A photograph of a woman from behind, wearing a flowing orange dress. She is walking along a sandy beach towards the ocean, her right arm extended and her left hand holding a pair of tan high-heeled boots. The background shows the ocean waves under a bright sky.

THE PIRATE QUEEN

A NOVEL

PATRICIA HICKMAN
AUTHOR OF PAINTED DRESSES

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To Jordan M., who reminds me how easy it is to love.



And to our friends Judy and Del Arrendale. Judy, you wanted another beach book. Hope you like this one. Your friendship is a treasure; your prayers kept us afloat.

*Well something's lost, but something's gained
In living every day*

JONI MITCHELL, “Both Sides Now”

THE PIRATE QUEEN

1

My shell is not like this, I think. How untidy it has become! Blurred with moss, knobby with barnacles, its shape is hardly recognizable any more. Surely, it had a shape once. It has a shape still in my mind. What is the shape of my life?

ANNE MORROW LINDBERGH, *Gift from the Sea*

One might have observed that all of the right people had been invited to the Warren estate for the *Southern Living* shoot. The certainty of the Warren's happy existence on Lake Norman was firmly set in the minds of the departing guests. Undoubtedly, through the women present, the affair's success spread off the estate and into the notable neighborhoods. The party had ended leaving the catering help to stow away the perfectly selected china settings.

Saphora Warren pulled down the balloons, plucking them out of the air and then inserting a straight pin into the latex. As quickly as she dropped the dead latex remains, a teen boy she had hired to clean up after the lawn party picked them off the ground. He had trolled past her dock on his Jet Ski yesterday and, when he saw her sunning on her boat's deck, had asked in vain for a cold beer.

Lake Norman's shoreline lapped at the Warrens' family boat in the distance, the mast a cross against a pale pink manse located transversely

on the opposite harbor. One house sat like a relic on the Warrens' end of the Peninsula, a reminder of the older ranch houses standing before the year the lake was put in. It was unseasonably hot for late June. The warm brown water turned red along the clay-brimmed lawns.

Several of the guests had driven family boats across the lake, arriving early for the *Southern Living* lawn party. Had not Saphora's housekeeper, Tabitha, just led the women docking their motorboats and sailboats along the Warrens' dock into the guest room near the swimming pool to slip into garden dresses and brush out their hair, matted down after a morning of tennis? But here the afternoon had been spilled like sweet tea poured out, the ladies already gathering in clusters to kiss good-bye and float back to their pretty houses across the lake.

Saphora noticed she had forgotten to shave her legs. She pulled down the hem of her skirt as if she were straightening it at the same second Abigail Weed, the journalist from *Southern Living*, noted a few more descriptive details about Saphora's gardens, the patio containers holding gold black-eyed Susans that turned open faced to the sun. Saphora was popping the balloons so methodically that Sherry, her cook and personal assistant, ran from the kitchen out onto the paved patio yelling, "What in the world?"

"It's nothing," said Abigail, taking over, speaking for Saphora, and familiar enough with running *Southern Living* lawn parties like productions that she said to Sherry, "Sherry, can you help Mrs. Warren?"

Sherry took the straight pin from her boss like she would a child who might hurt herself. "Miss Saphora, aren't you the one to be doing that?" Sherry said, implying that Saphora should not do menial tasks like deflating balloons. But Saphora was not herself today and that accounted for her giddiness.

Abigail put down her laptop that held the contents of Saphora's "life on the lake" and joined Sherry in killing the remaining balloons.

"This is some place, Saphora. You live in your own fairy tale," said Abigail.

"Bender planned it this way from the beginning." Saphora had not noticed before how the high hedged wall surrounding the estate and the trees of a similar height enclosed the house like an evergreen compound. Bender had commandeered the landscaping crew using words like "picturesque" and "palatial."

"Bender's your husband, Dr. Warren?"

"The plastic surgeon. Yes. He invented a procedure." She did not know why she told Abigail that without her asking. But it was the surgical procedure and its ensuing fame in the medical community that gave Bender the things he needed to order his life. He dressed like a prince, closet arranged like a Manhattan department store. He was tall and good-looking.

When Saphora had gotten around to telling Bender the call had come from *Southern Living*, he was dressing in a golf shirt for his Sunday morning game. He patted her as he sprinted out the door, telling her she was using up the magic from her lucky star. He spread envy, she was pretty sure, as he putted over the third hole. She imagined him mentioning the *SL* lawn party in a casual way, like doctors do.

This morning he had taken one final turn around the rear lawn, proud the house was selected for the *Southern Living* magazine spread. Practically speaking, a write-up about them could affect home value in a sagging economy.

Not showing up for the lawn party was his way of making himself elusive so that he would become the subject of the party's talk. Saphora knew her lines just as she knew Abigail would have fished

around the subject of Bender's illustrious career until she acquiesced. So Saphora helped her cut to the point she was after. One last time. It was not that she owed him anything. Promoting Bender was a full-time habit.

"I heard about that award," said Abigail. "Back in the nineties, right? It's all over the Internet. You must be the envy of all your friends."

Saphora looked at the four remaining women still mingling on the patio. "I don't know." She smiled. A faint laugh fluttered out of her throat. She was not as fast as Bender with words. She would lie awake, and the right thing to say would come to mind. But too late. Her brain was about to explode from storing so many unsaid things. Thinking deeply rather than broadly presented so many lost opportunities.

Saphora was curious about Abigail's life in Florida. She imagined Abigail writing clever descriptive phrases about the photographs of the places where she had traveled. She made fast friends, probably had to with her schedule. Abigail was a woman who did not care whether her clothes were designer made or factory overruns. There was an attitude about her that Saphora defined as gypsy. A woman who lived to cull out the far-flung corners of the universe.

Sherry joined Abigail, and the two of them set to reopening the still-inflated balloons, sucking the helium out of them. Sherry sang, "La la la la." Abigail laughed. Then Sherry laughed until Mark Ng, the photographer, walked up on them.

"I've got to head back to Tampa," he said to Abigail.

"You're always the spoilsport, Mark," said Abigail. The helium was still constricting her vocal chords.

Mark hefted his camera bag and walked away from them. Saphora had never met a more somber young man. He did not like

or want to keep any of the photographs using the lake as a backdrop, calling the lake “too brown to photograph.” Saphora overheard him ask Abigail if it would be improper to colorize the lake photographs blue, but Abigail was a purist. “It’s a lake, Mark, not the ocean.” As soon as he walked away, she said to Saphora, “He’s a coast dweller. He doesn’t get lake life.”

Saphora liked Abigail right from the start because of her secret admiration for cynical women. Abigail whispered sharp criticisms into her ear; she was good at assessing people on sight. That was evident as each Peninsula wife had arrived browned from playing tennis on clay courts. “There’s one with plenty of time on her hands,” she would say.

Abigail was good, however, at bringing people she liked into her circle. She took Saphora into her confidence at the outset, making Saphora feel elevated, as if she and Abigail were circling overhead, their communal laughter falling down on the mortals below.

The few remaining guests lined up along the courtyard quad to offer polite farewells to Saphora, but mostly to ogle Abigail, hoping against hope she would use her magical influence to pick their house for a photo shoot. But today was reserved: Pick Saphora Day.

One of the women was a naturalist named Erin Guff. She thanked Saphora for Bender’s donation to her pet ecological fund.

Bender had not mentioned donating to Erin’s charity.

“That husband of yours is generous to a fault,” said Erin.

Her tone was affected. She was hiding something, Saphora decided.

Erin lobbied for environmental interests along the Outer Banks, like educating homeowners about how lawn fertilizer polluted the ocean. Saphora admired her activism if only because it seemed so

daring. She admired anyone unafraid to confront and wished she could have that kind of boldness. But Erin's subversive tactics were not admirable.

Today Erin stood like a centerpiece among the other Peninsula wives. She wore a white strapless dress picked up in New York, not like the other women, who dressed like colorful birds from Charlotte boutiques. She looked away for a millisecond, long enough for Saphora to come to the conclusion that she had slept with Bender. Saphora should not have invited her to the party. Now that she thought about it, women had weakened Bender's character.

Erin turned to face her again. "I love you dearly, Saphora. You're a treasure." She said it as if she had found wings and flown between Saphora and Abigail.

Saphora let Erin kiss her cheek. But it left an itch.

Mark came alongside Saphora as she unthreaded a silk garland out of the trellis. "Thank you for letting us crash in today, Saphora," he said.

"Can you send some of the pictures to me?" she asked Mark. "I can pay you."

Mark's sleeve brushed her forearm. He packed up the camera but seemed to take his time. Stalling was what a man like Mark did when he wanted to linger around a woman. He awkwardly interjected idle chatter, unlike her husband, who was never without exactly the right thing to say. Saphora was terrible at flirting. She had once filled out one of those personality quizzes that assessed her flirting skills. She was in the one percentile of women who did not know how to flirt. Not knowing how to flirt seemed to make her better, less like Bender.

"Sure. Here's what it'll cost you. Tell me how you make your bar-

becue sauce,” Mark said to Saphora. He winked, she was pretty sure. Very charming, an Asian man’s wink. She walked alongside him toward the front gate. The back of his hand brushed the back of her hand. He was not so somber after all.

Saphora had not cooked one of the twenty or more dishes for the staged party. Sherry had whipped up the sauce in between cooking two other dishes. “It’s the chili peppers,” she told him, sounding more southern than usual, probably because Mark seemed to expect it from her. “And brown sugar. Sherry can tell you.” She had a terrible memory for the details of what went into a sauce or any combination of ingredients that came together so perfectly as to draw admiration. Memory was not her strong suit. She could go downstairs for a cold cola, and the next thing she knew she’d be staring into the dryer trying to remember why she came downstairs. “Sherry’s around here somewhere,” she told him.

“Did I hear my name?” Sherry sidestepped Saphora, flirting above her boss’s missed opportunity. She was African American, tall, leggy. The kind of woman who would turn heads if she could only afford the right clothes. But her voice was still so helium bloated that Mark turned away.

“I’ll e-mail you, Mrs. Warren,” he said. “Just so you know, you’re the nicest hostess I’ve photographed so far.”

Saphora hung on Mark’s compliment and his gaze until he broke eye contact and headed through the gate for his car.

Sherry finished with the catering company’s associate, who was responsible for packing up the remaining folding chairs. The last of the chairs disappeared into the delivery truck. Soon the lawn was clean again, although trampled.

Sherry said, “This is the best party we’ve ever had, Miss Saphora.

You impressed the fool out of those ladies from the Peninsula Club. Not a one will ever top this."

"Because of you, Sherry. You should take the rest of the day now," said Saphora, "for yourself." That should get her out of the way.

"But what about dinner? Dr. Warren, he's home by dark tonight, he told me."

"We'll warm up leftovers. You cooked plenty, enough for an emerging country."

"I am beat, for sure. I got to prop up my dogs."

"Go home and rest. As a matter of fact, take tomorrow off too. Paid, I mean. You deserve it."

She caught Sherry off guard.

Saphora walked her to the back entry where Sherry had parked her Kia. She helped Sherry into her car and told her to check in with Dr. Warren Thursday morning. Sherry continued to resist being brushed out of the house so quickly. "I saw your suitcase lying open on the bed when I was putting up your clean towels, Miss Saphora. You going somewhere?" she asked.

"Oriental," said Saphora, not looking directly at Sherry. The Outer Banks beach house Bender bought five summers back, in the coastal village of Oriental, had stood empty for all that time.

"You should have told me. I could have driven up a day ahead and stocked up for summer. You know how cobwebs take over."

"I'm in a stocking mood," said Saphora. "It's therapeutic."

"Not for me. It's just plain old work."

Saphora ran out of excuses. The late afternoon hour was swimming away, and she needed to get her cook and personal assistant out from under foot. "I left that bag of costume jewelry for you in the bathroom. Did you find it?"

Sherry was on to her. She kept her eyes on Saphora in a manner showing her unease with leaving her mistress to organize dinner. "I did. That's some of your good stuff. You all right, Miss Saphora?"

"Better than most." It was only costume jewelry; Sherry liked the junkier accessories. She looked good in bright costumey pieces that cheapened other women's looks. "This is your bowling night. Jerry is waiting for you."

"You know me too good, Miss Saphora." She took her time putting her pocketbook in the backseat, her apron in the passenger seat, folded too neatly for something she was about to put in the wash. She finally climbed into the car. There was a moment when she looked as if she was still conflicted over leaving.

"Have fun bowling," said Saphora.

Sherry closed the door and started her engine.

"Bye!" Saphora managed to get her sent off, down the drive and out the gate.

A food smell hung in the kitchen. It followed Saphora up the staircase and into the bedroom when she realized it was she who smelled like everything that had been cooked from four this morning on. The steamed clams and chili-soaked shrimp were for the time being a part of the fabric clinging to her skin. She peeled off the blouse and the woven silk skirt and slipped into the shower. The dual shower heads shot the water at her skin like tiny bullets. The bathroom mirrors steamed over so that when she stepped out onto the marble she could not see any of her face or the small dimples of cellulite pocking her buttocks. She cycled four days a week, but her body responded like an old pillow.

She stuffed the nine-hundred-dollar blouse into the dry-cleaning bag. She was leaving behind the expensive stuff, the part of her

wardrobe she had passed through Bender's impeccable filter, and taking her everyday clothes. She wondered if she would ever see that blouse again. Benny Taylor's boy Eric would pick up the dry-cleaner's bag Thursday morning after Sherry hung it on the rear kitchen door. Three days later, Eric would return the dry cleaning—her blouse, Bender's laundered shirts, and his golf pants. Sherry would whisk them upstairs to hang in the dressing room. Saphora shoved the blouse deep into the dry-cleaning bag as if she didn't care what happened to it.

She finished rolling up her comfortable traveling clothes to pack tightly and then slipped into the twenty-dollar jeans bought on clearance at Kohl's. Bender had rolled his eyes at her for slumming, as he called it. It was her happy rebellion to wear whatever she wanted. Saphora packed the Gucci suitcase with a few of her skinny clothes and some middle-of-the-road size sixes since she could possibly lose weight while living alone. Then she included the everyday clothes that actually fit. Maybe size eight would be her permanent state of being. *It's up to me*, she thought.

She looked around the Bender-sized bedroom for the last time. Tabitha had come Monday to clean. Saphora made the bed this morning, four hours after Bender got up at three to drive to the hospital. There was not a wrinkle in the bedding. She could flip quarters on the sheets. She opened the nightstand drawer. The items in the drawer were neatly segregated into a tray that held Bender's watch and wedding band at night. There were always batteries in the flashlight tucked into the drawer that Bender used when he routinely got up at two in the morning to relieve himself. A new set of golf clubs in the bag waited just inside the walk-in dressing room. A mini putter station lay five feet out from the dressing mirror. It took little time

to remove any traces of herself. She wondered how long it would take for Bender to notice she was gone.

She zipped the suitcase closed and grabbed a ball cap she normally wore while running. She pressed it down over the two-hundred-dollar hairstyle Bender had called “perfect, so perfect for you, Saphora.”

She rolled the suitcase onto the upstairs landing at the exact moment the front door opened. She assumed Sherry was coming back to remind her how to use the warming oven. She stepped up to the edge of the overhang, resting her hands on the balustrade to look down into the entry. But Sherry had not come back. Bender came through the front door instead of the back entry, where he usually parked the blue Lexus, the only car he willingly left out in the rain. His face was white as scallops, and his skin palely gleaming. His shirt was wrinkled, and he had not dressed for the hospital but was wearing a plaid shirt, like the kind he wore tarpon fishing off the coast of Florida. He looked to the back of the house, as if he were looking for her, or maybe for Sherry to mix up a martini in the middle of the day. Had he not said he had an important surgery scheduled with a client from the Peninsula? A nose job, wasn’t it? Maybe it was yesterday. She couldn’t remember.

“Good grief, Bender. It’s not even four,” she said in the quiet of the afternoon.

“Saphora,” he said, breathless, as if he had been running. He was looking straight at her, but not as if he was at all perceiving her. He was looking past her. It was not like him. Bender was always direct. “I’m glad I found you,” he said distantly.

She was thinking about the suitcase beside her on the floor. How to explain? She would send him into the kitchen for a beer and then

hide the luggage. He would fall asleep halfway through the drink, and then she would leave. Nothing was keeping her from leaving.

"There's cold beer in the kitchen. Some leftovers. You like fried green tomatoes. I can't have any so you might as well," she said as if she had not already eaten two. Her pulse drummed in her ears.

Before she could rattle off the list of dishes she thought might entice him, detour him from his upstairs shower, he said, "I'm sick."

The sky was not yet darkening and would not for several hours. Not even a motorboat rumbled distantly from the dock.

"A glass of club soda then?" she asked, nervous, her thoughts spinning.

"Come down," he said, disappearing into the house.

She caught up with Bender after passing the mud room, where the photographs of their three children hung above the coatrack. The coatrack still hung eye level to a first grader even though their youngest boy, Ramsey, was now married and a dad.

Saphora had her first child because she was too young to organize her life around birth control. So she spent the first two years of marriage organizing her life around Turner. He was the biggest baby, her mother-in-law said, in four generations of Warrens. The Warren men came small into the world and then grew to be tall men. They were big earners and big spenders. Bender's mama had called her only son Bender the Spender. She had passed away two years earlier after a vacation in Austria. Bender had said women who married Warren men seldom lived long after their men died. They lost their purpose.

Turner had seemed like a lonesome little boy. If Saphora had known about temperaments back then, she would have known Turner was born to need people around him. She could have had twenty children and never filled Turner's need for companionship.

She had not thought of putting him in day school until after his sister, Gwennie, was born. Then the youngest came along, another boy whom his brother and sister called Ramsey, after a story that had been read to them in Sunday school. Saphora never told them the difference between Ramsey and Ramses. But the name had suited him the minute he opened his eyes—blue, never to turn another color.

Saphora read baby books and went to a parenting class at a church, where they tried to rook her into membership. Confidence in mothering came too late. But finally the three of her children were in school and then they were grown.

Turner married a girl from New York. She took him away from his Lake Norman nest and then sent him back. He was a charmer but not a good provider, and girls these days are smart to catch on. Turner kept his boy, Eddie, on weekends and summers. He called his boy Eddie because his ex named him Schuyler Eduardo Warren even with Turner at her side laughing and telling her she could not possibly mean it. She was not Latino. All of the Warrens debated the middle name privately. Saphora's sister, Emerald, said it was probably an old lover named Eduardo. But Emerald was prone to gossip out of turn.

Gwennie was an attorney who never married. Ramsey married a girl who kept him working long hours at a job anyone could do. Ramsey's first child, Liam, had the temperament to either blow up a building someday or else research incurable diseases. He tortured his brothers, twin boys, until they came running to Saphora, calling her Nana, a name Ramsey's wife, Celeste, selected when Saphora couldn't accept any of the pet names for Grandmother.

As Bender continued down the pass-through that led into the living room, Saphora was thinking about her children back when

they were young and under her control. It was strange, as if the house had locked away the echoes of them running through the house calling out to each other, only to let them out at that instant.

Bender took the upholstered chair that faced away from the bookcases. He looked awkward in the chair, and that is when Saphora realized he had never sat down in that chair until now.

"You should have seen the *Southern Living* people, treating us like we were all Hollywood celebrities, snapping pictures of Sherry's food. I didn't let on that I was nervous."

She figured Vicki Jaunice might have noticed her anxiety when Saphora inadvertently dipped her shrimp into Vicki's sauce. That was when, for the first time, she decided Vicki had slept with Bender, the same as Bernie Mae Milton and Pansy Fulton.

Vicki had gotten her start in business when Saphora recommended Vicki's cosmetics business to all her friends. The home-based business had ballooned into a sizable basement office with six staff members. She should never have let Vicki get a foot in the door with her friends.

Bender opened a Red Stripe with one twist of the cap, without looking at it or her.

"Abigail says our house photographs like a castle. Isn't that good?" she asked. "She's the *SL* journalist." Had she told him that already?

Bender could not settle comfortably into the chair. He had put on the weight he often did in the winter but would take it off as soon as he could get active again in the summer.

"I've never noticed so many books in this room," he said.

"I should give some to the library. But they are, after all, our books." Saphora kept books from as far back as second grade. She could look at one spine and it was like a time machine, like the blue

book entitled *The Last Affair* given to her by a boy who kissed her outside the boys' locker room. He had never asked her for a date. But he kissed her and then handed her the book. Whenever he passed her in the hallway, he winked at her.

"Have you noticed a change in me, say, over the past month?" he asked.

"You've gained weight, but then you take it off as you please," she said. He could gain weight, and women still thought of him as good-looking.

"I can hardly take the stairs. Then, dizzy spells. You haven't noticed me complaining of headaches?" He had a controlled tone, normally, but his voice tensed. His long, manicured fingers lay on top of his stomach accusingly. "And nausea." He took a pair of eyeglasses from a case in the table drawer and carefully pushed them up his nose. Then he got up and, running his finger down a shelf of medical books, pulled three from the bookcase. He placed them on the end table and then sat back down in the chair. A faint moan came out of Bender such as she had never heard before.

"Maybe you are taking the stairs more slowly," she said. His expectations of her were often passed off like a quiz. There were curious other seasons of Bender, as she privately called them, where he went on self-assessment tangents. When he did, he swept her and the kids into the assessments too, over their weight; whether or not she had kept Turner, Gwennie, and Ramsey sweating long enough over a tennis game; or improving their math skills.

Lately he had focused solely on improving Turner, a relief to Saphora as it took the pressure off her to perform according to Bender's tightly regimented life.

"It just seems you would notice."

"Tell me what it is I should notice, then, and I'll try," she said, her voice strained, like piano strings stretched too far.

"That I'm dying," he said, so quietly that a flock of birds outside the window nearly drowned him out.

"Bender, it's a mistake," she said, knowing how he worried himself into illnesses privy to doctors. She quietly assessed the books beside him on the table, volumes she had saved from his first year at Duke med school. He ran his finger over the surfaces. Soft particles rose up in the glare of the lamp. "Tabitha should dust more often."

"I'll tell her," Saphora said quietly.

"I've gone to two different doctors."

"Bender, your health is important to you. It's not like you let yourself go like some people. You know yourself how technicians make mistakes. It was just last week one of your patients got read the wrong x-ray report." A doctor wrongly told a woman she had a tumor right behind her nasal cavity. "You're fine."

His hands curled over the ends of the chair arm so tightly that it seemed his fingers might go clean through the upholstery. "Saphora, you're not listening."

Bender had said before that she was not a good listener. She was feeling her oats still, what with her suitcase waiting upstairs. "I can't stand it when you're like this."

"It's cancer, of all things."

"I'm not listening to any of this."

He told her, "You'll have to call the kids." He pulled out a pad from the table drawer and the pen from his pocket. "I'm going to see Jim Pennington at Duke. He's the one to do this."

"Yes, of course." Jim had been Bender's best friend in med school. They actually met playing on the same soccer team. They re-

mained friends over the years, occasionally socializing with the wives involved.

"You're making a list?" she asked. Bender's list making aggravated her only less than his flittering around with the Peninsula wives.

"I'll put the house up for sale," he said, "if you'd like. I can't imagine you knocking about in this place all by yourself." He kept scribbling, as if he were writing out a prescription.

"Sell the house?" she asked, feeling as if the ground beneath her shifted. It was like him to run back and forth, sneaking off for medical testing without telling her. But here he was making major decisions when the air in her ears was near to exploding. She wanted to yell at him. But she sat quietly. She was a good wife—that's what he had told a group of his men friends just last week. The doctors played cards out on the back deck Friday nights. She could hear how the conversation went from golf to a botched surgery by a doctor not from their circle. She had taken a swim and come back so she missed what got them talking about wives. But she had let his compliment slide off her as she was already entertaining the idea of running away.

"Gwen has the best head on her shoulders. Maybe she should tell her brothers."

She was the first girl in her class to pass the bar. Gwennie took her father's pressures on her in stride. Better than Saphora.

"I've been knocking about in this house by myself since we moved into it," she said, but he was busy working on the list. "You're jumping ahead of things, Bender. What is it you say all the time? Don't make decisions if you're too hungry, angry, lonely, or tired." Her emotions were beginning to tear away, though. She hated showing tears in front of him. He considered her weak when she did.

"Saphora, stop crying," he said.

She pulled open the door on the mahogany commode, where she kept the tissues.

"I want to die in Oriental." He took a medical journal into his lap. "If I have to die."

"Bender, the hospital is too far from there. Stop acting as if you're already dying." He was making her so mad she felt the urge to walk out on him. But she stayed in her chair as if he had tied her into it with ropes.

"There's hospice. And Duke is not that far. I'd like to leave in the morning. It's only three hours."

"It's over three hours, Bender, and that's a long drive."

He went on as though she hadn't said a word. "Sherry can help out."

"For goodness' sake, Bender! How soon?"

"Six months. Six years. Doctors never really know those things. We guess."

"What about our friends? We'll be so far out."

"We'll have them up as I'm able."

Saphora got him a glass from the cabinet and poured the rest of his beer.

"Call Sherry. She'll get the house ready," he told her.

"I gave her time off. She worked herself to death for this party you insisted I give."

"Call her back. I need her there. Better yet, have her come here tonight."

It was the opportune moment Saphora had waited for ever since Bender had appeared so suddenly in the middle of the day. "I'll call from upstairs. I need to compose myself."

She climbed the stairs, swept away by the urge to run for her suit-

case and bolt for the door. The luggage was where she left it, behind the upper-landing balustrade. She wheeled it back into the bedroom. A tag from Nantes still dangled like a loose earring from the handle. She had gone to France two years ago, taking Gwennie to Europe for passing the bar. Bender had stayed behind in Lake Norman even after Gwennie had lost her temper with him for never joining them on a single vacation.

She stowed the luggage, still packed for Oriental, in the storage cubicle of her dressing room. She pulled up Sherry's telephone number in her BlackBerry. She scrolled past Gwennie's number, and then there were Ramsey's and Turner's numbers sandwiching Sherry's. Turner's next nursing shift would be starting come dinnertime. He took any shift to fill up the hours away from his son and the ex-wife who said she loved him but could not stay married to a man with Turner's low ambitions.

Gwennie would be the first to call her back. Saphora scrolled back up and called her daughter. She heard the forceful little recorded voice answering mechanically as if she needed to place the thought in the caller's head that she meant business. Saphora left a message to call her and then added, "This is rather serious, Gwen." Then she hung up and wondered if she had said too little by saying "rather serious." Gwennie would surely understand why she had not spilled out over the phone that her daddy was dying.

Saphora did not want to call Sherry after giving her the rest of Tuesday and also Wednesday off. Bender surely did not mean that he wanted to leave the next morning for Oriental. Her Oriental.

She walked out of the dressing room, stopping just short of the bedroom. Bender was pulling back the pale blue matelassé coverlet she and Gwennie had picked up in Nantes. He dropped his trousers

over the footboard and slid under the coverlet. When he closed his eyes, he said, "When Sherry gets here, have her come upstairs. She can make my calls."

"Sherry's not home."

"Call her cell phone, Saphora. For Pete's sake, think!"

"Bender, she's gone off with her husband." She didn't tell him they were bowling but left it mysteriously unsaid. He'd not think bowling important enough. But she didn't want Sherry here tonight in the middle of their shock. "Rest yourself." Saphora walked back into the dressing room, wounded by Bender's suggestion that she could not think on her own. Her telephone rang. It was Gwennie.

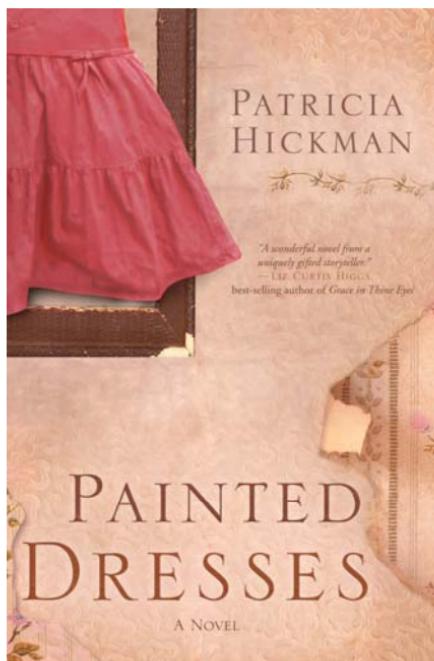
It rang thrice and then switched to her answering service.

Bender yelled, "Who was that?"

Saphora closed the bathroom door. She sat on the closed toilet lid. She pulled paper from the toilet roll, wiping her eyes. She could hear Abigail mysteriously talking as if she were circling again overhead. "You must be the envy of all your friends."

She said through a sob, "Envy's an expensive piece of real estate."

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