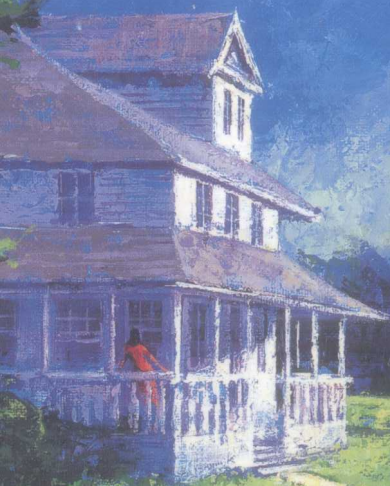


THE QUEEN OF FAMILY-SAGA WRITERS . . . BELVA PLAIN
IS IN A CLASS OF HER OWN.' NEW YORK TIMES

BELVA PLAIN



LOOKING BACK

LOOKING
BACK



Belva Plain



CORONET BOOKS
Hodder & Stoughton

Copyright © 2001 by Belva Plain

First published in Great Britain in 2001 by
Hodder and Stoughton

First published in paperback in 2001 by
Hodder and Stoughton

A division of Hodder Headline

The right of Belva Plain to be identified as the Author
of the Work has been asserted by her in accordance with the
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

A Coronet paperback

4 6 8 10 9 7 5

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

All characters in this publication are fictitious
and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead
is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this title
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 340 76641 7

Typeset in Centaur by
Hewer Text Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Mackays of Chatham plc, Chatham, Kent

Hodder and Stoughton
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

Looking Back

Mine, Amanda thought with satisfied approval. Owning good things like these made you feel warm within. All else was secondary.

As she rode away in Norma's car, she could not help turning her head for another glimpse of the little white house that was her own.

'I'm glad Cecile thought of these monthly luncheons,' Norma said. 'They seem to prolong the college years. Keeping us under the same security blanket, I suppose.' She laughed. 'But people do drift apart if they go too long without seeing each other.'

'I can't imagine that could happen to us three.'

Also by Belva Plain

After the Fire
Fortune's Hand
Legacy of Silence
Homecoming
Secrecy
Promises
The Carousel
Daybreak
Whispers
Treasures
Harvest
Blessings
Random Winds
Evergreen

About the author

Belva Plain's first novel *Evergreen*, was published in 1978 and became an international bestseller. She has since entranced a worldwide audience. She lives in northern New Jersey.

Prologue



At a country inn on the coast of Maine, two men of a certain age, sitting on porch chairs some distance apart, watched the swollen, olive green Atlantic crash on the rocks below. They were of a type that a careful observer would recognize by their old, well-cut woolen jackets, polished loafers, and reticence in the presence of strangers. They had not spoken at all.

Then one of them startled the silence. 'Is this your first time here?'

'No. Every few years I come, whenever I feel the urge to see an ocean. Last time, I went the other way, to the Pacific.'

The waves crashed, the wind raced through the trees, and the silence returned. Then after a while, as if he were musing, the other man addressed the air.

'I read an interesting thing yesterday. Balzac is supposed to have said, "Behind every great fortune there is a crime."'

'Yes, that is rather interesting.'

BELVA PLAIN

'I thought so. Apropos of it, I could tell you a story, if you care to hear one.'

'By all means. Go ahead.'

Chapter One



Books, purses, three empty bottles of Diet Coke, and the remains of a large pizza littered the card table that had been set up near the open window. Outdoors, green May was flourishing. Scented with lilac and wet grass, it was lively with walking traffic on the paths that crisscrossed the quadrangle from the Gothic library, to the glassy, modern science building, to the old redbrick museum, and beyond.

'Commencement. It's more like a conclusion, a funeral.'

Startled, the two others turned toward Amanda. This doleful remark did not fit her. She was eager; her bright, blooming face in its frame of wavy, caramel-colored hair was always optimistic; she sparkled. Among these three young women, she was the one who would most attract attention.

True, there were some who would prefer the calm, classic elegance of Cecile. It was she who now said more cheerfully, 'It's the beginning of something else, Amanda.'

'For you, it is. You must be the only person in the graduating class who's getting married this summer.'

'I know. Isn't it ridiculous? I feel like my own grandmother. In her day, for Heaven's sake, you were expected to do just that. "A ring by spring," they used to say.' Cecile's pink smile made fun of herself. 'But we've waited four years for him to get through architecture in New York, and that's long enough. We haven't seen each other since February vacation, when I went east, and I can't wait.' With a sigh of contentment, she added, 'I'm sure if it weren't for all this, I would be terribly sad about leaving here.'

'*Ave atque vale,*' Norma said.

'Amanda asked, 'What's that?'

'"Hail and farewell." It's Latin.'

'Why on earth anybody should want to fill her head with that dead stuff, and spend the rest of her life teaching it to people who'll never use it except to teach it to more people who'll never use it, I don't know!'

'Surely not the rest of her life,' Cecile protested.

'Why not? I happen to enjoy it,' Norma said. 'Anyway, I'm the family oddball. Always was.'

Norma was plain, short of stature and too broad of face. Yet, because that face with its keen roving eyes was so extraordinarily alert and intelligent, many a person, seeing her for the first time, had felt a kind of shock.

'You are not an oddball,' Amanda said firmly.

'Oh, yes. Even my brother, who really loves me — really, really does — even he says I am because I'd rather read than eat. Anyhow, enough of me. Have you decided,

Amanda? Are you staying up here or going back south for good?’

‘I don’t know. I can’t seem to make up my mind. One thing makes me mad, though. Nobody ever told me that a B.A. means almost nothing anymore, not my kind of a B.A., anyway. If I knew something *definite*, the way you know Latin, for instance, I could walk right into a teaching job, at least at a private school like yours where you don’t absolutely have to have a degree in education. As it is, without graduate school, I don’t see what there is for me.’ Amanda sighed. ‘So I might as well flip a coin. Spend the summer scorching here in the Missouri drought, or else cross the Mississippi and sweat in the soggy heat at home while I look for some kind of a job, though God knows what.’

Cecile reminded her, ‘No matter what you decide, you’ll have to come back up here for my wedding. You’ve got to be a bridesmaid. I’m paying the airfare and buying the dress, so no argument about it.’

‘Come stay for a couple of weeks with me,’ Norma urged. ‘I’ve a hunch that might help you solve your problem, if you know what I mean.’

‘No, I don’t know what you mean.’ Amanda had a way of discarding at will, or else retaining, her native accent. Now, widening her eyes with puzzled innocence, she recrossed the Mississippi. ‘What d’y’all mean?’

Norma laughed. ‘You know perfectly well what. My brother Larry is more than a little bit crazy about you. He thinks you’re absolutely beautiful.’

‘Well, so she is,’ Cecile said stoutly.

‘Your brother Larry doesn’t know a thing about me.

I've been in your house only twice, for two weeks each time. What can you tell about a person in those few days?'

'You can tell plenty,' Cecile declared, still stoutly. 'Why, Peter and I both knew after the first three days, right here on this campus. Peter Mack, the senior, and Cecile Newman, the freshman! It was all unheard of, and still we both knew, no matter what anybody said.'

Amanda studied her fingernails. Shell pink ovals with white tips in the French style, they were beautifully cared for by herself. She was thinking of Larry's latest letter that had come yesterday. By now, if she had saved all the letters, she would have more than a dozen of them, but she had not saved them. Thoughtful and quite correct, they were also far too frank and effusive. To be admired is one thing, but this was so sudden as to be absurd. And yet, here was Cecile with her tale of three days.

Obviously Amanda was thinking, Cecile saw, so she changed the subject. 'Weren't we going to have somebody take our picture downstairs in front of the house before we leave?' she asked.

Norma said quickly, 'Yes, but not today, and not a full-length picture. I need to press a long skirt first.'

Automatically the two friends glanced at, and as quickly away from, Norma's legs. Shapeless and thick, the ankles measured the same as the knees. Held together, they were almost as wide as somebody's small waist. These legs were the bane of Norma's existence, *bane* being *poison*; in a way, they had poisoned her life — or she had allowed them to do so.

In elementary school, the boys called me 'piano legs,' until Larry, my brother, was old enough to beat them up for doing it.

'I have no time now, anyway,' Amanda said. 'Sundale's Coffee Shop awaits me,' she mocked. 'Will you be stopping at Sundale's later, either of you?'

'You're sure we don't bother you when one of us comes in?' Cecile asked gently.

'No, why should you? Come and admire me in my baby blue uniform.'

'All right. If I can get through some more of this packing, I will. But just look.'

The small space, cramped to start with, was jammed with possessions. Cecile's and Norma's rooms – or cubicles – were heaped with clothing, laptops, and books, all seemingly flung at random on the beds. More books were stacked in boxes on the floor. Luggage waited to be filled; it was fine luggage, leather and tweed, Amanda saw, estimating its cost.

'Oh, well, I'll save some éclairs for you,' she said. 'If you don't come, I'll bring them back and put them in the refrigerator.'

'Suddenly I feel so sorry for her,' Cecile exclaimed when the door had closed. 'She never seemed to be the kind of person you'd feel sorry for. In all the time we've known her, she never once complained about anything. Today is the first time.'

'She's been wearing a mask all the time, haven't you realized that?'

'Do you think so? But she seems to get so much pleasure out of every little thing. It's almost contagious to be with her.'

'No, no, no! What is a little thing to you is a big thing to her. She must have been awfully deprived. I can't believe you haven't seen that in her.'

'Probably,' said Cecile with a small rueful smile, 'I haven't because I've been too spoiled all my life.'

'You're the least spoiled person, Cecile, given your circumstances. You're merely inexperienced.'

'Well, I certainly know that it can't be exactly easy to be on a scholarship work-study program, but so many people do it, that it doesn't seem quite so—'

'She has more on her mind than that,' Norma said, interrupting. 'Things must be pretty bad at home, and being up here can only have made them seem worse. She's very torn between going back or getting away for good. I get hints of it when she's at my house, but only hints.'

'Strange. So beautiful, and so smart. To look at her, you'd think she had everything.'

When Sundale's closed at eleven o'clock, Amanda walked out into a clear, soft night. Most of the employees turned toward the avenue, there to catch the day's last bus for the long ride into the city; only one young woman, who lived in the town, took Amanda's direction toward the university. She was considerably younger than Amanda, only a senior in high school, yet in these fifteen-minute walks to the spot where their ways parted, they had developed a kind of intimacy. Perhaps it was the quiet neighborhood of sleeping houses and the solitary path on which their footsteps rang that had encouraged the intimacy.

'I see your friends didn't come tonight,' said Terry.

'No. They're still packing up. Me, I can practically carry back all my stuff in my own two hands.'

'You going to be sorry to leave?'

'In a way. In another way, I sometimes think I'm sorry I ever came.'

'You aren't. Gee, if I could go there, I'd give anything, even though I'm glad I'm going to State U. It's half the price, maybe less. Gee, so much seems to depend on money, doesn't it?'

Under the sky's weak night light, Amanda glimpsed the girl's upturned face. its innocence was not four years, but forty years younger than her own. And with a feeling almost maternal, she said gently, 'You'll do all right, Terry.'

The fact was that this girl very probably would. One Saturday afternoon, at Terry's urging, Amanda had gone over to visit her at home. The house was small and simple, but beautifully cared for by Terry's father, who was a carpenter, and by her mother, who worked in a pastry shop and kept the neat kitchen fragrant with good cooking. The little brother had been doing his homework at a table in the front room, while a fox terrier lay in his basket under the table. Leaving the house that day, Amanda had looked back. For a moment she had had a strange feeling, a pang of envy, as if a magic circle had been drawn around that house and all the people in it.

Terry was curious. 'However did you get a scholarship? You must have been head of the class.'

'Well, I was. I had A's all through, but all A's aren't equal to each other, you know. There wasn't much

competition at home. Here, I got B-pluses, and believe me, I had to work hard to get them.'

Terry, still curious, had another question. 'How did you get to room with those two girls?'

'I was in three of Norma's classes. We got talking, and we liked each other. Then when Norma and Cecile got those rooms, they asked to have me assigned to the third bedroom.'

'Who's the pretty one with the dark hair and the plaid pleated skirt? Sort of athletic looking and preppie?'

'That's Cecile. She is athletic. She plays lacrosse.'

'What's the matter with the other one's legs?'

'It's something about her glands, Cecile told me. Pituitary, or thyroid, or something.'

'With legs like those, you'd want to die, wouldn't you?'

'I don't know. I only know she's one of the nicest people I've ever met.'

'Oh.' There came a pause, and then another question. 'Why did you say you're sorry you ever came here?'

'When I have the right answer to that, I'll tell you, Terry. Here's my street. Get home safely.'

What indeed was the right answer? Two forces raged, one of them the longing for home, and the other a need to stay away from home and start another life. The conflict was sometimes almost physically exhausting, not the least so because of the effort to keep one's trouble to oneself. She had revealed too much today. It must not happen again.

All was dark and quiet except for a dim light in the hall when she went back to the dorm. Tiptoeing into the closet-size kitchen, she put the *éclair*s into the refrig-

erator, closing the door without a sound, so as not to disturb the sleepers. Sometimes when she caught herself tiptoeing, there came a sense of being, in a vague way, an intruder here, even though there was no sensible reason for feeling like that. Taken in one piece, this last year in these rooms had been wonderful. She would remember it as a collage of snow sliding on the windowpanes, of music on Norma's CD player, of food and drink, pretzels and chips, beer, and a crowding of feminine voices. It had been a curiously feminine time; Norma had no boyfriend; Cecile, wearing Peter's diamond on her left hand, most certainly wanted none; I, thought Amanda, had no time for boyfriends because when I wasn't studying to keep up, I was working every weekend and skipping half my vacations to earn something at Sundale's. No, you would never think that a year spent that way could still have been so wonderful. And that in spite of all, it could be so painful to leave it behind.

Restless now, not ready for sleep although it was midnight and she had been rushing around since five o'clock, Amanda went slowly through the nightly routine, repairing chipped polish on her nails, spreading lotion on her feet, and caring for her teeth, which were strong and even.

'You have a short upper lip,' Norma, who noticed details, had remarked, 'so your teeth show when you smile. You're lucky that they're so perfect.'

Luck. Yes, she had had a good deal of it after all. She would never have been here if she hadn't come from Mill River and been a little bit — no, quite a good deal — different from the rest of her class. She was probably the

only one in it who loved books so much. She was her family's *oddball*, as Norma was hers. And if the principal hadn't been an old-time college friend of some important people in the faculty here . . .

Yes, and besides all this, she had made these two friends, the first *real* ones she had ever had. In a way she felt closer to them than to her own sisters, although she hated to think so. But it was true, and it had nothing to do with any good things that Norma and Cecile had done for her.

Still, sometimes people think what they want to think. Isn't that so? Amanda asked herself. Perhaps if Cecile hadn't done so many warmhearted things, like giving me that sweater—

A little blue treasure, it lay in its original glossy box on top of her suitcase. It was a duplicate of one of Cecile's, which she had innocently admired. Desire for it must have been written on her face, for on her birthday, Cecile had produced that glossy box with a ribbon bow on it. The ribbon bow was still saved, tucked now under the sweater.

They were from another world, those two, Cecile and Norma, friends from their kindergarten year at some private country day school that, in the snapshots at least, was apparently surrounded by lawns. Some might wonder, judging by outward appearances, what Cecile might possess in common with Norma. But anyone who knew them both would understand. For in some ways, Norma was extraordinary. She had quite literally a photographic memory. You would have to see it to believe, Amanda thought now. She could scan a page in a textbook and