

# Lavender Blur

by Dianne McKnight-Warren

Donna and I get out of the car and a man across the street calls out to us, “You givin' that baby back?” He laughs and we flinch. Shame is the lowest feeling. It shrinks you.

The voice belongs to a black man with cotton white hair sitting on a porch in an old kitchen chair, one with thin metal legs that are close to splaying out like a porch spider.

The man's eyes look softer than his voice sounds.

At least we know we have the right place. We are here to give a baby back. My friend Donna is. I've been lucky so far. God only knows how.

It's 1969, it's the Bible Belt—Atlanta, Georgia to be exact— and we're standing on the curb outside a small brick house where a doctor does abortions with an instrument he invented. Or so we heard. It could be a coat hanger for all we know. We've heard a lot of rumors about him—that he went to prison because a woman died, that you shouldn't see him after 11:00 in the morning because he'll be drunk. It's after 8:00 in the evening now and a hazy August twilight is turning to dusk.

I can't go in with Donna. The doctor told her she had to come alone. She might have made that up. I felt relieved when she told me but I tried not to show it. I know she saw. She wouldn't be here if I hadn't told her about him and now I really wish I hadn't.

I made her swear if she smells alcohol on his breath she will leave. I know she won't. I know she'd rather die. It could be worse than alcohol. We're paying him with 200 doses of blotter LSD a sympathetic guy in my dorm gave us. I think that's the reason the doctor said he'd do it. He kept hanging up on us until we told him

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that.

Donna's studying to be a nurse at a hospital in another town. We were best friends in high school and we planned to go to college together and major in theatre. I was a year behind her and she waited for me. She worked as a keypunch operator for a trucking company, bought a red Karmann Ghia and a Magnavox stereo. But she got pregnant, married, separated, then had a baby boy. The father was nineteen and I don't think he came to the birth. I don't know if he's seen his son.

She and the baby moved in with her parents. Her mother had always been nice to me. Every time I went to their house she was busy with chores like my other friends' mothers but she didn't look like them. She was sexy. She wore full make-up and treader pants and décolleté necklines that framed her breasts like the central focus of a still life bowl of fruit. She always looked like she was about to step out on a patio for a movie-star-at-home photo shoot and, maybe, barbeque. And she was married to a quiet man who drove a milk truck. I'm not making this up. I don't remember ever hearing him speak. I remember her parents having cocktails and dinner on tv trays in the living room while they watched the news. That was so exotic to me, so sophisticated.

Things went back to normal, more or less, after Donna and the baby moved in except Donna had to stay close to home so she decided to be a nurse instead of an actress. Then she met David, an army vet recently back from Vietnam.

To him Donna must have seemed like a sweet, calm dream. She could make the most ordinary things feel deep and considered. When she lit a cigarette, she'd blow on the match just enough to put out the flame and the smoke would take its own time leaving, float over and above her like a veil lifted at an altar. She never waved it

away. I don't think it ever occurred to her to wave it away.

David was a couple of years ahead of us in school and we didn't hang out with him. He joined the Army after graduation. I think he wanted to go to Vietnam. Dozens of boys from our high school went. Most of us were working class, barely middle class, and our fathers had fought in WWII so military service was expected, patriotic without any irony, without the betrayal that would creep in about this war. I felt lucky to be a girl and guilty for feeling lucky. I hadn't even had to take a boyfriend to meet an early morning bus at the selective service office, hadn't had to watch a swearing-in ceremony in a parking lot. I had not personally known the dread of that, of counting down the days, the disbelief, the bewilderment. Some of my friends knew though. I remember being with them in the days after. I remember their grief, their tears. They cried and cried.

Donna called three days ago to tell me she'd seen an ob-gyn in some town in South Carolina. I told her about this doctor, found out what I could about him. She came yesterday and we called him at least twenty times and here we are. Her own hospital would have kicked her to the street if they found out. And she hasn't told David. She's not in love with him. She felt sorry for him and let him do it. It was dumb but I've done dumber.

She said the doctor in South Carolina was thrilled when he told her she was "Gonna have us a bay-bee." Like hell I am she claims she said but I doubt it. That's not like her and anyway people don't react to shock with instant indignation. That takes time to form, like a "bay-bee."

She's ten weeks' size she says in nurse speak but she looks swollen all over, like if you pricked her any place on her body a stream of some kind of fluid would squirt out. She might be more than "pregnant around the edges." That's what we called it in high school when a girl started to show.

So we're standing on the curb and she smiles at me and I stay still. It's the first time she's smiled this visit. Later I would hope I'd remembered to smile back. She walks on and up a few steps, opens the door and goes in.

I think about moving the car, maybe down the street, but I don't. I'm not going to hide anymore than I already am. We're all hiding in plain sight.

The street light comes on, a pale lavender bulb in the beginning. It always surprises me, that lavender. I think about the song, "Lavender Blue," think of the words I know by heart. Lavender blue lavender green.... Why green?

I try to imagine being Donna. I try hard, we've been so close but I can't get past the great comfort that I'm not her, that it's not me in there. I feel thankful and awful. Like I am something even worse than this.

The bulb changes to white as it gets dark and insects arrive like guests to a crazy party. They fly in ecstatic orbits, faster than my eyes can follow. I don't know if the light is holy to them or only confusing but the effort they make to get as close as possible to the source is impressive. I hear collisions, little snaps and pops, the incessant buzzing.

I stare at the door of the doctor's house, trying to will it to open. I don't know how long an abortion takes. Donna has told me it's a simple procedure.

I see a light in the back of the house, like from a back bedroom. I don't know how long I sat there in the dark, under the light and the bugs and the stark shadows, all that negative space, but after a time, the front door opens and Donna walks out. A tall black man in a white coat shuts the door behind her. I get out to help but she doesn't need it.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. Let's go."

I start the car and pull away from the curb. "You feel okay?"

"I'm fine." She fastens her seatbelt.

"Was he drunk? Did you smell alcohol?"

"No. He was professional. He hurt his hand."

"What?"

"It hurt his hand. That's all he said. He said it was tearing up his hand."

And that's all we ever said about it.

Later back in my corner room on the eighth floor of a high rise dorm, we're drinking red wine and listening to records. I love listening to records with Donna. There's a reverence to it. We talk quietly, if at all. I tell her how I can't understand the lyrics to "Lavender Blue," the green, the lavender green.

"It's about the plant, the lavender plant and the flowers," she says.

"Oh," I say, surprised more at not knowing than knowing. "Oh, the green should come first."

"It should. It's out of order."

The last 45, "A Whiter Shade of Pale" is playing. It's the saddest song ever written I think. We get ready for bed and I turn off the

lamp. I look out my window. It faces north and is sunless all day long. I can see a few indistinct stars on clear nights but not the moon. Never the moon. I wish I could see the moon right now. It would go so well with this song

### Epilogue

The next time Donna got pregnant she married David and they had two more children before they were divorced. She became a nurse but battled depression for the rest of her life.

It would be years before birth control pills were prescribed to single women in Georgia. I would try to get them in 1970. I would go to a doctor after I let a guy bite me. The doctor could see the bite marks and the bruises but he wouldn't give me birth control pills. He said I should wait until I was married to have sex.

