

WEDDING BELLES

By Melissa Hardy

God had not seen fit to air-condition the Pink Vatican (so called because of its interior of rose-colored marble and its basilican proportions). As a result, Julia, a ways down on the bride's deserted side of the biggest Presbyterian church in Charlotte, North Carolina on a Saturday in summer, fairly poached in all that rank July humidity. . . shimmered like an egg which, shell-less but intact, vulnerable, yet clinging to an integrity that can only be short-lived, wobbles disconsolately in a pan of slow, simmering water. It was that kind of heat that old folks die of, sitting alone in their apartments in front of oscillating fans that do not cool at all, but only chip-chop the humidity up into little bits and stir it around.

Given the heat, Julia had made a serious mistake -- wearing her flame azalea organdy. It was one of those never in style, leftover bridesmaid's dresses that, truly, a person can never wear anywhere else but to that one wedding -- her older sister Nancy Louise's, in this case. Flame azalea bridesmaids and maroon men with collars of claret velvet. "The whole troupe looks like eczema on a pig's belly," her Uncle Walter had observed over bourbon and branch water. He was a veterinarian specializing in animal husbandry -- swine science, he called it. Such a specialty caused him to be morose and much given to dark thoughts.

Well, Julia was also given to dark thoughts these days. Four Snow girls and all of them married off, saving her. She alone, of all her sisters and all her acquaintances, had not managed to graduate from UNC-Chapel Hill with a BA and an engagement ring, and now she was going to have to go North, to a music conservatory in Boston, to find a husband. Every available Southerner was taken. The spiteful organdy stuck to her now like a sunburn. It was stiff with reproach. Distractedly she plucked at its skin tight bodice like a wino with DTs picks at bugs that aren't there.

The fat man seated next to her took some interest in her distress. "Prickly heat?" he inquired solicitously. His broad face flushed pink with heat -- it was shiny with perspiration and radiant with expectation. Clearly, he was looking forward to the wedding.

"Do you think the fabric could have fused itself to my skin?" Julia asked anxiously.

"Is it synthetic?" the fat man asked, speculatively seizing hold of and fingering a handful of starched skirt. "You know, of course, that you should never wear synthetic fabrics on a plane. If the plane crashes, the heat will fuse the fabric to your skin. Of course that might not matter much if you're dead. I myself am presently wearing dacron and cotton, but I do not anticipate getting on a plane this afternoon."

Julia noted with some concern that the half-moons of sweat stains under each of his huge, soft arms drooped wetly towards his belt and the bared flesh of these arms, revealed by the short sleeves of his light yellow shirt, seemed to yearn moistly towards her.

Julia and the fat man were the sole occupants of the lengthy pew

-- in all this heat, not one hundred people had turned out to see Suzie Bailey sink semi-permanent nibs into poor, unsuspecting Buddy Lowe -- yet the fat man, who had been seated after her, had stepped over her when she had offered to slide down and managed to deposit himself not six inches from her, forcing Julia, considerably augmented by her voluminous skirts, to cringe deep into the pew's aisle-side corner. If his damp flesh comes into contact with mine, she thought, surely the effect would be like velcro. If that were the case -- that their flesh touched and locked -- Julia might well have a panic attack. Being a Snow, one of the Chapel Hill Snows, she was prone to such things -- nerves, fantods, fits, even palpitations, including palpitations of the eyeball.

"My name is Mr. Bissett," the fat man announced. "I'm a distant collateral . . . relative, that is! *Heh! Heh!*" He wheezed wetly. "Of Suzie's," he added, tears squirting from his eyes. When he laughed, he wagged his elbows like a chicken flapping truncated wings. His armpits made a squelching noise as his elbows struck his sides.

"I'm Julia Snow," Julia breathed. Breathing was important when it came to panic attacks. Breathing helped. Not breathing did not help.

"Oh, yes! Julia Snow!" Mr. Bissett nodded. He had heard of her. "Of the Chapel Hill Snows. You roomed with Suzie."

"In school," Julia agreed, still breathing. Seizing a hymnal from the shelf nailed to the pew in front of her and holding it with both hands, she fanned herself vigorously, causing its pages to become loosened from its spine.

It was not surprising that Mr. Bissett should have heard of the Snows. The Snows were a distinguished and neuraesthetic family which ran, among the men, to doctors, lawyers and legendary alcoholics -- they often served in the State Legislature, usually without distinction. The Snow women, on the other hand, were inclined towards quieter and more decorous pursuits -- morphine addiction or the most discreet exercise of a guarded and indulged kleptomania. Once, long ago, shortly after the Civil War, the Snows had been Old Money. Then they spent all their Old Money, which left them, merely, Old Family. "You could have come out at the Debutante Ball in Raleigh in any one of several years," her mother had advised her. "But then there are all those teas and luncheons . . . ! One has to have a dress for everything! And the boys on the circuit! Every last one of them called 'Frosty' or 'Skip' or, even, 'Chip', and, if the truth be known, Julia, frequently homosexual and, let me tell you, by the time you've figured out who's what, why, darling, you've lost *years!*"

Suzie, on the other hand, was New Money and No Family To Speak Of. Her father Tom Bailey, who was called, of course, Big Tom, though he was practically a midget, owned a factory that made fine furniture of the sort advertised in full color spreads in *House Beautiful* and *Better Homes and Gardens*. "All very good if one must *buy* furniture," Julia's mother pointed out. "Of course, the Snows do not *buy* furniture; they *have* furniture. They have furniture because furniture has been passed down the generations to them." And pretty dilapidated furniture it was, too -- folks were always falling through chairs, and beds were forever collapsing with people in them. "It's a wonder there are so many

of us alive," Uncle Walter had observed, darkly, reaching for the decanter of bourbon on the venerable, battered sideboard.

"Oh, I can remember back to when Suzie was just a little pop-eyed girl!" Mr. Bissett exclaimed -- he must have been close to forty, Julia reckoned, blonde and pink and balding. Not marriage material. "Big Tom said to her, 'When you graduate from college, little darlin', I'm going to give you the biggest, whitest wedding Charlotte, North Carolina has ever seen. All you have to do is find you a groom!' And, by golly, she did! Bud Lowe! Who is this Bud Lowe, anyway? And do Suzie's eyes still pop? I haven't seen her in years."

How to be kind? "They still pop," admitted Julia. "As for Bud. . . . Well, he comes from Canton."

Mr. Bissett held up a pudgy, pink hand. "Say no more!" he declared, winking at her in a conspiratorial fashion.

Canton was a town in the mountains of North Carolina, midway between Asheville and Cherokee, where they make paper. That is all they do in Canton; nobody does anything else. Ecology hadn't exactly impinged upon the consciousness of the owners of the paper mill, so Canton had for decades lain wrapped in a sulphurous fog, looking like a nightmarish Brigadoon and smelling like the unventilated mud room to Hell. Bud's folks worked in the paper mill. In the summer, Bud worked in the paper mill. Perhaps pollution had affected the gene pool. Certainly no one could deny that all the Lowes, including the women, had long arms that swung loosely from unwieldy shoulders worn like cumbersome yokes; they stooped; their feet were small and shuffled when they

did not skitter; their toes curled upwards; they had low foreheads and distinctly prognathous jaws. As for Bud, he looked like a baboon partially shaved for some surgery, you could not call him bright, and, as for his background, any breeding he might have. . . . Well! Bud wasn't many people's idea of a catch, and that was a fact. Of course, no one was so impolite as to acknowledge this, except behind Suzie's back, and then it was talk, talk, talk and endless speculation on the subject of how long two people so ill-suited to one another could possibly brave it out. There were some who went so far as to lay small bets that they could not make it even so far as to the altar:

"I'd give it a year. Until the warranties run out."

"They're good for at least eighteen months. You forgot to factor in inertia."

"In the fall, he has a job," offered Julia, trying to make it good.

"Teaching band in high school."

"Where?" Mr. Bissett wanted to know.

"In Fuquay-Varina," Julia admitted.

"Oh," said Mr. Bissett. "Well, as they say, Fuquay-Varina is not the end of the world. . . . But, from Fuquay-Varina, you can see the end of the world!"

What about the North? Julia wondered dismally. What about Boston? At least in Fuquay-Varina it didn't snow. At least in Fuquay-Varina a girl didn't have to wear a toque and look a pinhead half the year and never wear pretty little shoes but only ugly boots and coats that made you look fat. She remembered

sitting with her mother on the wide veranda of her home in Chapel Hill a few days before. The porch was held tight in an ancient wisteria's gnarled embrace. Hunter bees had made their home in the thick white columns -- the columns buzzed. Her mother was stringing beans into a cracked blue bowl. She did this by biting off each end of the bean and then biting the bean in two.

"That's unsanitary!" Julia complained.

"What folks don't know can't hurt 'em," her mother assured her. Then she shook her head. "You know, Julia, what I fail to understand about Northerners is why they went to such a godforsaken country in the first place."

"Well, maybe they didn't know any better," Julia offered. "Maybe they just set sail and North was what they ran into."

"Granted," admitted her mother. "But that still begs the question of why, afterwards, when they knew what the weather was like, they didn't come South."

It was a question Julia could not answer. She sat silently, watching a thunderstorm sweep towards them across the easy roll of the Piedmont, long, flint-colored skirts brushing a green floor. Julia loved the South. She did not want to go North.

"Ah!" exclaimed Mr. Bissett, his face brightening. "Music!"

Sure enough, the organ had begun testing itself, rumbling sententious vamps as if to say, what is it they want me to play? This? Or is it the Bach?

"Here comes the family!" cried Mr. Bissett joyfully. He twisted around on the pew and strained to make out two tiny figures negotiating the vast distance between vestibule and altar." Now, who can this be?" he wondered.

"The one of the left must be one of Bud's relations," Julia told him. "Look at those long arms and that low forehead."

"Morning coats," Mr. Bissett identified the cut of the man's jacket. "Tsk! Tsk!" He shook his head. "A bad choice of costume. I am reminded of *Bedtime for Bonzo*."

By now the male Lowe had loped lopsidedly past them, dragging by one elbow a fragile and apparently terror-stricken old woman. She was walloping him with a sizable handbag.

"Stop that!" the unidentified Lowe hissed.

"Let go of me!" the old woman shrilled back.

"Aunty!" Mr. Bissett cried in greeting, half rising from his seat, but the old woman was too engaged in struggle to acknowledge him as she was jerked past. "That's Suzie's Granny Bailey," he explained to Julia. "My Aunty. And here comes Babs. That's Suzie's mother . . . and who is this short person?"

One by one the members of Bud and Suzie's families were led down the long aisle and deposited in their rightful places. In contrast to overall impression of Neanderthalism conveyed by this convergence of many Lowes in one place, the Baileys appeared almost Apollonian. This impression was only strengthened when Bud, flanked by his long, untidy drink of a best man, emerged from the door to the right of the altar and

stood, visibly stricken, his long, morning-coat clad arms swinging loosely in their sockets and his low brow beetled.

At the sight of Bud standing there, looking like a bug skewered on a collector's pin, memories of the year she had shared a house with Suzie began to seep back -- memories that she preferred to think of as portents, for the fact that Suzie was getting married after graduation and Julia wasn't had bound the girls in a kind of curious intimacy. That is to say: Suzie pitied Julia; Julia envied Suzie; Suzie exulted over Julia; Julia anticipated with pleasure the death of Suzie's hopes and dreams and so gathered and hoarded signs that Suzie was making a terrible mistake. For example:

"He has hair all over his entire body," Suzie had once confided to her. "Including," she had added with a shudder, "his back!"

"Ooh!" Julia yowled. "You can't mean it?"

But Suzie had nodded grimly. Her eyes glazed over beneath the thick glass lenses of her spectacles and, for a moment, a look of heavy despondency coated her features -- the veils of the future had parted and Suzie had glimpsed her fate.

Then there was the night that Suzie had banished Bud from her bed until they were married. "He sweats and sheds," she had told Julia by way of explanation.

"Suzie," Julia had advised, "you had better get used to that."

Or those countless times that Suzie had left her engagement ring teetering on the edge of the bathroom sink above the open drain. Bud had worked overtime at the mill for an entire summer to buy

Suzie the little speck of a diamond. "You left Bud's ring on the sink again," Julia would say, returning the ring to Suzie.

"Oh?" Suzie would reply, taking it from her and looking at it curiously, as if she thought she recognized it but couldn't quite place it. "The diamond is so very small, it's as if it's not there," she would observe finally, cramming it back onto her knuckle, twisting it into place.

The organ accompaniment, which had hitherto inclined towards lugubrious confusion, became more organized, brisker. Something like Handel began to emerge from its intestine ramblings.

"Now the bridesmaids! My favorite bit! All those lovely young things, flouncing down the aisle, wondering, 'When will it be my turn?'" Mr. Bissett imagined aloud. "Tell me, dear Julia, if you don't mind, why were you not chosen to be a bridesmaid?"

"I wasn't fat enough," Julia replied flatly.

As if to prove her point, Georgine Patterson was the first to take the long walk. Five foot five and two hundred and thirty pounds, she lumbered through the door from the vestibule, wearing an antebellum dress of white lawn, sprigged with green, with a low cut, sweetheart bodice and an enormous hoop skirt. Georgine surveyed the aisle suspiciously, as if she were not sure whether she could manage to quite squeeze through the narrow defile which lay between her and the altar. Perched saucily on her head was a picture book hat trailing green satin ribbons.

"See what I mean?" hissed Julia. "She is the fattest girl anyone knows."

But Mr. Bissett was enraptured. "'What a charming dress!' He cried. "Of course you recognize it! Cunning Babs! It's the dress Scarlett O'Hara wore to the barbecue at Twelve Oakes, perfect in every detail!"

Apparently satisfied that she could make it, Georgine began to waddle down the aisle, her hoop skirts swinging dangerously. She was followed by another Leviathon bridesmaid, and another.

"Suzie figured that looking good by comparison, was better than not looking good at all," Julia explained Suzie's reasoning -- in addition to being profoundly pop eyed, Suzie was short, stocky and had her father's bull neck.

"I have a Vivian Leigh doll wearing just that costume!" exclaimed Mr. Bissett. "Did I tell you that I collect dolls? I have a Grace Kelly doll, wearing an exact replica of the gown she married Prince Rainier in, and a Jackie Kennedy doll, wearing that pink suit she had on the day of the Assassination. Exact replica, down to the pillbox hat. No bloodstains, though, and . . ."

Here comes the bride! The organ announced.

"Oh!" cried Mr. Bissett. "The bride! Little Suzie! What *will* she wear?"

Suzie lurched into view, staggering under yards of billowing white fabric -- stiff petticoats, veils and trains all vied for her attention. Her father, Big Tom, kicked a pool of satin and pearl-encrusted lace out of his way, took his place by her side and locked elbows

with her. With his other hand, he firmly gripped her right upper arm -- Suzie was not wearing her usual granny glasses and so must be carefully steered towards her destiny. Together father and daughter began to make their slow way towards the altar, Tom struggling to keep Suzie on her slippered feet and untangled -- the satin train kept getting balled up with the organdy veil, dragging her tiara dangerously to one side.

At the sight of her former housemate teetering up the aisle on her father's arm, hot tears pricked at Julia's eyes. Will I never get a husband? Why is everyone married but me? Making a fist, she struck her thigh once -- the organdy muffled the sound. What is wrong with me?

Suzie and Big Tom made it past her and Mr. Bissett's pew -- Suzie was frowning in concentration, trying to make out the altar. Julia turned back to the front and glanced towards Bud. His expression was one of deep alarm. He looked like a man watching a runaway big rig coming at him at a hundred miles an hour, swinging a wide load from its hook like that hook's about to slip and that load's about to roll.

"Oh, fiddle!" Julia cried softly and burst into furious tears.

Mr. Bissett reached into the breast pocket of his yellow shirt and produced a packet of Kleenex which he handed it to her.

"Oh, *uuhhh, uuhh!*" Julia sobbed uncontrollably, burying her face in a whole handful of tissues.

"There! There!" Mr. Bissett patted her on the knee, on the back.

"There! There, Julia dear!"

The wedding proceeded apace.

"I do," Suzie said in a voice that sounded to Julia as if it had come from the bottom of a swimming pool.

"I do," gurgled Bud, sounding even farther away, as though he were being sucked down a drain.

"I now pronounce you. . . ."

"Eeep!" sputtered Julia.

Arm in arm, Suzie and Bud headed back down the aisle, more or less uneventfully, man and wife.

"Oh, now. . . . Oh, Julia! There! There! All over!" Mr. Bissett was still attempting to console her. "I cry at weddings too. See?"

"What?" Julia asked tearfully.

Mr. Bissett screwed up his pink face and blubbered a little, his lower lip vibrating wetly. "There!" he said. "It's inspiring, after all," he explained. "Two young people on the threshold of a new life. . . . The threadbare social fabric darned anew. . . ." He smiled. Glancing quickly to either side to make sure no one was listening, he bent still closer and spoke into her ear. "So," he hissed hoarsely, "how long do you think it will last?"

Mr. Bissett was kind enough to drive Julia to the reception in her battered Corvette. She was afraid that she might have a panic attack. She could feel it beginning to push up through her -- crisp new blades of escalating hysteria, leaves that unfurled as they broke the surface. Mr. Bissett was delighted. "It's not often that I get to drive a car," he explained. "Not since the accident." Julia pressed a handkerchief over her mouth and tried not to scream when Mr. Bissett made turns he ought not to have or veered from his lane while pointing out this house or that, belonging to this or that member of Charlotte society, and who had shot themselves in the head and what with and who had found them.

The reception was held at the Sunnyside Country Club. The spanking white clubhouse was flat-roofed and symmetrical, with a veranda which ran the width of the facade and columns two stories tall which seemed to Julia vaguely Doric about the capitals. Within this recreation of an Hellenized Southern mansion of the pre-Civil War era, beyond the three, long tables pushed together and piled high with matrimonial booty -- china and crystal, blenders and waffle irons and Julia's own, small silver-plated bonbon dish ("The child must have silver," her mother had insisted. "Otherwise, what will she have to put down the well when the Yankees come?") -- lay a vast room with sage-green wainscoting and Williamsburg wallpaper on which colonial gentlemen with powdered wigs presided over a rolling and verdant domain from horseback -- in the fields, what might have been Negro slaves bent decorously over rows of cotton. A band jammed into one corner played warmed-over Herb Alpert to which couples the middling age of Suzie's parents lackadaisically danced -- the clubhouse, unlike the Pink Vatican, was air-

conditioned. As Julia pushed past the dancers on the way to the bar, she overheard a sand-colored woman ask her partner, "And how long do you think it will last?"

She was prevented from overhearing his reply by the careening advent of Suzie and Bud, who were engaged in a ponderous rendition of the traditional bride's dance -- they seemed to move with great effort, as though they were both wearing snowshoes. Bud kept getting entangled in Suzie's considerable bridal gear, none of which she had managed to shed since she had dragged it down the aisle and heaved it back. "Good heavens, Bud!" she snapped. "Watch where you're going! Oh, Julia!" she exclaimed, as Julia, waving and grinning, attempted to edge past. "'Lo!"

"'Lo, Suzie! So happy for you!" Julia half-heartedly returned the greeting before the sluggish current of the dance bore the bride and groom away from her.

She felt a hand grip her upper arm. Manicured, opalescent nails on liver-spotted hands dug into her flesh. The hands trembled ever so slightly. A faint, medicinal smell of gin mingled with a heavy application of L'Aire du Temps. Turning her head, Julia gazed into the bright original of Suzie's own watery pop eyes. "Oh, hello, Mrs. Bailey," she greeted the bride's mother.

"Julia!" Babs Bailey gulped. "So nice of you to come all the way from Chapel Hill! And such a lovely dress, but don't you think it overwhelms your delicate coloring a bit, dear? Oh, but never mind. Such a big day! So much. . . ." she struggled for the word. "Happiness!" she found it. "My own little girl . . . and, of course,

what's his name, Bud. And what about you, Julia? When will your Big Day be? A pretty girl like you! Can't be long!"

"No time soon," Julia replied morosely. "I've got to go North."

"North? North?" Suzie's mother had difficulty getting her mind around this concept.

"Boston. The conservatory," Julia helped her out.

"Oh, yes!" Babs cried. "You play the piano, don't you? Well, don't you worry none! I understand that finding a husband in the North is like shooting ducks in a barrel for a Southern girl with accomplishments. Oh! And we were so sorry to hear about that cousin of yours. What was his name? Frosty? Skip? Chip?"

"George," said Julia.

"Imagine! Dropping dead during a fraternity initiation!"

"Well, they did bury him alive," Julia pointed out.

"Still. . . ! Oh, Laura! Randy! Yoo hoo!" Turning on her heel and rising up on her toes, Babs waved frantically and then lunged into the crowd.

Julia sighed and turned back towards the bar. Indecorously shoving her way past the collected Lowe males, who had surrounded it with the evident intention of drinking themselves into a stupor, she secured a bourbon and branch and retreated a few steps to find herself in the middle of a depressed gaggle of Lowe women, all clutching their pocketbooks as though they expected momentarily to be mugged by their fellow guests.

"Is that . . . *hard* liquor that you're drinking?" one of them inquired of her in a hushed voice.

Julia nodded.

"Oh!" replied the woman who had accosted her. They all wagged their heads disapprovingly. "Dear! Dear!" they said.

The Lowe males continued to drink defiantly, casting furtive but resentful sideways glances at the women whose collective chagrin was as palpable as a thunderstorm brewing in the late afternoon of a summer's day. Shifting their weight uneasily from foot to foot, speaking in low monosyllables, they looked to Julia like a clutch of convicts, trying in vain to appear casual as they planned their escape. Neither here nor there but caught hovering by chance in this apparently Baptist conflict, Julia also planned her escape. With feigned nonchalance she stepped away from the Lowe women and into the throng.

"You don't have a purse!" the woman who had spoken to her put a momentary end to her retreat -- the remark was a hook sunk in her back by which the woman hoped, it seemed, to reel her in.

"No," Julia acknowledged, startled by the question. "I checked it."

"Checked it?" the woman echoed her. "Oh! With that colored girl in the booth?"

"Yes," said Julia.

"I wouldn't give her mine," said the woman with an air of simple cunning. She nodded.

"No point in giving them everything they ask for," one of her relations agreed.

Julia closed her eyes and prayed for composure: *Please do not let me break out in spider veins on both cheeks!* Her prayer ran. Did these women realize that they had this day sacrificed their son, nephew, grandson on the altar of Suzie's matrimonial ambitions? Did they know that Bud was mere cannon fodder, a dry run? Or did they look around them at all this pomp and circumstance and say, "Bud's done us proud!"

Big Tom emerged from the crowd, headed towards the bar.

"Angela! Darlene! Lydia!" he greeted her -- he never could remember her name. He stood on tiptoe to fling his arm around her shoulders and gave her a big squeeze. He smelled strongly of sweet sweat and Jack Daniels -- it was in the blood that Julia could always tell exactly what a person had been drinking, down, often, to the label. "You look just like that big pink bush on the corner of Elwood and Decanter!" Tom told her. "What do they call it? Biggest bush in the county. Now you tell me! Wasn't that the goddamnest, whitest wedding you ever saw, Cindy, Lucretia, Nanette? Do you think it cost me a fortune? You bet it did! And how the hell long is it going last, I want to know! Fuquay-Varina! Now where in the good goddam is Fuquay-Varina?"

"It's east of Raleigh, Mr. Bailey," Georgine Patterson observed between big mouthfuls. The enormous bridesmaid had established herself before the long hors d'oeuvres table. When it came to access, her girth coupled with the width of her huge hoop skirts gave her a distinct advantage -- altogether, she pre-empted

a full six feet of space, and she was seizing her advantage by sucking back all the crab cakes and sausage biscuits within reach.

Mr. Bissett materialized on the other side of the table and, inclining forward, reached over platters heaped with barbecued ribs to pluck at Georgine's skintight bodice. "Is that a mustard stain? I have to tell you, my dear, you look just like my Scarlett O'Hara doll!" he exclaimed raptly. "Down to the piping! Where did Babs get the fabric, Tommy?"

"Hell if I know where she gets anything!" Big Tom exclaimed.

But Georgine had reared back defensively. "Hey!" she thundered at Mr. Bissett. "All hands on deck, sailor!"

"Don't worry about Bissy, Georgie Girl!" Big Tom said. "He's one of those . . . what do you call yourself, Bissy?"

"A pederast," said Mr. Bissett and smiled sweetly.

"Big words!" Big Tom laughed. "Never had much use for them! Big money! Big plans! Now that's different! Eat up, Georgie Girl! You know Big Tom's motto – 'There's no such thing as a last shrimp!' Not in any shindig I foot the bill for, huh, Bissy?" He released his grip on her to slap Georgine on the wide delta of her behind.

Julia felt certain that it was time to go. Loosed from Big Tom's damp embrace, she felt suddenly extraneous, as though she had wandered outside the fold and now the gate was closing. *We are poor little lambs that have gone astray! Bah! Bah! Bah!* Closing? Closed, surely. Eyes squeezed shut, she rocked on her heels, feeling the tug of centrifugal force, the slow spin that would fling

her clear of the center of her life and her family's long, luxuriant and dank history in this comfortable, slow world. This spectacle whirling around her -- Suzie's make-believe wedding -- was like the center, the still, still eye of the centrifuge, and she was being flung outwards into an outer space where possibilities collide with danger like meteors with planets -- randomly. Southern girls married early, but not, as it turned out, Julia. She would have to take her chances beyond the garden walls. Outside. Where foolish people had gone and foolishly stayed. North.

She left without saying goodbye -- receded, was how she thought about it, like the tide -- and, retrieving her pocketbook from the suspect check girl, slipped unnoticed through a French door onto the veranda of the clubhouse.

Or so she thought.

She was half-way down the steps when the elderly black man wearing the Club livery of forest green frock coat and mustard-colored vest, came to abrupt and violent life and, swooping down on her with an agility and alacrity astounding for one of his evident years, cut her off, seizing both of her hands in his own white-gloved ones. "But where's Young Miss goin' in yo' pretty party dress?" he cried in a low, mellifluous voice which rang with bewilderment and concern.

"I . . . long drive . . . feeling ill . . . things to do." Fumblingly, Julia made her excuses, conscious of her huge dress, her captured hands.

Convinced, or at least assuaged, the old servant loosed his grip on her hands, returned them to her. "A doggone shame!" he

murmured, shaking his grizzled head. Then, resignedly, "Lovely even' to you now, Young Lady!"

As Julia's car drove from the parking lot onto the circular sweep of driveway, she glimpsed the old black man one last time:

Gazing down at his feet in their shiny black patent leather shoes, he executed first a gentle, ruminative shuffle step at his post. This evolved into a waltz clog before exploding into a brisk time step sequence. She could just make out the words of the old song he sang in accompaniment to his stomping, stamping, tapping feet in a voice that was at once low, sweet and gravelly:

Fare thee well! Fare thee well!

Fare thee well, my fairy fay!

For I'm goin' Louisiana,

For to see my Pollyanna!

Sing Polly Wolly Doodle

All the day!

Good Lord, thought Julia. I'm living in an old Shirley Temple movie!

As she rounded the curve of driveway before the clubhouse, the old man glanced up and caught her eye. He lifted his white-gloved hand in a gesture of farewell and, spontaneously, she lifted hers, palm to palm like lovers despite the widening distance. Only because his voice was so sweet did his final words to her carry across the expanse of manicured lawn: "Young Miss drive carefully!" he called. "On yo' long journey!"

The Corvette passed through the wrought-iron gates and turned onto a boulevard which held the shimmering July heat to it like a river holds a morning mist. Tree-lined, expansive, flanked by prosperity. She headed North.

*This story appeared in the **North Carolina Literary Review**, Vol. 13, 2002. Copyright ©2002, Melissa Hardy.*

