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Shell Mound

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SHELL MOUND

Susan Gildersleeve

The bride moves like a liner across the freshly papered floor. She is frothy white, studded with seed pearls and trailing tendrils of hair, vine and ribbon. Her name is Erica, which is a bride's name, and she looks how a bride should look, thinks Pam, who knows how to be a bridesmaid: sometimes a dinghy and sometimes a tug.

The sun pours down in sheets out of a mackerel sky. The groom is who knows where. Under a napkin. Propping up a table leg. He has shrunk to the size of a walnut. It is not *his* day.

It is five and then six and then seven o'clock. After every dance, Pam watches the ushers re-paper the floor. She marks the tearing sound of the old paper as it is removed, the thickness of the new, the velvet feel of it underfoot and the way everything sinks into it: spilled wine and tears, the bride's slipper print, like a seal.

Erica leaves in a white Rolls, standing on the running board while the groom-driven car, taller than it is wide, trundles down the drive. She throws the bouquet overhand and the wires give way. Freesia, calla lilies, rice, ribbons and little bells, end over end over end in a shower for the maids. Under the waxed, black tires of the car the pebbles of the drive pop and crunch, small as baby teeth.

Pam leaves with Lance, her usher, and they drive east through cornfields with the sun about to set behind them. Lance brakes suddenly. A horse is loose, chased by three men who've left cars at hasty angles, doors open and ping-pong. The horse moves in delicate spasms and sidles away from the men, whose arms are wide open. They pen it between them and they are all grabbing, and then the horse is suddenly far from them, is nosing into the green corn at the side of the road. Now just its head is visible, traveling along above the corn for twenty feet, thirty, and after that the corn is deeper and the horse disappears completely.

Pam enjoys the drive. Her periwinkle slippers cradle her feet. The bones of her feet relax in the shoes. Under its taffeta casing, her belly settles and hums to itself. These clothes fit perfectly. She and Lance talk and laugh until Lance

drops her off outside her apartment and smiles and drives back to Cleveland. How the world slips from her. It falls out of her open hand. It brushes against her, but doesn't take hold.

At home Pam removes the blue dress. It still has its taffeta smell, and when she hangs it with the others, the smell will grow stronger. In the front of the closet, the clothes shift and change. They fade or stain, shrink or stretch. They tear. She throws them away. Every summer, she adds to the store of dresses in the back of the closet. When she slips each new one in, the others whisper.