

Belle walked out and hoisted herself onto the seat of an adult treadle tricycle that Merle gave her when she moved in. It was always parked in front of the store's hitching post like a three-legged horse. Her long chestnut-brown hair was wrangled into two thick braids, and a straw hat adorned with assorted fishing lures shielded her face from the warming sun.

She spent many a morning aboard the cast-iron tricycle, traversing the town before work. The three-wheeler was equipped with buggy-like rear suspension, but the craggy streets of Fort Myers humbled the coil springs. A blue gingham seat cushion offered little relief from the jarring thumps and thuds that rattled her pail full of tools—a folding saw, hedging shears, and a hand hoe. Belle kept an eye out for small gardens that could use a light pruning or weeding, a small gesture welcomed by busy townsfolk, especially the business owners. Mr. and Mrs. Gibbs, who owned the Palms Hotel, always waved to her in thanks, sometimes with both hands.

“You're an angel!” they'd yell from the porch. A guest might wave, too.

Sheriff Frederick Clark was rarely home, so Belle took extra time beautifying his small pinery. The sheriff kept the town safe, so the least she could do was check on his pineapples. She had the same compassion for the Abbotts, who seemed to always be doing for others; plants were the exception. Their neglected garden was a regular stop. Dr. Richard Abbott was frequently out of town, performing surgeries in Key West for extra income. His wife, Maude, was left alone for weeks with three young children. Often, the Abbotts' yard was occupied by members of the Seminole Indian tribe who'd spent weeks trudging in from the Everglades to await the doctor's return for treatment. Makeshift chickee huts shielded them from the blazing sun. Belle would weed and smile at the colorfully dressed families sitting under the open-sided log frames thatched with palmetto fronds.

There were only two gardens that Belle wheeled right past. One was in front of Billy's, the town saloon. She'd witnessed too many cow hunters watering that garden with what they'd drunk an hour earlier. The other garden belonged to Ida Cravin. Her husband owned the town's rival general store, Cravin & Company, which currently housed the post office. Belle avoided both the store and Ida, who carried a Bible at all times and walked briskly, as if making a beeline for perfection. She always dressed in Sunday clothes and owned a stable of elaborate picture hats with broad brims. Each was festooned with garish plumes, and one with an entire stuffed bird. The hats were the worst of it for Belle. As a proponent of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, Ida championed "total abstinence from all things harmful," yet her millinery addiction supported the slaughter of millions of herons, flamingos, and roseate spoonbills. Each year, countless egret rookeries were wiped out by plume hunters so "little snowies" could embellish fashionable hats purchased by the likes of Ida. To Belle, fishing lures were by far a more civilized way to decorate a hat.

As she rode toward the interview at the Edison estate, she considered what questions might be asked. *Why are you the best choice? What experience do you have? Do your hands always shake like that?* Nervous energy powered her spirited pedaling. She drew in the crisp air, inhaling the smell of sawdust from Ritter's Mill, tobacco from Varga's Cigars, bacon and coffee from every kitchen. A January morning was unfolding, and so was her chance to secure the perfect job, if you could even call it that. To Belle, gardening wasn't work. It was a slow, deliberate process that amazed and fulfilled her. She and the plants were partners. Their journey together began with her planting a seed. Next came watering, then waiting. One day, up from the dirt came a sprout, then a stalk, and finally, a brilliant bloom. They'd done it! To Belle, a

bourgeoning garden was reassurance that she could—at least with nature—cultivate a healthy relationship.

A five-minute ride had brought her to the entrance of Seminole Lodge, the grandest property in town. A board fence ran along the front of the compound, which was lined with Spanish bayonets, hearty plants with dark-green, daggerlike leaves. *Press* articles in years past reported that Mr. Edison himself had hand-drawn an extensive landscape and gardening plan for his winter haven, but the bulk of the project had yet to materialize. In the family's absence, a New York man lived year-round on the property in a one-room caretaker's cottage.

Belle left her trike next to the fence and hung her hat on a handlebar.