

Toast

LIBBY FLORES

The embarrassment, of both families, was how large the wedding had been. A big white tent in the rain. The guests contemplated using the table linen for cover. It was New Orleans in summer; no one had predicted a storm.

The tea lights, prematurely lit, flickered at the thunder. Guests who had brought small dogs or babies were on their knees, desperate to retrieve them from under the rented tables. The big white tent was next to a house that was now a restaurant. The father of the bride had rented both. On every table large magnolia blooms floated in antique silver saucers.

The husband-to-be sat in a small mahogany-paneled room alone, drawing on a bar napkin. It had started with his initials. The T now curled into a black crow that was diving into a bowl much too small for him.

The bridesmaids wore blue in all shades. In a row they resembled cornflowers at the moment of wilt. The heaviest of them was pregnant, and she stood behind the rented cocktail tables most of the night. She knew the dress neither concealed nor revealed her secret. The little bubble that protruded out of the indigo silk was one she wished to pop.

The bride wore bright-red lipstick. Not having a moment to herself, she was sweaty. She had already fainted once, after she saw that the tissue-paper stars that were to be hung in the oaks were wet as toilet paper. Her mother comforted her with lies about the rain. "It'll let up any minute now. These tropical storms blow right through. Oh, dear, you look beautiful." The bride's corset, made from

the finest whalebone and satin, was an uncomfortable reminder that her waist, even on her wedding day, was not small enough. It was fine to be beautiful, but to be thin was something else. In a mirrored dressing room, seven women plucked, sprayed perfume in clouds of saccharine mist, talked while looking at their own reflections, checked their armpits, applied mascara, but mostly crowded the bride.

The chef was elbow-deep in crawfish and squinting from the onions as he yelled to his staff. "Five more minutes on the hush puppies! And watch the okra." He was a New Orleans chef, born and raised. His apron was never clean. His palms sweated garlic. He had seen many weddings go down. He had fed this many anxiety-ridden stomachs. He looked at the tiny black eyes of the crawfish smothered in cayenne. The poor fellas were soon to be beheaded by all those French-manicured hands.

A second cousin was sent to buy umbrellas. He was a blond young man with a driver's permit. Happy to be free of the chaos, and in the seat of his uncle's new BMW, he opened the top button of his dress shirt and ruffled his damp hair. The keys were handed to him in a hasty fashion. The bride's mother, his aunt, had just discovered that the florist had delivered the wrong flowers. A polo match had been swapped for the wedding. Horseshoes of carnations and long droopy irises were at her nude, stocking feet.

All the while the groom's father was opening every closet in the sprawling house. A puzzle on his face. The groom's tux was lost. He kept yelling, *Misplaced, not gone. Misplaced!*

The wedding planner was sneaking a Virginia Slim under a dripping awning by the dumpsters, a clipboard in her free hand; she had lost again. Her own fiancé had asked for his ring back just the day before. Matrimony being her business, she had requested a few more days. So there it was still on her finger. She twirled it nervously with her thumb—a flat tire on a slow-moving car.

In the end, only the tent survived.

