

# Wedding Belles



by Melissa Hardy

illustrated and designed by Jennifer Vivekanand

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, seated 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 that, 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 the 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, save 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, stiff with reproach. Distractedly she plucked at its skintight bodice like a wino with the 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 was flushed pink, shiny with perspiration, and radiant with expectation. Clearly, he was looking forward to the wedding.

"Do you think that 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 toward his belt, and the bared flesh of his arms, revealed by the short sleeves of his light yellow shirt, seemed to yearn moistly toward 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 Muffin 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.

"My name is Mr. Bissett," the fat man announced. "I'm a distant collateral – relative, that is! *Heh! Heh!*" He wheezed wetly. "Of Muffin's," he added, tears squirting from his eyes. When he laughed, he waggled 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 Muffin."

"In school," Julia agreed, still breathing. Seizing a hymnal from the shelf nailed to the pew in front of