep breath. Her swollen eyes focused for the first time. Her key was in the ignition where she had carelessly left it in her earlier haste. With a quick turn, the powerful engine sprang to life.

The RN was scheduled to work the second shift. She had presumed that her doctor's appointment would not hamper her. Instead of looking forward to going to work, Walter Reed was unexpectedly the last place that she wanted to be. It was from her workstation that Michelle first laid eyes on Walt. Just down the hall, they had their initial conversation. Little did she know that she would come to rue the day.

The distraught woman fought traffic as she drove through the streets of Washington. When she got back to her apartment, she discovered that she had left it unlocked. Typically, she was careful and meticulous. What was going on?

Michelle had taken precautions not to get pregnant. Yet, the contraption failed. She knew an IUD was not foolproof, and now it had proven her foolhardy. The distressed woman recoiled when she went into her bedroom. She felt immediate disdain for the bed where it happened.

Lonely nights, with trouble admitting that she genuinely missed Walt, were over. For now, she was just a woman in trouble.

She let out a shriek when the phone invaded her space. What now? Michelle did not want to answer it, but the nurse in her instinctively reached for it. She was surprised by how shaky her voice was and tried to compose herself as she waited for a response.

The doctor's office was calling to check on her. Once Michelle gave assurances that she was okay, the receptionist asked her to come back. To prevent further complications, the physician wanted to go ahead and remove the device as quickly as possible. There was that "C" word again. Schooled to follow doctors' orders, Michelle said that she would be there as soon as possible.

Slowed by lunch hour traffic, she began trying to process the mess that she was in. Growing up, Michelle knew she was unlike the other girls. Her classmates all seemed to be living for the day when they might become mothers. She wondered why nothing about pregnancy and the ordeal of giving birth appealed to her. Even more repugnant, was the thought of being responsible for the well-being of a child. Her own mother had reassured her that she would feel differently when she met the right man.



Michelle grew up in northeastern Alabama in the area known as Sand Mountain. The only surviving child of career educators, she saw nothing remarkable about her raising. Her father, Tolbert, was a high school math teacher. Her mother, Connie, taught in the elementary grades. The fourth was her favorite, but she dutifully accepted whatever assignment that she was given.

Religion played a big role in the lives of those in Michelle's hometown. Her family was usually at church whenever the doors were open. The preachers took a dim view of a modern world straying far from the mooring of the simple Gospel. They vigorously proclaimed the old time religion.

*Be sure. Your sins will find you out.
The wages of sin are death.*

One bright spot in the girl's life was her paternal grandfather, "Pa Bell." The robust man with gleaming white hair told her many stories about his days as a mule trader. She loved spending time with him and never passed up an opportunity to ride along in his old truck. As a child, she also got to sit in his lap when he plowed. Sometimes, he even let her "drive" the tractor.

As incredible as it seemed, when Michelle and Walt started comparing notes, they discovered that they already had a connection. Their grandfathers were friends of the same trade.

When Michelle was four-years-old, a little brother was added to the family. The infant was frail when brought home from the hospital. She was allowed to touch his tiny hand but not to hold him. Since her parents did not discuss things with her, the situation was more than a bit overwhelming for the little girl.

When no one else was in the room, the big sister put her hands under her baby brother's sickly body. She gently lifted him as she had seen her mother do and tenderly put his cheek against hers. He whimpered, and she put him back down.

The baby died the next day. Michelle did not tell anyone about her breach of conduct, but she was never able to pry the episode from her mind.

Not many career opportunities were available for females as she came of age. One thing the girl knew early on was that she was not going to become her mother. Since the incident with her brother, she yearned for a chance to redeem herself and always presumed that she would become a nurse.

When her high school had a career day, Michelle gathered up all the information available on nursing schools. She was accepted into a three-year residential program in Birmingham and began her studies after graduation in 1962. Students were enrolled jointly with a college for the academic courses.

Always a bit shy, she never understood why boys found anything attractive about her red hair and freckled face. While still in junior high, one brazen classmate asked if the carpet matched the drapes. She had no idea what he meant, but her face flushed to match the color of her drapes when she figured it out.

Michelle was caught a little off guard when a young musician asked her out. Grover was a college student, and he played drums at a coffee house near the nursing school dorm. He was kind and sensitive, and for the first time in her life, she felt like a male was interested in who she was.

The student nurse had never been in love, and if Grover had, he did not let on. The program that she was in was rigorous and demanding, and his schedule was full. Nonetheless, the two always found some time to spend together. As Michelle entered her third year in 1965, they announced their engagement.

An elephant was in the room, however. The United States was at war, and the country felt no compunction about disrupting young people's plans.

Like so many of his contemporaries, Grover received his draft notice. Seeing him off to enter basic training, was bad enough. Saying goodbye when he left for Vietnam, was heart-wrenching.

Grover promised to come back to Michelle, and she vowed to wait for him. The last time he held her tight, he whispered in her ear that staying focused on coming home to her would give him something to live for.

The man Michelle loved was in no way suited to be a soldier. The music he played was about bringing people together, not ripping them apart. He was an advocate of the “Make Love—Not War” mindset. Nothing in his young life had prepared him for what fate had thrust upon him.

The nursing student interrupted her studies each evening to watch the news in the lounge of her dorm. The savagery of the war dominated every broadcast as casualties continued to mount. A letter from Grover showed up in her mailbox about once a week. Hers eventually caught up with him.

Michelle prayed every day for the fighting to end so that her man could come home. According to the reports, the hostilities were only escalating. Whose name might appear next on the casualty list was the new elephant in the room.

If something happened to her future husband, Michelle wondered how long it might take for her to find out. She did not have to wait long. The somber officers showed up at his parents’ house the day after he was killed. She got the call within an hour.

After taking time off for the funeral and then another day to catch her breath, Michelle was behind in her studies. The instructors worked with her to help her get back on track. Still, she felt like she was floundering. Her life had no purpose.

Grover made good on his promise to come back to Michelle, but neither of them had counted on it being in a body bag. The one and only time they made love was the night before he deployed. Unexpectedly, she was now with child by a man she cared for but did not love.



An unlikely turn of events had brought Michelle to this precarious point in her life. Always a good student, she kept her grades up in spite of everything. When she went to the Placement Office as graduation was approaching, she saw a notice about a nursing shortage at Walter Reed Hospital in Washington, D.C. Waves of warmth washed over her. As a tribute to her lover, the newly capped and pinned RN dedicated herself to the care of wounded veterans.

In June 1965, Michelle Bell packed her meager belongings in Grover’s

old Ford Falcon wagon, told her parents and grandparents goodbye, and headed to the nation's capital. The shifts seemed endless and the work was tiring, but the young nurse poured herself into her duties. She was ever mindful of whom it was that she was honoring. Over time, she began adjusting to the culture shock of living in an area so vastly different from anything that she had ever known.

The young nurse felt somewhat insulted the first few times fellows asked her for dates. How could she betray the memory of the love of her life? After three years of perpetual grieving, she thought she might finally be ready.

Simultaneously, a new professional military counselor was assigned to her floor. While she was focused on soothing physical pains, Walt Williamson worked to help bind up the emotional wounds of the downed warriors.

Walt had never given Michelle a second look, but it was not just she. The lieutenant seemed indifferent toward all the females at the hospital. The counselor then gained some unintended notoriety when word got around that he had brought President Lyndon Johnson down a notch or two as the politician was making rounds during his reelection campaign. Regardless of whether or not he paid attention to them, women certainly started noticing him.

Michelle was one of them. When nothing else seemed to get Walt's attention, she decided to get in his face. After some verbal sparring, she boldly proposed that he ask her out. The nurse could hardly believe her ears when the handsome young army officer and southern gentleman agreed.

They decided on a dinner date and then a movie. Walt suggested the academy award winning box office hit, *Dr. Zhivago*. Michelle was antsy as the evening approached. She had a real date, the first since her late fiancé's death. Her uneasiness spilled over into hollow chatter. Walt, on the other hand, seemed so laid back. The nervous nurse presumed that she got through dinner without embarrassing herself.

Michelle was mesmerized by the movie. The young woman was caught up in the tragic tale acted out on the big screen and hardly noticed when her date planted his hand into hers.

Walt did not hang around long when he dropped her off at her apartment. She felt certain that he had no further interest in her. As she soon learned, Walt Williamson was always full of surprises. He was fascinated with her spiritedness, and they started spending some of their off hours together.

In June 1968 when Robert Kennedy was assassinated, the country found itself once again brokenhearted and on bended knees. The wheels

were coming off the nation's wobbly wagon. The times were out of joint, and the future was riddled with uncertainty. Michelle's lease was up, and with neither giving it much thought, she moved in with Walt. It mattered little that this was very much out of character for both of them.

Walt's apartment was a duplex in a quiet neighborhood. This setting was a big change from the noisy apartment building where she had lived. Michelle did not mention to Walt that she was not a virgin. He did not tell her that he was.

Michelle was not ready to call it love, but her feelings for Walt were undeniably growing stronger. He treated her with genuine respect. More than anything, they were having fun—a commodity in very short supply as the nation braced itself for the next upheaval.

The two awakened with the single purpose of getting through each day so they could get home to relax, rest, and unwind. What Uncle Sam had in mind for Walt became another lingering elephant, one that also refused to be ignored. After less than three months of living together, he was transferred to Ft. Benning in Columbus, Georgia, to serve out the remainder of his military obligation.

Since Michelle had been agreeable to going with him when he first asked for the transfer, Walt had mixed feelings about leaving her behind when she backed out. The woman that she was, she also left the door open to change her mind again. They both knew that she could always get a job.

On the Friday of Labor Day weekend, Walt said goodbye to his patients and the several friends that he had made at Walter Reed. He was barely out of sight the next morning when Michelle regressed into an already familiar pattern. She started second-guessing herself, a tendency that would plague her throughout her life.

Adjusting to being alone again, she thought about the IUD occasionally. She certainly had no intention of being intimate with another man. For some reason, she kept putting off making a doctor's appointment. When the first touch of fall reached out and embraced her, she made the call. Perhaps, the changing of the seasons was the symbolic signal that she had been waiting for.

The day before her appointment was Halloween. Working the second shift, she did not have to worry about trick-or-treaters. When she got home, wearied from an unusually difficult day, Michelle remembered that it was Walt's birthday. After a momentary self-rebuke for not sending him a card, she reminded herself that he was gone from her life. There really was no reason to stay in touch. The next day, their last common thread would be plucked.



When Michelle reentered the doctor's office, she apologized to the receptionist for her earlier rashness. With other patients scheduled ahead of her, she was not ushered back immediately. More waiting only compounded her growing apprehension. It was unnerving to see another expectant mother in the waiting room contentedly knitting some booties. Even after the physician's nurse came to get her, it was a replay of earlier. The sudden intrusion of the door startled her again.

The kindly doctor took a seat in his rolling chair, and he reached for her hands. "Have you decided what you're going to do?" When Michelle shook her head no, he went on. "For the best chance of removing the IUD without harming the fetus, we need to act soon."

Michelle winced when she heard the "F" word.

"When did you have your last period?"

In all of the stress, she had kind of lost track of her monthly schedule. She had never been as regular as clockwork, to begin with. Upon reflection, Michelle said that she had missed one for sure, and thought maybe the previous one had been very light.

Without softening the impact of the blow, Dr. Orlando then went straight to the "A" word. "You know abortions are illegal. If the embryo is still small and undeveloped, we can do a D&C, and that will take care of it. Nothing about your pregnancy will go on your record. As a nurse, you must surely know that we do that all the time if the patient gets to us early enough."

"But what if I'm too far along?"

"There are other ways around it."

Michelle shuddered visibly and then grew very still.

The OB/GYN then declared frankly. "We must take care of the most urgent matter immediately."

The doctor asked her to lie back. With his hands, he gently palpated her abdomen, prodding a little in a couple of places. He said nothing during the examination, but his face betrayed his growing concern.

"Today is Friday. Are you off on weekends?"

Michelle nodded.

"This is a big decision. Go home and think about this tonight. Meet me here in the morning at nine. We're normally closed on Saturdays, but I will ask my nurse to assist. I will remove the IUD. You can tell me then if there's anything else that you'd like me to do."

Michelle nodded again. The physician left the room just as curtly as he

had entered it. She had no idea how bothered he already was about her situation.

Unable to turn the ignition key, Michelle gripped the steering wheel. As she sank deep into the bucket seat, the inner tussle started up again. If growing inside her was something to live for, then why did it feel like she was dying?



Michelle was scheduled to report to work in only two hours. Everywhere she turned, she was faced with still another distressing dilemma. Should she call in sick? She never called in sick. Could she do her job with everything weighing on her mind? Would she be better off at work than at home? Should she call Walt?

The silence was shattered. Her head was leaning on the horn. “Get a grip, girl.” Then she burned rubber leaving the parking lot.

Driving aimlessly, Michelle’s mind took a brief mental vacation. Diverting itself from dwelling on her predicament, she revisited the day that she bought the American Motors X model. The little station wagon, handy for carrying Grover’s bulky drums, was about worn out when it was handed over to her. His parents gave it to her after he was killed.

Walt kept nudging her to walk a little on the wild side. Michelle suspected he thought that getting rid of her old boyfriend’s vehicle would be a good way to snip that tie with the past. With the money that she was saving on rent, she could afford the payments. After visiting several dealerships and still unable to decide, she spotted the bright red sports car front and center in a showroom.

“No.” “No.” “No.” She kept repeating, shaking her head.

Walt laughed at her. “Why shouldn’t a redhead have a red car?”

Michelle still had trouble imagining that she actually did it. Programmed to take care of others, it just did not seem right to indulge herself. She even accused Walt of encouraging her so that he would have a new toy to play with. Saying goodbye to another part of Grover was not easy as she drove away, leaving his wagon on the lot. Walt started calling her sporty car simply the X.

The sound of another horn ended the digression. The light had turned green while her mind was a million miles away. Once again, the X responded, and the car almost spun out of control. Her foot found the brakes, and she came to a screeching halt. Steering into a parking space, her tear ducts started dribbling their almost depleted reserves.

Michelle’s customary lilt had begun to wilt. The clock was ticking, but time stood still.



The X was reined in, but Michelle's mind was going off in all directions. She winced at a sudden incursion and turned her head to see a policeman tapping gently. Jarred into the moment, she rolled the window down.

"Ma'am, are you all right?"

Sniffing, she mumbled something about needing a few moments to get herself together.

"Do you realize that you're parked in front of a fire hydrant?"

Instinctively, Michelle swiveled her head toward the sidewalk to see for herself.

"Just move along. And whatever it is that's troubling you, I hope you get it resolved."

Muttering to herself, she shifted the X into drive. "Get it resolved. That'll be the day."

Michelle had a few acquaintances, but no close friends. Walt was the only person that she could talk to about this implausible situation. Should she contact him? Why shouldn't she call him?

Back at her apartment, the nurse was finally able to make one decision. She called her supervisor and told her that she was not well but gave no further details. After receiving a brief reprimand for waiting so late to call in sick, the dutiful professional promised to be back on Monday.

Michelle looked at the clock. In only seventeen hours, she would again be in the doctor's office. Every fiber of her being was hanging in the balance. What a short time she had to figure out what to do.

When the expectant mother's tummy growled, she realized that she had not eaten anything all day. She had intended to stop for a bite on the way home, but those plans went entirely awry.

Half-heartedly slathering mayo on two slices of bread to make a sandwich, Michelle remembered something else. When she was shopping for new wheels, Walt chided her for being so conservative.

"Look, woman. You're twenty-four-years-old. Live a little before you have more mouths to feed."

The fiery redhead shot back. "Huh! I won't ever have any more mouths to feed. And buddy . . . You'd better make sure that you know how to keep feeding yourself."

After the first couple of bites, something suddenly made sense. It was not just a case of nerves that had been causing her recent nausea.



Walt had checked on Michelle a couple of times after he got settled. She realized that she had not been very cordial, and the calls stopped. She had his number somewhere, but where? If she could not locate it, that would be her sign not to get in contact with him.

“There it is.” It was clipped to the inside back cover of the phone book. Keeping notes there was a habit that she had picked up from her mother. Staring at the number for several seconds, Michelle rehearsed in her mind what she was going to say. With fingers trembling, she began to dial. If he did not answer, might it be her second sign?

After the third ring, a click was followed by a recorded message. “Hello. This is Walt Williamson. I am not available to take your call right now. Please leave your name and number.” Michelle was not prepared for that. She had never gotten a recording before except the phone company’s. Caught off guard, she complied, and then wished immediately that she had just hung up.

With no one else to talk to, she tried to console herself. “He does not want to talk to me again. Perhaps, he will just ignore my call.” In her heart, she knew better, but that assurance was about to be sorely tested over the next few hours.

Why did she keep looking at the clock? Walt was probably still at the base. After she felt certain that he was off duty, she tried again hoping that he might answer. Maybe he had not found her message. Once more, she got the machine.

Convinced now that it had been a mistake to try to get in touch with him, Michelle started crying. What was she going to do? Walt would know. He always knew, but he was gone. Why did he apply for that transfer? Where was that man now that she needed him so much? Why did she not move with him?

“Why?” “Why?” “Why?”

“I’ll go take a hot bath. It’s better that he never knows anything about this. He still has his life ahead of him, and I would never do anything to entrap him.”

Michelle’s mind kept searching for an off ramp. “I’ll go ahead and have the baby and then call him when it’s born. Walt could then take the child and raise it. I know he would. And he would make such a great father.”

The hot soapy water began soothing her nerves. Then, something hit her right between the running lights. “How can I ever face my folks?” Because of her religious upbringing, neither abortion, nor a baby born out of wedlock, was tolerable.

Her thinking flip-flopped yet again. “There’s really nothing to worry

about. The D&C will take care of everything, and nobody will ever have to know.”

Michelle just about jumped out of her skin when her namesake, Ma Bell announced rather rudely that somebody was trying to get through. The phone was on a stand outside the bathroom. Was it Walt? Should she just let it ring? Wrapping herself in a towel, she went to answer it. Not sure that she would even recognize her own voice, she let out a feeble, “Hello.”

It was not Walt, but rather a co-worker at Walter Reed. Someone could not find a file that had been misplaced. Why does the phone always ring at the most inopportune times?

As she was settling back down, Michelle ran more hot water. Refusing to let her eyes even wander toward her belly, her mind just skipped right over the pregnancy part. Instead, it went straight to bringing a baby home from the hospital. Her face contorted, and she let out a painful “Ugh!” She was just not the mothering type.

Could she go through with getting rid of what was implanted inside her? The nurse was well aware of the debates going on all over the country about abortion. Women were demanding control of their bodies. Why should a bunch of crotchety old men make those decisions? Would it be very different if they were the ones who had babies? This was not an open forum, however. This was *her* body.

Where was Walt? Why had he not returned her call? How Michelle needed to hear his voice. Would he want her to move to Columbus as quickly as possible? Might they get married and live happily ever after? At least she could turn the majority of the parental duties over to him and continue with her career. That would be it, though. No more children. She knew how to fix that.

When Michelle realized that the water was cold, she got out of the tub and began drying herself. The clock said it was a little after eight. It was beginning to look like Walt was not going to call.

Thirteen more hours.



Nurse Bell was never without pharmaceuticals. Free samples were scattered around at the hospital. Her body ached for a tranquilizer. Should she take a couple of sleeping pills, try to get some rest, and wait until morning to make a final decision? Why not take the entire bottle? If she did not wake up, there would be no decision to make. She had sinned and her sins had found her out. Was not death her due? Maybe it was time for her to take her medicine.

“No.” “No.” “No.” God might forgive her if she took her own life, but

not that of her unborn child. Had she just made up her mind about what she was going to do?

Michelle switched on the TV. It was 1968, a rowdy election year, and it was the first week in November. The news turned her stomach and nothing else was on. At some point, the heaviness of the day caught up with her. Stretched out on the sofa, she drifted off into a fitful sleep.

Just before midnight, the expectant mother's shrinking bladder got her attention. She looked at the clock.

Nine more hours.

In her drowsiness, Michelle decided to try one more time to reach Walt. Perhaps, he went straight from work to meet friends, or maybe even had a date. Surely, he was home by now. When he still did not answer, she varied her message. She simply asked him to call her as soon as possible, day or night.

Immediately, she burst into tears. Why did she just do that? He obviously did not care about her, or she would have heard from him. At the same time, she kept rehearsing what she might say if he did call.

As she crawled into what had been their bed, Michelle confirmed what she had decided earlier. The doctor could do the D&C. If it was too late for that procedure, he would go ahead and take care of it. Her mind was made up. Yes. That's what she was going to do.