

Chapter 17

The first thing that happened was Mrs. Ewing came bounding over all thrilled to death because she had found some dresses for me. They weren't new, but they were party dresses! She had gotten them in the summer when she was up ^{North} in a place called Litchfield. Her "dear friend" had given them to her. Her "dear friend's" daughter that was at Smith had simply just grown out of them.

"I don't think she's worn them more than a few times," Mrs. Ewing said as she hilariously unwrapped the box.

"That's the nicest thing I ever heard of," Mother said. "Felicia wants to go to a little dance and the dressmaker is down with her gall bladder again."

I just ~~stood~~ ^{stood} there with my hands behind my back, waiting. I don't know why Mother is so partial to people giving me their old worn-out clothes. I've told her a thousand times I think

it's sort of down-trodden. But she thinks it's simply grand and sensible, wearing other people's clothes.

"Flo was just going to give them away," Mrs. Ewing said, ~~talking about her dear friend.~~ "But I told her I had a little friend in Ashton and I knew she would love to have them."

"How sweet," Mother said. "Really, that is, Margaret."

"Her daughter's a charmer," Mrs. Ewing said, opening the tissue paper. "A perfect little charmer."

And out they came! You positively would have committed suicide.

"Why," ~~Mother said,~~ "why, they're absolutely love-ly!" ^{Mother said}
Just Felicia's type."

"Gosh," I said, and I meant it. Taffeta! Not a single ruffle anywhere. One was a plaid---orange and black---and the other---DARK BLUE!!

"The little plaid is so handsomely tailored," Mrs. Ewing said. "Here, Felicia." She held the dress up to me and practically broke my collar bone with her two thumbs. "So nice with her fair hair."

"Just exactly the sort of thing I had in mind. Isn't it, Felicia?"

"Yasssss," I said, trying to sound overjoyed with pleasure. Somebody as rich as Mrs. Ewing, you can't hurt her feelings.

"Honestly, Margaret," Mother said, "this is the nicest thing I've ever heard of." She really was happy. "Here, let's try the dark blue."

They held it up, too, and I had to just stand there like an idiot.

"I almost think that's better than the other one," Mrs.

Ewing said. "Felicia is the tailored type. And see, Sarah," she caught hold of the back of the dress, "the little pleats to give it just enough flair."

Mother really was happy. She's been telling me and telling me I'm the tailored type. She adores clothes that you don't notice too much. She thinks there's nothing worser in the world than some girl that looks all dress coming down the street.

"Margaret, how lovely of you to think of Felicia---especially when you were away like that." She had this sad smile on her face as if she were going to cry. Mother is also very partial to people being appreciative. Being appreciative is the gateway to heaven, she's always saying. She looked at me.

"They certainly are nice, Mrs. Ewing," I said. But I positively couldn't wait until she left. I wasn't going to wear one of those dresses if they put me in iron chains and tried to drag me there. I had already seen Melissa's and Marilyn's. They were the most gorgeous things you've ever seen. Melissa's was blue and ruffled all the way down from the waist. She also had a hoop to wear under it so she looked like War Between the States days. Marilyn's was peach-colored and had miles and miles of stuck-out skirt. What if I walked in in that pitiful dark-blue dress with just those pleats in the back. If Mother made me do that I'd never speak to her again.

"Well, I've got to run," Mrs. Ewing said, looking at her watch. "Bill's got to have a little operation tomorrow and---"

"An operation!" Mother said. "Bill Ewing?"

"Nothing serious," Mrs. Ewing said. She put her finger to her mouth. "Hemorrhoids. We don't like to say much about it,

but he's been so uncomfortable---in real pain."

"Ohhh, I'm so sorry, Margaret. Give him my love, won't you?"

Aren't women peculiar? They can sit up and talk about something like hemorrhoids for hours and hours and never bat an eye.

"Bye ~~bye~~, Felicia," Mrs. Ewing said. "Have a nice time at the dance."

"I surely do appreciate your thoughtfulness, Mrs. Ewing."

"Not a-tall. Not a-tall."

"Thank you, Margaret. ^{mother said} You were a dear to think of us. I do hope Bill gets along all right."

"Oh, he will. He'll just go in and come right out again."

~~We went to the door with her.~~

~~"Good-bye," she said.~~

Mother waved at her and I didn't say anything. I shut the door.

gal 60 "Now wasn't that grand of Margaret to think of you?"

"I wish she hadn't," I said. But I don't think Mother heard me. She went back to the box of dresses. "Velvet can take these in for you. I think they need to come in just a ---" She held up the plaid one. "Here, Felicia, run up and let's try them on."

"There's no point in it," I said.

"Why?"

"Be-cause I just will not wear them."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I'm not going to walk into the coca-cola plant looking like a Yankee goon."

Mother was exasperated. She sat down in the chair. "Felicia, I just don't know what I'm going to do with you. In the first place

we don't call northern people 'yankees.' Some of the loveliest people in the world live in the north. Many of them have excellent taste in clothes and these---those dresses---were bought in New York. You're always talking about wanting to go to New York. I just don't understand you at all."

"Those weren't made in New York."

"They certainly were." She got up and examined the label.

"Bests. Now you see. It's a fine store for young girls."

"In New York they wear dresses with sparkles all over/ them."

"No decent person does."

"*Yes, they do!*"
"They do in the movies."

"Felicia, now, pu-leeese don't try to be silly."

"I'm not!"

"Go right upstairs and try them on." She started walking back to the kitchen. "Vel-vet. Vel-vet. Can you come here a second, please?"

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So, that is the way I marched into the coca-cola plant! I wore the plaid one because at least it had some color in it. It also had a bow in the back, but you couldn't see it too well because it was so large and low it looked like the rest of the dress. Also I had to wear these sad low-heeled black shoes with straps over the instep and I looked like the most tragic person you've ever seen.

"You really look lovely," Mother said. "Not like some little over-dressed silly. Doesn't she, Allison?"

"What?" Father said. He wasn't even paying any attention. He was reading the old boring Sewanee Review again.

"Doesn't Felicia look nice?" Mother said.

He glanced up at me. "Is she wearing lipstick?"

"I think that's all right," Mother said. "For a dance. Just a little."

I felt five thousand feet tall, standing there, and my heart was pounding away. When my heart starts pounding my face starts getting red and I look terrible. I wish I could get over it.

"She looks all right," Father said.

Mother straightened the strand of pearls. "What time is Mrs. Summers coming for you?"

"In a minute." I could scarcely talk and for some reason I went around slapping all the pieces of furniture in the living room.

"There they are now," Mother said. "You'd better wear your coat, Felicia. Here." She put the coat over my shoulders. "And your gloves. Now have a good time."

"Okay," I said and walked out into the night. It was like walking to the guillotine, like Marie Antoinette did in that old movie on television.

Mrs. Summers was driving and she looked sort of beat-up compared to everybody else. In the back were Margaret Ann Akers and Betty Rice (Popular.) Marilyn was up front with her mother. Margaret Ann and Betty were all spread out with their ruffled dresses. There was hardly any room to sit.

"Is there enough room?" Mrs. Summers asked. "You girls with your skirts," she said.

"There's room," I said. Neither Margaret Ann or Betty moved. ^{8?} ~~It didn't make any difference. There was room enough since I didn't have to protect any ruffles.~~ I sat all scrunched in by

the window, but I noticed my knees were taller than anybody else's. My face started banging away. It was like my heart was inside of my cheeks or something. I thought I just might throw up. I guess it's worse, though, if you have to go to a dance with a boy!

Actually, I don't even remember walking into the coca-cola plant. I do remember seeing some of the machines and things, but what I remember most is the girls' powder room. Everybody was there. Even Carolyn Dunwoody---the new one that's so popular. She was sitting in front of the mirror, combing her hair, and everybody was flocking around her. She looked ~~absolutely~~ *very beautiful* gorgeous in this white ruffled dress with a blue bow in the back. Everybody, except a few that had on net dresses, had on hooped skirts. One girl's was so large she could hardly make it through the door. She was fat, too.

I just stood up against the wall with my arms crossed and felt like the Empire State Building. It's funny but nobody seemed particularly happy. Nobody was laughing or anything. They all looked dreadfully conceited and bored. Every now and then they'd stare at themselves in the mirror. I would have given anything in the world to have been Carolyn Dunwoody. She used to live in Griffin, Georgia, and that's where she started getting popular. I think she's more popular in Ashton, though, than she was even in Griffin. Mother and Father don't know the Dunwoodys because they're obscure. I wish Mother and Father were.

Anyway, you couldn't stay in the powder room all night, so I went on out to the dance floor. Nothing had begun yet. All these ~~new~~ boys were sliding up and down on the floor. That's what they do all the time, start running and then slide as far as they can. Clumps of girls were standing around. Even Harriet

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Lane and Elizabeth Hill were there. They're in the high ninth and are always being sponsors at football games and things, even in the high ninth. } They also chew gum and talk very fast. Most popular people do.

I went on up and stood by Betty Rice and Marilyn. They didn't say much and nobody mentioned my dress. I tried to stand more on my left foot so I wouldn't look so tall. Melissa Stewart was going around giggling to everybody. She knew she was safe because she was giving it. They'd all have to dance with her.

At the coca-cola plant they have these benches that line the wall, all the way around the room. The girls sit on the right side of the room and the boys on the left. What you do is, you sit there and then these boys come racing across the room at you and the one that stands in front of you dances with you. It's horrifying.

Mrs. Stewart went over and plugged in this huge record player that had bubbles going up and down in it, then she said we were going to have three dances where the boys could choose their partners. She started clapping her hands and told this one boy that was trying to be funny---he was walking around the floor on his knees--to go sit down and behave with the other boys. Everybody thought that was excruciatingly funny.

"Now when I blow this whistle," Mrs. Stewart said, smiling all over the place because it was her and Melissa's party, "that means that another dance has started."

I was sitting on the bench by Sally Whitehead. She has red hair and her mother is a friend of Mother's. Sally's fourteen and the thinnest person you ever saw. She had on a dress sort of ~~blue~~

like mine, no ruffles or anything. I guess she didn't want to say too much to me because I'm a grade behind her.

Well, Mrs. Stewart blew the whistle and it was like an army attack. Waves and waves of boys came literally dashing across the room. Up the line from where Sally and I were you could hear all this commotion. I think every boy in the room tried to get to Carolyn Dunwoody first. I looked up and she was already dancing. Marilyn and Betty had been chosen too. Nobody was standing near Sally and I. My face started getting hotter and hotter and then, FINALLY, old Cecil Bowers tapped me on the shoulder.

"Wanna dance?" he said.

I stood up right away. "Yeah!" I looked back down at Sally. She was still sitting there, alone. There was just this one other girl---way down at the other end---and there weren't any other boys. I started to say something, but Cecil was getting all ready to dance, looking down at his feet with his elbows stretched out.

Cecil's in my grade but he's a half a head shorter than I. He's also pretty dumb. All the way through grammar school all he did was sit at his desk and draw castles. His test papers were always on the bottom when they were hung up for everybody to see.

"I've been eatin' onions," Cecil said, doing this one step we all knew---slide, slide together, back; slide, slide together, front.

"What for?" I asked him.

"I dunno. I eat 'em all the time."

"Me too," I said. That's the way to be popular. If a boy says he eats onions, you say you do too.

We didn't say much else. I looked back at Sally. She and

the other left-out girl were sitting side by side. Sally had her arms crossed and her legs stretched out in front of her. It was rude, I thought, of Mrs. Stewart not to see that there were enough boys. Carolyn Dunwoody and this blond boy started doing these other stpes that nobody else knew. Everybody was speaking to Her:

"Hey, Carolyn. Hey, Carolyn. Hey, Carolyn."

She didn't even smile at them. "Hey," she'd say in this very bored way. Carolyn Dunwoody usually dances with her eyes shut. She's the only one.

I started getting a very bored look on my face. It was pretty hard to do because Cecil Bowers was not very good to dance with. He kept looking down at his feet which made him shrink up even more.

Mrs. Stewart blew the whistle and we had to go sit back down. I don't know why I went and sat down by Sally again.

"Well, you got asked," she said as if that was the most unheard of thing in the world.

"Uh huh," I said and looked across the room at the boys. They were getting all set to spring across and attack again. I guess they were all trying to reach Carolyn and them first. I put on my bored expression again.

But nobody asked me to dance the second time. Nobody asked Sally either. There we were, just sitting there, and every now and then everybody looked sort of pitifully over at us.

"Well, god damn," Sally said. She really said that and ~~then~~ let out this huge sigh. "If they don't wanta dance with me, I'm going home!"

The blood rushed to my face. I didn't want to be the only

one left. "You can't , Sally! You can't go."

"I think you ought to, too," she said.

"Why?"

"Just because."

My face started burning again and my fingers ^{were} cold when I touched my face.

Mrs. Stewart came over to us. "Are you girls having a nice time?" she asked exceedingly cheerfully. She has these tiny brown eyes.

"Yes'm," ~~"I said."~~ "We really are!" ^{"I said."} "Melissa surely looks nice, Mrs. Stewart."

gal 62 She sat down beside us. "Melissa is rather pretty, isn't she?"

Sally didn't say anything and, anyway, all these ladies started coming in---friends of Mrs. Stewart's---so she got up and went over to greet them. I knew what they were going to do. They were going to sit in chairs and watch us. They adore to do that. They simply love to sit there and watch how unpopular you are.

Finally, though, we formed these circles---the boys inside and the girls outside. Mr. Stewart and this other man with a palm tree painted on his tie also got in the circle so it would be even. What you were supposed to do is walk around the room in the circle until the music stops and the one in front of you---dances with you.

Guess who stopped in front of me? Bobby Phillips. He's in the high ninth class and practically the most popular boy in the entire town. He has blond hair and brown eyes and thousands of teeth. He also has this habit of kind of sucking in his cheeks all the time which is pretty attractive also. When I looked and saw

it was him that was going to dance with me, I nearly died. But the only thing was he kept looking at everybody else. While we were dancing I might as well of not even been there. Even Carolyn Dunwoody kept looking at us. She was dancing with Henry Johnston -- this fat boy.

Bobby also kept hitting all these other boys while we were dancing. Extremely rude. I decided I hated him and when the music stopped he didn't even say "thank you" or anything. He just went dashing over to his side. Wonder why it is boys are like that? If I were a boy and saw some tall girl was just sitting around, I'd go over and dance every dance with her. I would, too.

Well, this is the part I really don't much want to tell about, but I guess I will since life is so strange. See, Sally went on home. She called up her mother and told her to come and get her. I wouldn't have done that for anything. Besides, I don't know whether Mother would have come for me or not. ~~You knew, I told~~ she believes in sticking things out. Even if you were in the army and a bunch of Chinamen were coming at you to kill you, she'd believe in sticking it out.

So I did. But then punch time came around. Mrs. Stewart blew her whistle for the one-thousandth time and then told everybody to choose their partners for refreshments. The boys started letting out this whoop and then came racing across the floor for partners. That's the most important time at any dance because you really get to know people.

All these women were hovering around the punch table and the line started forming. Then, just like that, it came blasting to me that I had been left out! Every girl had been chosen---every

one but me! I started desperately looking around the room. There wasn't another boy left. My face, even my arms, started getting this really terrible burning. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't just sit there on the bench. Who was I going to have punch with? ~~I'd probably have to~~ Would I have to sit over there by the piano all alone with everybody staring. You couldn't join up with anybody else, not without a boy. Nobody does that. So, what I did was, I just went to the line and stood at the end all by myself. This other couple you don't know was standing in front of me but they didn't turn around to talk or anything. Even my throat started aching and I knew my face was scarlet. I kept looking down at the floor because I wanted to go somewhere where I could cry. I kept wondering where I would sit when I finally did get the punch. Everybody else ~~were~~ was all going back to the benches and I couldn't just go walking to the bench alone--the last one, carrying my punch, alone. My brains started whirling and then this voice said: "Felicia? Felicia, do you feel well?"

It was Mrs. Summers, Marilyn's mother, that had brought us in the car.

"No'm," I said. "I think I have Scarlet Fever."

"Let me feel your forehead," she said, putting her hand to my face. "You do feel warm. Would you like to go home? I can take you."

"Yes'm," I said. "I really don't feel well."

"Let's see if I have my keys." She started digging around in her pocketbook. "Yes, here they are! Do you have your coat?"

I never looked back at the line. I don't know what everybody thought---me, trailing out of the room after Mrs. Summers. I kept wondering if she had seen and was just being nice. Or if

she thought I really was sick.

In the car I kept sighing. "I hope it isn't anything contagious," I said. "You know, like polio, or anything."

"Oh, I don't think so," she said. "You probably just got over-heated."

"Maybe so," I said and let out this slight groan.

At the house I told her good-bye. She sounded like she was feeling sorry for me when she said she hoped I'd be feeling better. I didn't want anybody to feel sorry for me, so I very cheerily said, "Don't worry, Mrs. Summers. I'll be okay. Tell Marilyn to call me."

As I walked up to the house, I could see Mother's light on in her bedroom. I knew she would be in bed, reading. I didn't want to tell her what had really happened.

"Why are you so early, Felicia?"

I got this terrible frown on my face. "Mrs. Summers brought me on home because she said I looked sick. I am too, really."

"Heavens," she said. "Here, let me see?" She felt my forehead. "You're not warm. Are you really sick?"

"Uh huh. Kind of in my stomach. I think I have to throw up."

"Felicia," she said in this now-tell-me-the-truth voice.

"What happened?"

"Whatdoya mean?"

"At the dance?"

"Nothing. It was just won-der-ful! Bobby Phillips and everybody danced with me." I started frowning again. "But I really don't feel very well. Doya guess it's polio?"

"Well, I think you'd better go to bed. We'll see how you are

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in the morning."

"Okay then. Nite."

"Good-night." But I knew she knew I wasn't sick. She knows when I'm sick and when I'm not. I guess I've ruined Mother's life.

I got on into bed and just lay there, thinking. I had been saved! Mrs. Summers had saved me from the most humiliatingly horrible experience of my life. Then I started crying, really. I kept saying: "I'm going again! I'm going to the next one and the next one and the next one! And I'm gonna be popular. I will! I will....!"

But, oh, it was so terrible. [I wish you knew.] - B?