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The letter came in the mail on Tuesday with a big red smiley-face and HAVE A HAPPY DAY THE R.V. DIBSONS stamped on the back of the envelope. I made an involuntary noise in my throat and opened it. It said:

"Dear Ali,

(a contraction from Alice, my real name, which Mrs. Dibson feels is too formal),

"Hi! The five of us were just saying dinner, why, David and Ali haven't been over for just 'eons!' We'd love to have you over sometime soon! We've been wanting to have you around for ages. Don't respond if you can't. Tonight... why, David and Ali love to have you over sometime soon! Don't worry, David and I haven't been over for just 'eons!' We'd love to have you over sometime soon! How about this Saturday thirty-ish?? Maybe Davey could 'finalize' it by phone?? We'll be waiting!

Love and kisses,

Davey's Auntie Do.

"Saturday evening, "six-ish" I sat waiting for David to pick me up. Not eagerly, just ready. The idea of going didn't thrill me, but these social functions were funny in their own way. David's relatives especially, killed me. We had been school buddies, David and I, for a long time, and lately we'd been seeing more of each other, mainly because school was finished and no one else seemed to be around anymore. But David's aunts and uncles and cousins and second cousins were quite pleased that we'd been seeing more of each other, which my own relatives, generally, like I said, I thought the whole thing was funny. I was a little lonely, but the thought of David and my own family, because they were always here, and they were, shall I say, pushing.

They had us married off with babies, living in a handsome suburban bungalow near them so they could drop in often, informally of course, and we would all be one big happy family. In a way I could really appreciate them. They were involved with each other, which my own relatives, who stuck to a strict policy of "minding one's own business," were not. But generally, like I said, I thought the whole situation was rather hilarious.

David thought so too. We knew where we stood with each other and agreed on some basic issues like marriage, namely, that it wasn't for us (not together at least). But we went along with the whole bit, the oh-you-two-make-a-lovely-couple's, and the Any-young-man-would-envy-youDavid-would-have-blissful-blissful-Blah's. We just had fun watching them fool themselves.

David picked me up shortly and was struggling with his tie in the rear view mirror when I got in the car. His straight brown hair was still wet and looked as if he had just washed himself dry after his shower like a dog does after a swim. He was wearing beige corduroys half tucked into his boots, and a tweed jacket that must have belonged to his grandfather. He gave up on the tie and tossed it up on the dashboard. "We'll make a lovely couple tonight," he said. I forgot to mention, David is a favorite in The Family because he is "so casual."

We sped to Aunti Do's place (we were late) with the windows open so he could dry his hair, which was dry by the time we got there. Auntie Do greeted us at the door. She was a picture of cheerfulness in a bright printed dress with a pleated skirt, and a large daisy brooch just below her chin. Her arm was stretched out in a welcoming gesture as she said, "Why, come in!" almost as if this were a total surprise.

There were smiles and kisses and how-are-youn's and I said "Hello, Mrs. Dibson," to which she replied, "Oh, do call me Aunt Dorothy, after all you're practically part of the family." She led us into the living room where the rest of the family sat watching Candid Camera. There were more greetings, handshakes and kisses.

Soon, however, we gathered around Auntie Do's table decorated with candles and silver, Holly Hobbie salt and pepper shakers and happy-face napkins, and Prince Albert dinnerware. Quite a conglomeration. There were even name cards next to the plates so that we wouldn't waste a lot of time deciding where to sit.

Uncle Roger, a husky man with a broad, waxy, smiling face, sat the head of the table since he was the head of the family. Auntie Do sat the opposite end which was nearest to the kitchen. Joanne, their daughter and David's cousin, sat next to Auntie Do, also near the kitchen so she could help her mother. To Joanne's right sat Robert, who reminded me of one of the many dwarves with his red face and flappy ears. He was married to Joanne. I had to constantly remind myself of that, and the fact that someday they might have their own family, because they were always there, even a few times when David and I dropped in unexpectedly. Not only that, they struck me as being too childish or naive to be married, or at least Joanne did. She still called her father "Snoopy" (or more like "shnoopy") and talked baby talk to her brother John who was eighteen. Robert just took it all in and acted grown up.

Well, anyway, I found my seat next to Robert (and consequently around the corner from Uncle Roger). David sat across from me (so that we could gaze into each other's eyes I suppose), and John, whom everyone always referred to as the "baby of the family," sat next to David.

Dinner was much like the other dinners we had had here. Uncle Roger teased, and Aunti Do would say, "Oh, now Roger..."; Joanne rambled in a squeaky voice about her wedding, and Robert agreed with her at the appropriate times; David acted silly and everyone laughed; John more or less kept his mouth shut throughout the meal; and I was fairly quiet myself but added to the general conversation now and then.

It was after dinner that the real fun started. Auntie Do, Joanne, and I were doing dishes and the men were watching television, as is the proper order of things. We were almost done when out or the blue Joanne said in an excited little voice that I was getting tired of by now, "Shall we do it now?"

"Yes!" Auntie Do said.

"Do what?" I asked.

"You'll see," they both said. Auntie Do winked.

"Come with us," she said after the last pot had been returned to its proper corner and every spot whisked away from her Antique Gold stove. I followed them to a bedroom at the end of the hall and they looked around the room for some clues and saw nothing but a bed with a flowery satin spread, a dresser and four ghostly mauve walls. "It sounds suspicious," I said.

"Well," said Joanne, looking as though she had a speech prepared, "we know you and Dave don't have much, well, money, and...well...Mother and I decided that if you wanted to you could wear my dress.

"Your dress for what?" But they didn't need to answer. Out of the closet came a shiny white wedding gown, and two beaming faces stood on either side to accompany it. I bit the inside of my mouth. "David and I haven't made any plans to..."

"I think it will look just lovely on you Ali!" Auntie Do wasn't listening, of course. She could see me wearing it already in her mind, complete with a bouquet of sprayed carnations I'm sure. I tried again.

"We're not even thinking of..."

(con't, p. 6)
As the bus pulled into Baronn View, Mary Anther had the oddest and most distinct sensation that she had never left this town of her childhood days. Back in New York she had read of the terrible, burning drought and the stunted crops but the drought had somehow seemed too far away.

"The land is a sterile waste," the newspapers said. But to Mary, the year she was 15 was the worst the drought had ever been. The people in New York did not know that, however, nor did they care. Most of them had never seen an Iowa cornfield, they did not understand the stark and awful tragedy of a field full of dying, half ripened stalks of corn, or what it did to the pride of the farmer. They could not see how the sun was sometimes a merciless god and the land a willing sacrifice, because they themselves had never gotten away from the city long enough to find out. But Mary remembered—even the pleas and prayers for rain that had gone unanswered in the old brick church.

The people's attitude had been one of extreme sadness and despair, Mary reflected. It was not as if they had been reduced to a diet of soybean soup and potatoes, but the loss of thousands of dollars in terms of bushels per acre of corn dealt a damaging blow to the spirit of competition between the farmers. In truth, they were all equal now and the people complained bitterly when the drought did not touch the entire state. It seemed that the Almighty had decided to shut up his crystal water fountains and move to a more favorable community.

"The land is a sterile waste," Mary said to herself as she looked out the window at the men leaning idly against the country store. It was as if, in the saying of it, the words took on a deeper significance for her.

When Mary stepped off the bus on the edge of town, the first thing she saw was not the Fructus O'Ferre Cemetery sign but the sun, glaring with an intense red, almost bronze-white light, in an otherwise perfectly calm and medium blue sky. She closed her eyes and saw little red suns shaped pattern across the strange blackness. But the red flashing sensation was soon gone and Mary's eyes adjusted rapidly to the noon day glare.

Mary looked at the sign again and the letters of Fructus O'Ferre came sharply into focus. It was the name of the man who had donated the land for the cemetery—a rich, fat, balding little man who sat on his riches the way a hen sat on her eggs. He fit her image of him the way a draw string fits a pouch and he was, it was rumored, just as tight.

Nothing was allowed to "go to seed" in this cemetery. The caretaker had an impeccable taste when it came to choosing flower and shrub arrangements and the lawn was the greenest it could possibly be for nine months of the year. There may not have been one drop of water in the whole town but there was always water for the cemetery, Fructus had the money and Fructus bought the water. It simply would not do to have a poorly kept cemetery. That would not even be respect for the dead but would reflect on the townspeople. It was the custom.

Mary sighed. No, Baronn View had not changed very much. Not even its observance of Memorial Day. Even now she could see from the sidewalk that many tourists were strolling casually among the gravestones as if they were guests at a picnic.

When tourists passed through Baronn View they were usually on their way to the famous Grotto of Redemption, a Catholic shrine made entirely out of rocks and stones of many different colors and sizes. Fourth of July picnics formed in her mind at the thought and she remembered the artificial red, white and blue crepe paper flowers that were thrown into the crowd by Miss Independence, before the mayor gave his annual opening address dealing with the town's gratitude for America's religious freedom, political freedom, and civic responsibility that the townspeople were all to exhibit. The people responded well with cheers and claps and then the Rev. A. J. Anther was called up to the platform from the crowd to deliver the closing prayer.

It was a good prayer and Mary reflected that her father had always had a way with words. He was short and to the point and he was, she just realized now, the pinnacle that the townspeople's beliefs, the beacon which they took their own faith. It struck her then that the one church, which had been standing for nearly a century, was in the center of the town. That was the way it had always been. Her father, the church, the town. It was hard to separate the one from the other.

Through the fence, Mary noticed the tourists' Memorial Day ritual of placing artificial flowers on the graves. It was a typically tourist thing to do simply because the flowers were cheaper than real ones and lasted longer.

She remembered her father explaining it to her the year she was 10. It was the first time that she had ever gone inside the cemetery by herself. As her father had explained to her they were paying their respects to all the veterans who had died in their wars and to the people who had died in Baronn View.

"Father, why didn't we bring any flowers like the other people?"

Mary gazed curiously about and noticed all the Memorial Day strangers. They were tourists on their way to the Grotto, her father had said.

"Bringing flowers is a sentimental waste of your time and money," her father added, nodding towards a tourist. "They don't understand the true value of love. It's not in the deed but in the seed. If you don't understand the sacrifice they made," and he pointed to the grave of a soldier, "then you won't have the right kind of love to bring."

"Oh," she said, not understanding. They looked at a few stones and she guessed she was bored because that was when the silly, childish game began.

"Father, how did he die?" she wanted to know, pointing at a large and rather prominent gravestone. "How did she die, Father? Was it poison, or was it suicide?"

A pause for a breath, and then the game went on. "Or was it—liverwurst!"

The very idea of the hated liverwurst killing off someone plunged Mary into helpless giggles and shouts of laughter. Mary remembered the laughter, and the hand that with one sharp, swift slap, had cut it off.

"Father!"

"No one, and I repeat no one, laughs at death!" It was said sternly and coldly so that Mary would understand that people do not laugh in cemeteries.

"But Father, the people are dead. They can't hear me."

"The unfairness of the slab made Mary cringe inside.

And now that she thought about it, it was the laugh and the slap that she remembered more than the thrill of being with her father. Why had they both not understood?

The whole thing was one of those small tragedies in life that you never think much about when you are actually living through it. But later, when you had the time, and the years to think on it, the understanding came, and with it, the pain. You listened to the pain because it had happened and you had felt it, but that was all. Life simply went on as the well worn cliche so aptly put it.

Lost in her thoughts, Mary opened the wire gate mechanically. She went in, forgetting the other people until she heard a deep voice intone irritably behind her.

"Where shall I put these flowers, Father?"

"I don't know. Steve, anywhere I guess," sighed the woman called Margaret. "Does it really matter? I mean, it's not like we have to know the person, do we?"

There was a slight pause.

"I should think the most important thing would be that we remembered, and stopped."

"Well, if you don't make up your mind pretty soon, then I'm going," he said. The impatience he felt for Margaret's slowness was all too apparent.

"Ha," said Margaret scornfully, "That's (con p.3)"
A Walk Down the Block, cont... "Surely God's Grace is big enough to cover Mrs. O'Toole..."

"Of course He does," he snapped impatiently.

"Then Father, I don't see your point." She put the mixer on low for one last minute to make sure that the peaks were still stiff enough. "Surely God's grace is big enough to cover Mrs. O'Toole if it is big enough to cover me."

The eggs were whipped now and Mary glanced outside at the brick of the old church. It was almost suppertime. The clock on the wall ticked loudly in the silence. She was thinking about how kind you gave when you understood the sacrifice, knowing you would get nothing back in return. Her father interrupted her and it seemed to her in the silence that his words came out like the slow way over an upright razor blade, into her heart.

"I'm older and wiser than you are, my dear, and I've seen a great deal more of the world than you have. Stop and think before you talk, Mary. Only a very naive person would say what you have just said."

She turned then from her cake, pouring out through her eyes the full intensity of her bitterness.

"And whose fault is it, may I ask, that I happen to live here in this town, and that you will not let me associate with the one heathen here who is 'the world.' I'd rather be Mrs. O'Toole's friend and go to hell with her if I must, then burn in your sterile hell here."

Mary ran from the room crying. She had said the words that had come from her heart and now there was nothing left to say. She had only wanted to be free, to love the way God loved her. But something had gone wrong in the saying of it. It was one thing to love those who didn't know the truth. It was quite another to love those who did. The difficulty lay in doing both. Lost in her thoughts, Mary did not hear the woman until she spoke directly at her elbow.

"Excuse me, but is it alright if I put my flowers here?"

Mary looked up. It was the woman called Margaret.

She looked curiously at Mary and then spoke, pointing at the gravestone. "How did he die?" And then noticing the tears, "I presume you are a relative?"

"He was taking a walk down the block."

Mary replied mechanically, "when a drunken teenager hit him from behind. He might have lived, you know, but he had a heart condition, and the shock killed him."

"What a tragedy!" murmured the woman. "What a waste," she said, her eyes taking in the freshly watered grass and the exquisite flower arrangements around the gravestones. She held her handkerchief to her eyes and dabbed lightly.

"Well, here," the woman offered. She laid on the grave of the Rev. A.J. Anther a bouquet of perfectly formed, luscious, pale pink, plastic flowers, and then walked away.

But, Mary thought, she had not told the woman the greatest tragedy of all. Her father had died with a copy of her now famous short story, "The Heart of a Living Flower," in his hands. He had been on the way, her mother said, to Mrs O'Toole's house on Beacon Street.
The Seasons Still Change

I stopped our battered pickup at the field where my husband Dave and son Rog were working. It was a fresh May afternoon, the sun lightly toasting me but the air still cool enough to give goose bumps. The fields being planted with corn and soybeans were still dark brown, but the oats and hay fields were a fuzzy green.

When the men were working in the fields I always brought them a lunch about the middle of the afternoon, the sun lightly toasting me but I like it better that way. It was like a picnic for me, I'd bring a blanket and we'd sit in the ditch along the gravel road. Being outdoors always made me feel clean and I like to feel a part of the work.

They were planting corn that day. Rog would go over with the ground with the disk first, the circular blades chopping the ground into fine little pieces. Dave would follow with the planter on which four V-shaped pieces of metal pushed four straight, even grooves in the ground. Small seeds would drop from tubes into the grooves, and when the men worked on the back of the planter covered the seeds again. The men stopped at the end of the rows and walked toward me.

Dave had on his baggy blue jeans, Co-op feed cap and an old, white, short-sleeved Sunday shirt. No matter how often the kids would tease him about how awful he looked he still wouldn't give up his uniform. His face is so familiar to me it is hard to describe, a furrowed forehead, rough, weather-worn skin, square face and two white, new looking pieces of skin where his hair is receding. Rog looks a lot like his dad, square face, deepset blue eyes, but he's taller, about six feet two and not quite filled out yet.

"Hi Mom!" Rog said, "I hope you have lots to eat."

"How do ham sandwiches, fresh baked cookies, kool-aid and coffee for dad sound?"

"Pretty good," Rog answered as he dug into the grey metal lunch bucket.

Usually Dave was full of talk about the weather, how good the ground looked and how many rabbits he had seen, but he only greeted me with a "Hi Jen" and sat down to eat. He looked out over the fields as he ate, chewing his bites slowly instead of gulping them down with coffee, which was his normal way of eating. Finally, when he was almost finished he spoke, "Say Rog, how about making the farm into a partnership after you graduate this spring?"

I felt scared and empty inside, waiting with him for the answer. When Rog was born, the first son after four daughters, Dave had come bounding into my room. "That's quite a boy, Jen. He'll be pitching manure in no time, I can tell already. He's a born farmer with those big hands and broad shoulders."

Smiling, I teased, "But what if he wants to play baseball in the long fingers?"

"Piano! Not a chance, he won't have time for anything that silly. No, he'll be a farmer some day."

Sitting at the sandwich he was holding, Rog hesitantly replied, "I've been thinking about it a lot, dad. It's hard trying to decide what to do when I know it might be for the rest of my life, but I have decided. I'm going to college in the fall to become a vet."

Rog had barely been walking when he went along with Dave to do the chores. He'd stick his little fingers in the calves' mouths for them to suck on, and would sit on the ground by the barn, letting the kittens run over his stubby little legs while he talked to them in his own language. By the time he'd finished his own chores, so Dave let him feed the few chickens we had with a little bucket.

When he was in second grade, he watched the miracle of birth for the first time. The next day they had an excited Rog at show and tell. "You should've seen it! The sow was just laying there on her side, grunting, and all of a sudden out popped a little pig and—plop—it fell onto the ground. There was all slimy stuff on him but he just wiggled right out of it and while he was doing that, out popped another and then another, about six of them. Even after they were cleaned off on the straw and started sucking on the sow, just like they'd been there all the time."

"It took Dave a second to realize what Rog meant when he said he, shook his head with a look of disbelief on his face. "But I've always figured on you taking over when I retire. All the girls are married and none of their husbands are farmers, they can't take over. What happened? When did you change your mind? I thought you wanted to follow me."

Sometimes Dave gets carried away by how much it all means to you dad. But that can't change my mind. Even if you do love it so deeply, that doesn't automatically mean I can feel the same way. That's almost the same way I feel about animals. And farming is so much work with machinery, and that's something I don't like at all."

He hadn't always felt that way about machinery. When he was six, it was "I'm big enough Dad, let me drive please."

Dave would let Rog sit on his lap and steer while he'd shot put, but stuck to his rule of not letting Rog drive alone until the summer he turned nine.

Late in that summer the men were chopping corn into silage for cattle feed that winter. Rog had come out to help haul the loads of silage from the field. They would dump the silage onto a pile behind the corncrib. It took about two days for them to finish by our place. The second day one of the men couldn't come because his cattle had broken down a fence and were all over his fields, so he had to spend the day looking for them. Dave wanted to get that done that day so he let Rog drive the tractor that packed the silage down. Rog would hop on the rectangular pile, packing all the chopped up corn close together so it wouldn't blow away or spoil easily.

When I went to tell Rog to come to the house for lunch that afternoon, I was shocked by how high the pile had become. It was dangerous work because the tractor's outside wheel had to come within a foot of the edge. If the wheel slipped over the side, the tractor would roll and could easily pin Rog.

At the table I asked Dave, "Don't you think Rog should quit? The pile is getting so high!"

Glancing across the table at Rog, Dave answered, "You worry too much Jen, he's big enough. Aren't you Rog?" Rog nodded his head violently in agreement.

I was still worried. They went back outdoors and kept looking out of the window toward the corncrib, even though I couldn't see the pile behind it. I noticed one of the men come on the yard with a load and watched it go out of sight behind the crib. Suddenly he came running back into view, his heavy work boots moving as fast as he could make them. I wanted to run and hide because I didn't want to hear what he was going to say, but I forced my legs to carry me outdoors to meet him. He came puffing up and gasped, "The tractor rolled, and Rog's leg is pinned!"

Frantically, I tried to remember what I had learned in a first aid course I had taken. The only thing that came to my mind was "Keep the victim warm to prevent shock."

Hurrying to the house I grabbed the phone book from the table and ran to Rog, shouting over my shoulder to call an ambulance.

When I reached Rog, I felt completely helpless. One of the big back wheels had his entire right leg pinned and he was lying face down on the ground. He had his head turned to one side, but he just wiggled right out of it and answered, "You worry too much, Dad. But that can't change my mind. Even if you do love it so deeply, that doesn't automatically mean I can feel the same way. That's almost the same way I feel about animals. And farming is so much work with machinery, and that's something I don't like at all."

"I'm going to be okay, ain't I mom? Dad's going to be so mad at me. I got too close to the edge, " Rog whispered to me.

I smiled at him, "Sure, you'll be all right, just don't worry. Dad won't be mad. Lie there quiet, and everything won't be okay."

He made it through that experience with just one break on the top part of his leg and it healed quickly. But it was a long time before he would go near a tractor after that.

Dave was glaring at Rog, now he spoke again. "You'll have machinery everywhere you work. And how will you pay for college? I can't help. You haven't been getting very good grades. College is hard, and you don't know how to study, you never have. You won't be able to make it."

"Dad, I've been saving money from the calves I've raised and sold. Maybe I can find work at college, and otherwise I'll just have to borrow it. I know it'll be hard but it's what I want and you can't change my mind." That finished the subject for Rog (cont., p. 5)
TRIOLOGY

Words
Words, like any other paint job
drop, round in ceremony, down
tense and shiverfull of promise
amoebas on the waiting book
then in stupid dribbles slither off
across a barren page, a human soul.

Words, like any other art form
can never tell it all at all.

Words Again
Without our toehold on
the floating rumor that
He’d sanctify a syllable
we might as well
drop dead
(stillborn, past walls of silent air).

The Last Word
lies hidden
and still open
floating deep, deep
and deeply sure
among the souls
of men.

—Ag Vander Wal

UNTITLED!

Bird on the free wind—
I will not be caught
is the sound
burnt into
every grass moving,
every tree branch twitch
that scrapes hard
across the morning sky.

—Bonnie Kuipers

THE GARDEN

At eight
the whole world
is a playground,
and in the big elm trees
there lurks (look hard)
a mission control
for our trip to mars
(the vegetable garden)
So jump on the swing set—
I mean super duper
two seat
shiny red spaceship—
and take off.
Fill-er-up on the moon,
sandbox fuel ain’t too dear.

Moon creature! Here!
Dumb kid nex door,
give me a hand.

Too bad vader seen,
live,
the first landing on mars,
and our rock and plant
collecting expedition
in his garden
because . . .

two brave spacemen
have this strange new disease,
"k lap op de achterwerk."

—John5uk

The Vision
—Bill Huisken

Seasons, cont . . .

and he stared right back at Dave with his
mouth set in a hard, straight line.

Rising, Dave walked angrily back to the tractor. Rag shrugged his shoulders and
followed.

It was about a month ago that Rog left
for school. He went the morning before
school started because he had about a
hundred and fifty miles to travel and he
wanted to meet his roommate and look
around before classes started. Dave and I
stood close together by the fender of Rog’s
old Chev. We’ve never known how to say
good-bye. It was kind of chilly standing
there without coats on in the cool, fall
weather.

Rog opened the car door. “Well, ‘bye
mom. See you at Thanksgiving.”

“Be good, Rog. And write sometime.”

Dave was looking down at the ground.
Rog glanced at him, then looked at me
with those deep blue eyes and a quivering
smile, got in the car and drove off the yard.

“I have to go finish the chores.” Dave
said to me quietly and turned, walking
towards the barn. His shoulders were
sagging a little more than usual and his
steps were slow. The leaves on the tree by
the barn were already starting to fall, leaving
only the bare, dark branches. Looking up at the grey sky, threatening
rain, I called after Dave. “Next thing you
know it’ll be snowing again.”
Saturday, cont...

But Auntie Do and Joanne were happily chatting together for the moment, removing the hanger with the utmost care and shaping the veil which meanwhile had also come out of the closet. Down came the zipper of the white dress, down came the zipper of my green dress. I didn't feel like arguing so I submitted, figuring it would be more of a hassle to get out of it then to go along with it.

In a moment my green dress lay neatly across the bed and the white one was on its way over my head. I thought absurdly, this is the first time since I was five years old I had help getting dressed.

Then it was on. It was about five inches too short everywhere and my brown suede shoes and green stockings stuck out underneath. Too much, I thought, and underskirt. But Auntie Do wasn't phased in the least. She was pushing and yanking at the zipper to make it go up. I pushed my ribs out as far as I could but after a considerable bit of trouble she got it up anyway. Then she stood back to get a more objective look at it.

"How about if you step out of your shoes." This, she must have reasoned, would make the dress longer and wider. She looked thoughtful for a moment, then her face lit up.

"You know what you can do," she said, "I know a store in town where they have the most lovely lace. Now, you could lengthen the dress by adding a panel of lace to the bottom."

"Yeah!" Joanne was pleased; they both were. "It does look so nice on you Alice," she added.

"Hm-hm," I agreed, but I knew it looked ridiculous.

"And you could do the same thing with the sleeves," continued Auntie Do who was now holding up my arm. "You could get another panel and slip it into the middle like a band all the way around."

Yes, that would make it longer alright. "Does it feel comfy?" Joanne asked. "Comfy!" I thought that had nothing to do with it.

"It's pretty tight," I told them.

Auntie Do knew exactly what to do. "You can get some of the same lace and make panels along the side." She looked around and picked up the veil. "Here, let's try this now."

It was one made of stiff net that looked like someone had tried to cut it with a saw. I looked even more bridish. They tried to get me to squeeze my feet into Joanne's tiny satin pumps but I told them I had blisters on my feet so would rather not.

We all stood quiet for a moment studying my ridiculous image in the mirror; at least I thought it was ridiculous.

Joanne broke the silence.

"Well we just wanted you to know you are welcome to wear it if you want to. It would save you so much money."

"You're very thoughtful," I said, and felt a little awkward. "But like I said before, David and I aren't getting married." Now I felt embarrassed dressed the way I was. I took the veil off.

"If it's because of money, Alice," Auntie Do said almost in a whisper, "David's Uncle Roger and I are in a position to help." She would not back down: we were getting married, and we did need money.

"Thank you," I said, "I'll remember that." And I started the struggle to get out of the dress. In a few moments I looked like my plain old self again and felt tired and ready to go home.

In the living room Uncle Roger, Robert and David sat watching TV. David gave me an odd look and I returned one which meant I would explain later. Then he announced that he was on a health kick and wanted to get to bed before ten-thirty. That was baloney but they all thought it was marvellous. He had a knack for thinking of appropriate excuses.

So we left the Dibson family in the comfort of their living room. As we pulled out of the driveway and onto the street, four smiling, happy faces and waving hands could be seen through the window.