Michelle Berry / MARY-LOU'S GETTING MARRIED

Percy Q. is wearing a bright green dress and he's decided to wear it to the wedding even if it will shock the hell out of everyone. He's decided that he looks smashing in bright green, neon green, radiant green, and he's going to walk right out the front door of the house and wear it to the wedding even if Mary-Lou Bishop drops down dead at the altar. He's going to wear it proudly too; he's going to hold his head high and sashay into the wedding, stroll down the aisle, with a look on his face that no one can doubt. Green eye shadow too and a little dab of green lipstick left over from Halloween. He plasters his face with the guck. Yes, Percy Q. thinks as he dabs, this ought to do the trick.

Emmie watches Percy Q. from the hallway mirror. She stands in front of the mirror trying to adjust her hat and watches Percy Q.'s reflection in front of her. He's strolling up and down his room in that outrageous green dress with all that make-up on and Emmie is adjusting her little pill box hat with the red veil and thinking, "My God." She's thinking, "My God," and her thoughts get stuck there and the pill box hat falls off for the hundredth time and Emmie shakes her head and watches Percy Q. stroll up and down in his room in that god awful green dress.

"We're late," Emmie finally says. "We're late for the wedding and my hat won't stay on."

Percy Q. stops pacing and laughs out loud. "Let's go then," he says. "Let's go to Mary-Lou Bishop's horrible wedding."

"Don't laugh at Mary-Lou," Emmie says. She turns to face Percy Q. "You have no right to laugh."

Percy Q. checks out his reflection a final time in the full length mirror above his shoe stand and then he waltzes out of the room and

heads down the hall, a green nightmare.

"Let's go," he shouts.

Emmie follows closely behind, holding tight to her hat.

"A purse," Percy Q. says to himself. "If only I had a matching green purse."

Emmie rolls her eyes into her head and steadies herself on the stairs off the porch. She doesn't notice that she isn't wearing shoes and Percy Q. doesn't say anything to stop her. Her bare feet pad down the sidewalk as she rushes along, trying to keep up with her younger brother and his violently awful bright green dress with the puffy shoulders and the lacy back. Out on the street, away from the house, they walk quickly, not even looking at each other. They walk to the church and they think their own private thoughts and every so often Percy Q. smiles to himself and chuckles, and Emmie's eyebrows knit together and she grits her teeth in anticipation.

Because Emmie knows that, sooner or later, something will happen.

At the wedding Mary-Lou Bishop doesn't drop dead but she does look at Percy Q. twice as she trips down the aisle. Emmie's poor feet are killing her and, after she got over the shock of being bare foot at a wedding, she's wishing she had thought of painting her toe nails red to match the veil on her pill box hat. Emmie's discovered that if she tilts her head just slightly the pill box stays on and she doesn't have to hold it. So she tilts her head and Percy Q. smiles at everyone in his green dress and Mary-Lou Bishop walks up the aisle to the altar, firm and strong. But when she gets up to Ted Bubble, Mary-Lou can't help but turn around and look again at Percy Q. in his green dress with all that make-up caked on his face.

Percy Q. waves. "Yoo-hoo, Mary-Lou," he shouts.

Mary-Lou blanches and turns back to Ted.

Percy Q. looks down at his dress and whispers again, this time to Emmie, that he wishes he had a nice green purse to match his outfit.

"Don't get too used to this," Emmie whispers back. "Don't go crazy on account of Mary-Lou's wedding." She rubs her bare feet together under the church pew.

Percy Q. touches up his make-up with Emmie's compact, every so

often stopping lipstick application to say, "Amen," "Bless You," and The Lord's Prayer.

Emmie remembers that when he was a little boy Percy Q. used to love to stick hay in his shirt and pretend he was pregnant. She remembers that he used to walk up to Mary-Lou Bishop and Sue Master, when they were all just young, and tell them to pat his growing belly, tell them to feel his milk-big tits. Emmie sighs and shakes her head. Now Mary-Lou's tummy is pushing out of that wedding dress and Ted Bubble looks like the proud Papa he's going to be and Emmie's brother, Percy Q., is sitting in row five on the bride's side grooming his hair and wearing a green taffeta dress.

At the reception, in the basement of the church, Mary-Lou serves the wedding cake to half a dozen people but stops when the baby kicks and cramps up and she suddenly feels nauseous.

"That wedding was not a moment too soon," Mrs. Bishop whispers to Mr. Bishop as they hover over their daughter. They follow the minister down the hallways to a room where Mary-Lou can rest in peace.

In the reception room Ted Bubble stands on the side lines and watches Percy Q. carefully. He doesn't like the outfit that man's got up in. He doesn't like it when people try and be different, try to make a point, stand out in the crowd. Ted Bubble has spent his entire life molding himself into a plastic replica of his dearly departed father and he damn well doesn't like it when some fag-boy shows up to his wedding wearing a green dress and god awful green lipstick. Ted Bubble doesn't care if Percy Q. is a university man from the big city. He doesn't care if Percy Q. just hopped off the train. He drinks his beers and watches Percy Q. in his dress and checks on his new bride every so often in the room where she is lying down somewhere in the bowels of the church. Twice Ted Bubble gets lost in the hallways and twice some nice church lady shows him the way back to the beer and the cake.

Emmie has met someone else at the reception who isn't wearing shoes. They laugh about it at first and then Emmie, with her head tilted to keep on her hat, says, "Where are our brains?" and the young man tells Emmie, very seriously, that he was taken captive by aliens

and they sucked out his brain, replacing it with Life-Savers. Emmie thinks that it's just her luck to be dropped in with the loonies at this wedding. Later, Emmie, with a cramp in her neck, watches the young man's mother drag him over to the bar where she plies him with cola and he spends the rest of the night, wide-eyed and sugared up, dancing barefoot beside the juke-box with Hilly Mount's twelve year old daughter Bets.

Percy Q. doesn't know whether to use the Ladies' Room or the Men's Room. He can hear Mary-Lou moaning like a cow down the hall somewhere as he stands in front of the pink and blue doors saying "Eeny-meeny-miny-moe."

Percy Q. is a bit disappointed that no one is really taking him seriously in his nice green dress. The Life-Saver boy dancing jerkily by the juke-box is sucking up all the attention and Percy Q.'s make-up is starting to run with the heat. He feels like pulling Mary-Lou Bishop into the washroom and showing her the panties he's wearing under the dress. Emmie didn't want to look at them. Neither did Hilly Mount or Crazy Ethel. It's not that Percy Q. wants these women to get a charge out of his undies. He just wants to show them to someone, he just wants to make a point. He feels he's wasted the uncomfortableness of wearing them if he doesn't show them to someone. Percy Q. walks into the Ladies' Room and enters a stall. He mumbles to himself about undies and dresses and the horrible fact that Mary-Lou Bishop just got married.

Crazy Ethel is talking to Hilly Mount about Percy Q.'s bright green dress. They are admiring the fabric and the style.

"Take it from me," Crazy Ethel says. "That dress would cost a bundle."

"He always has to outdo us," Hilly Mount says. She looks down at her baby blue dress with yellow buttons. "Go one better. I suppose he bought it in the city."

Crazy Ethel says that Percy Q. is someone you just can't beat. She reminds Hilly Mount of the hair cut he had in high school — the prettiest curls ever, she says.

The wedding goes on into the night. At about ten thirty Mary-Lou Bishop asks to see Percy Q. It's the moment everyone who knows anything has been waiting for. Ted Bubble, who doesn't know any-

thing, looks confused, drunk, out of sorts. Emmie rushes up to Percy Q., takes his hand and says, "Don't be like you are. She's married now."

The juke-box stops playing the chicken song but the young man with no shoes and Life-Savers for brains keeps dancing to a tune in his head.

Two days before Mary-Lou Bishop's wedding to Ted Bubble, Percy Q. came home from university on the train. Emmie picked him up at the station. She was driving the orange convertible through the snow, top down, and wearing a scarf, looking for all the world like a movie-star. Her chattering teeth were hardly noticeable.

"If you weren't my sister," Percy Q. said as he leaned into the car to kiss Emmie's cheeks, "I'd marry you." And the mention of marriage didn't seem to even faze him then.

Emmie and Percy Q. settled back into the old house as if Percy Q. had never left, as if he hadn't been gone for two years. They woke the same time every morning and Percy Q. watered the house plants and made coffee and watched TV and did crossword puzzles while Emmie worked at the drugstore down the street, behind the counter, selling cosmetics.

Percy Q. wasn't wearing a dress when he got off the train and he wasn't wearing a dress for the two days prior to the wedding when he lived with Emmie in their parents' old house in Onion Corners behind Centre Street just up the block from the Dry 'n' Sack Clothes Cleaners where Percy Q. made the money that took him away to university. In fact, for the first time ever, he looked perfectly normal. His hair was cut short and he had no make-up on. Emmie thought that maybe sending him away to university finally took the crazies out of him.

And Emmie snuck her boyfriend, Zeb, into the house both nights through the bathroom window, and they made out like there was no tomorrow because the whole thing, the sneaking around, was quite the thrill. Emmie didn't want Percy Q. to meet Zeb yet because things had only just gotten started between the two of them and Zeb's heart was a bit weak considering his advanced age. Emmie didn't know what Percy Q. might do yet or what he might be like. She didn't think Zeb

could take the shock of meeting Percy Q. because, even though he was looking normal at the train station, even though she was hoping beyond all hope that he'd been cured, Emmie knew at the bottom of her heart, that it was only a matter of time before her brother flipped his lid.

It happened one night in front of the TV, a bowl of popcorn on his lap. Percy Q. stood up and said, "My God, Mary-Lou Bishop's getting married." He said it as if it had just occurred to him, as if he hadn't come all this way on the train just to attend the wedding.

"And that's not all," Emmie said. She knew it was time to tell him everything. She knew it was time he heard the facts. "She's pregnant, Percy Q."

Things weren't the same after that. No more crossword puzzles or coffee or TV together. Things went all crazy and Emmie sighed a lot and didn't know what to do with her hands.

Emmie is 32 years old.

Percy Q. is 29 years old.

And good old Zeb is 75 years old and can kiss like a teenager.

Mary-Lou Bishop shouts, "Percy Q." and Percy Q. comes at her in his green dress and sits down beside her on the couch. Mr. and Mrs. Bishop take this moment to go and greet the wedding guests.

"We should take her to the hospital," Mrs. Bishop whispers in the hall.

"After the reception," Mr. Bishop says. "We paid through the teeth for this and, goddamn it, I'm going to enjoy it."

"What's going on?" Percy Q. asks.

And Mary-Lou cries and says, "The pain's so bad, Percy Q. With all the playing you did you'd never have guessed it."

Percy Q. looks curiously at Mary-Lou's large breasts and tummy.

Ted Bubble walks in and checks on his new bride, a beer in each hand. He says to Percy Q., "What are you supposed to be? It's not Halloween, you know." Percy Q. just smiles nicely and winks. A real wink, a wink that knocks the socks off the groom. Ted Bubble gets the message. He knows when he's looking at a messed-up man, and leaves the room in a hurry, again getting lost in the halls of the church. But

this time Ted Bubble is led into the supply closet by a hungry church lady who tells him he's manly and big and beefy. She wraps her bony arms around his large waist and he puts down his beer and grabs onto her for dear life. It's been a while since he's been embraced and that Percy Q. winking thing really confused him. It made him feel all funny inside and, just for a second, it made him feel good. Ted Bubble does what his dear father would have done in a situation such as this, but he uses a condom he's got stashed in his wallet because, after all, he is married now and has responsibilities. After all, Ted Bubble thinks, he's going to be a papa.

Percy Q. lies down on the couch next to Mary-Lou and looks at the ceiling. His green dress billows over her white one and the rustle of the two materials sounds cool and liquidy. Every so often Mary-Lou Bishop-Bubble screams out in pain and Percy Q. quits his daydreaming and offers her his hand.

"Remember when we were young?" Mary-Lou pants.

"You had those high heels I wanted," Percy Q. says. "And that diamond tiara, whatever happened to that?"

"Oh, Percy Q. You were always so different, weren't you?"

He laughs. "Me?" he says. "I was the normal one. The rest of you were different."

"How's university, Percy Q.?" And a pain shoots through her, turning her face purple.

But Percy Q. takes her mind away from the ache and tells Mary-Lou about school and his courses and how his dry cleaning money is just about running out. Every so often Mary-Lou groans so loudly that she drowns out her husband's joyful cries in the supply closet just down the hall.

Emmie decides that the next best thing to no shoes is no hat. She takes her pill box hat off and puts it on a chair where it gets sat on immediately by Hilly Mount's fat son Jacob. He squishes it to a pulp but Emmie doesn't care because the hat was uncomfortable and she thinks her head may be permanently tilted and she wonders if Zeb will like her any better for it.

Emmie doesn't know what she's doing with a 75 year old boyfriend but his kisses send fire into her heart and he owns half the drug store

and might get her a raise. Besides, Emmie thinks, she's stuck in Onion Corners living in her parents' old house, helping her brother make something of himself — why shouldn't she be thinking about her future, her dreams of owning the drug store someday, living in Zeb's big house on Portland Street? Problem is, in all those dreams of the future, Zeb is long gone and dead and Emmie's got herself a new boyfriend, maybe Jake from the Five 'n'Dime, and a brand new pill box hat that stays on her head. It's not as if Emmie doesn't love Zeb, it's just that she knows he's not long for the world.

Percy Q. was a strange child, unable to do anything right from the day he was born. He started by talking backwards, mixing words around, saying "There, hey, you, hello," instead of "Hey there you, hello," and walking lopsided and crazy down the street, running when he should have been walking and vice versa. But Emmie and her mother loved Percy Q. with all their might because there was some little spot of gold right there, deep in his eyes, that shone out and blinded them with its brilliance. They knew Percy Q. had something special in his heart and they watched him grow and doted on him, teaching him right from wrong and black from white.

"He's just a little backwards," their mother used to say. "He just doesn't know his way around the block yet."

Percy Q.'s real attacks of craziness, of sheer weirdness, when they both knew something was wildly wrong, started when he was five years old. Emmie remembers Percy Q. sitting in the booster seat at the table wearing only a sock on his little private part and exclaiming that the carrots placed in front of him were "crazy bee-bop baloneys." They wanted to think it was all fun and games but Emmie's father said Percy Q. was "loony," and when he went to school the teachers said he should be placed somewhere with facilities to take care of children in his situation.

Emmie sighs. She shakes out her head and looks down at her squished pill box hat and thinks that maybe tonight she should let Zeb touch her belly button like he's been wanting to. Emmie thinks she's not that kind of a girl. She thinks she's saved it up for so long she doesn't want to just let it go, but she knows that living in Onion Corners, working in cosmetics on Taylor Street is not something she wants to do for the rest of her life. Belly button touching or no belly button

touching she'd eventually have to let Zeb into her bed and take him where he wants to go. And if his kisses are any indication, it might not be all that bad.

Percy Q. and Mary-Lou have been together for ages in that back room in the basement of the church and suddenly there is no sound coming from behind the big, oak door. No howling. No moaning. Just stillness. A calm.

It's late in the night and Ted Bubble is sitting on a hard backed chair in the reception room drinking his twentieth beer and thinking that it's about time he headed home and put his pajamas on and snuggled into his baby blue bed under the hockey posters and spaceships hanging from his ceiling. And then Ted Bubble remembers that he's going to have a baby and he's a married man and his heart does a little dance in his chest and he feels slightly ill from all the beer.

The church lady who cornered him in the supply closet wants him again but there's no way in the world Ted Bubble can even get up from his chair let alone find someone to lend him a condom. The world is spinning so much he just wants to lie down and sleep.

Ted Bubble remembers that he only slept with Mary-Lou once before she got in the family way and he is wishing that his little guys, his sperm, had picked a more normal girl to impregnate. Someone nice looking maybe. A good cook with large breasts. But Ted knows that his father, rest his soul, would have wanted him to make an honest girl of her and so he's sitting in the basement of the church watching a jerking crazy boy with no shoes dance to the beat of the juke box. He wonders what's keeping his bride and what she's doing with that university man in the green dress. Ted can't believe that they once were in love, Percy Q. and Mary-Lou, even though he's seen their initials scraped in every desk in school and around all the town's walls since he was just a little boy. He wonders if his new bride changed Percy Q. into the fag-boy he is and he hopes like crazy that nothing that horrible ever happens to him.

Percy Q. + Mary-Lou.
Mary-Lou + Percy Q.

P + M and M + P.

Percy Q. pledged her his heart and said he'd be back for her, said he would love her forever and would carry her soul with him wherever he went.

"Oh, Percy Q." Mary-Lou says. The pains in her belly have come and gone and she is lying next to him on the couch in the church holding hands and thinking of everything that's been happening to her lately. "You look nice in green."

Percy Q. looks down at his dress. "Yes, I'd have to agree." He laughs.

"Emmie's hat looked nice."

Percy Q. nods.

"Why did you leave me?" Mary-Lou says. She sits up on the couch and takes his head in her hands. She squeezes tightly.

"Ouch."

"You said you wouldn't be gone long."

"A university education takes a few years, Mary-Lou. Especially for someone as backwards as me."

Emmie is dancing with the juke-box, cola-ed-up boy with the Life-Saver brain. She thinks, after her second glass of wine, that he's quite some catch. She can't believe her luck. Emmie never drinks alcohol but Percy Q.'s been gone for a while and she doesn't want to walk home alone in the dark. She's stuck in a crummy basement room with a lot of the people in the town she'd rather not talk to. (In fact she's heard several of them talking about her and Zeb and it's made her feel slightly angry, like she could knock over a couple of people.) So she decided to try a little drinking and see what it feels like.

Emmie spent everything she had on Percy Q.'s first set of encyclopedias. And she remembers now that she has bought him every stitch of clothing he's worn since their parents died. Percy Q. has it made, Emmie thinks. She wishes now that she had taken all that money, all the money she's ever spent on him, and moved away from Onion Corners to begin again. Stuck here, Emmie is. Stuck like so many

leeches on her skin. And the blood's being sucked out of her every minute of every day. Why else would she be dreaming about an old man? Why else would she be in love with his wrinkled face and dry, toothless kisses?

It's not that she doesn't love Percy Q. (or Zeb) but, come to think of it, Percy Q.'s been gone two years, away in the city, and he didn't even send her a postcard. He traipses off that train, looking for all the world like a satisfied seal, and he puts on a green dress and does the crazy things that Emmie sent him away to get out of his system.

Emmie thinks that maybe Mary-Lou Bishop is the cause of all the suffering in her life. Maybe if Mary-Lou Bishop had never been born, Percy Q. would have stayed on the right track and carried on down the line, moving up, moving ahead, and taking Emmie with him to the big city.

But then she remembers that Mary-Lou came along well after Percy Q. was walking and talking funny, well after he'd been wearing god awful colours on his face and shaving his eyebrows. Mary-Lou Bishop moved into town on the Saturday before Percy Q.'s eleventh birthday and, although he was never sane to begin with, Percy Q.'s been crazy and foolish and in love ever since.

That's why Emmie is having a hard time understanding first why Percy Q. left town without Mary-Lou tagging behind, and second why Mary-Lou ended up rolling in the hay with a loser, a drunk, like Ted Bubble. And it's all come to a head tonight, in the church basement, with Percy Q. in a green dress and Mary-Lou in white, moaning loudly and carrying on, a baby about to be born.

Good thing, thinks Emmie, that Ted Bubble doesn't know anything. Good thing that Ted Bubble is drunk, passed out, asleep in a chair by the juke box.

But Mary-Lou's labour pains have stopped. She's not having a baby yet, and she is sitting up and craving cake like you wouldn't believe. She's craving anything baked, biscuits or donuts or cornbread or muffins.

"We really should talk about all this," Percy Q. says. "We really should sit down and have a long chat, have it all out."

"Talk about your dress?"

"No," Percy Q. says, although he has been wanting someone to comment on it. About us."

"You took off, Percy Q. You left me high and dry."

"But I was always coming back. I told you I would come back."

"And how was I supposed to know that?" Mary-Lou gets up and paces the small room. "How was I supposed to know that? You tell me. Two years, Percy Q., two years and nothing from you, not even a letter." Mary-Lou stops pacing, puts her hands on what were once her hips but now are swallowed up by the baby's legs and arms moving around and around in its sac, excited by the noise of the world. "What was I to do?"

"Not Ted Bubble, that's what you shouldn't have done." Percy Q. bites his lip. He feels like crying. His make-up would be ruined, he knows, so he just bites his lip and lies on the couch.

Mary-Lou and Percy Q. were like this: they were like two peas in a pod, two bugs in a rug, two cats in a cradle. They took one look at each other, Percy Q. with his longish, curly hair and backwards walk, Mary-Lou with her imposing nose, her pimply complexion and her stutter, and they both knew instantly that here was someone else who was pushed out of public life — *here* was someone else. And Mary-Lou's stutter stopped suddenly and Percy Q. walked straight forward and his words came out coherently.

Emmie remembers Mary-Lou and Percy Q. sitting on the swing in the backyard. She remembers they made their own little sounds, their own little laughter. She remembers thinking that this is true love, that two people who communicate like this, in barks and squeals, must really be made for each other.

Last night, after Zeb snuck in, Emmie asked him if he loved her and he put his teeth back in and said, "I'll have to think about that, honey." Emmie told him to climb back out that window and not come back until he could say yes to everything she asked him from then on.

And now she's dancing with the Life-Saver boy and his mother is hollering, "Go to it, sonny," and Hilly Mount and her kids are clambering all over the place, screaming because it's two in the morning and the bride hasn't come out to finish cutting the cake, to serve ice cream and lemonade. Ted Bubble is asleep in his chair and little Bets

is picking up dirt from the floor and placing it ever so carefully in his wide open mouth, jumping back when he snores.

The wedding of the century, Emmie thinks. This is a wedding we'll all remember.

Mr. Bishop has had too much to drink and Mrs. Bishop is trying to get him to stop pawing her in public while she's talking to Betty-Ruth and Irene MacDougall from the bowling league. She slaps his hands and says, "Oh my, Donny, not here."

Percy Q. and Mary-Lou are back to sitting on the couch and holding hands. They can't believe that no one has been in to check on them for a while. They can't believe that they are finally together again after two years apart.

Percy Q. wants to take off his dress and throw it in the waste basket. He suddenly feels silly. But he's only wearing women's undies underneath and, even though he likes to shock people, he doesn't think the weather is warm enough tonight. He has shown Mary-Lou the undies and she giggled like she was supposed to but her mind told her to feel sorry for Percy Q. because, even though he's a university man, he still is a little crazy at heart and probably won't get anywhere in life.

Mary-Lou thinks about her big, lumbering, new husband, the Ted Bubble she's just married, and she knows that, even though her life will be miserable with him, at least he'll be able to put food on the table. He's got a good job as a carpenter and he's built up a clientele that could knock her socks off. That's what he told her. Ted Bubble brought over his resume, typed finely on purple paper, when she told him she was pregnant with his child. He showed her his craft, showed her pictures of the shelves he's built, tricky ones, corner ones, and he said he has to do the right thing by her and they agreed on it, even though Mary-Lou had an uncommon urge to phone his references first.

Mary-Lou is only thinking like this because she has to.

They met at the dance hall on a Sunday night in June and Ted Bubble had too much to drink and forced Mary-Lou to go all the way. And, even though she didn't really want to, it had been over a year

since she'd heard from Percy Q., so she opened her thighs and let the big man in. Here it is February and she's pushing out of her wedding dress like she's going to explode.

What's funny to Mary-Lou is that no matter how many times she did it with Percy Q. — in the field by the school, in Mr. Richard's barn under the hay, in his own back yard under the porch, she never once got knocked up, she never once felt that squirmy sick feeling she's felt for this entire pregnancy. And Mary-Lou thinks this is funny because she loves Percy Q. with all her heart and isn't that, isn't love, supposed to be what babies are all about?

Emmie wants to go home and so she wanders down the corridors of the church feeling sick from wine and getting lost. She comes upon the minister sitting on the toilet in his bathroom, apologizes and moves on, opening every door that isn't locked. Eventually she finds Percy Q. and Mary-Lou. She finds them by hearing them talking, whispering and laughing, and she barges in and takes Percy Q.'s hand and says, "Let's go home."

But Percy Q. doesn't want to leave.

"Where's your hat, Emmie?"

Percy Q. knows that the second he leaves Mary-Lou she'll have to go home with that big Ted Bubble idiot and she'll be married until the day she dies. He feels consumed by worry. He feels all achy inside.

It's just that university in the city was so far away from Onion Corners and it made him feel big and good and smart. He went to his classes every day and, even though he didn't understand half of what was being said, he'd lie on the lumpy bed in his rented room at night and imagine himself with a degree. He'd imagine the jobs he would get, the places he would travel. And then, of course, when he failed, bombed all his courses, he couldn't tell anyone about it. How could he face his sister? How could he face Mary-Lou? So Percy Q. got himself a half-decent job in a dry cleaners in the city. He was meaning to bring Mary-Lou to his side when he made some money, when he coughed up the courage to tell her of his mistakes, but the embarrassment of the whole thing left him dry in the mouth. Then the job ended, the dry cleaners closed down, and Percy Q. wandered the streets, picked through the city garbage, sold what he could find to get

by. When he got the telegram from Emmie asking him to come home, telling him Mary-Lou's getting married, he headed home on the first train into Onion Corners.

The green dress is from a dumpster behind the Village By the Pond Mall in the big city. He found it last Tuesday with a rip down the side and he patched the rip expertly (years in dry cleaning taught him a thing or two about sewing buttons and he just applied that knowledge to the rip) and was intending to give it to Mary-Lou for a wedding present. But when he really thought about the fact that she was getting married to someone other than himself and then, to make matters worse, found out she was pregnant, Percy Q. went a little crazy, dove off the deep end, so to speak, and put on the dress and the make-up and marched down the aisle back into Mary-Lou's heart and right into her wedding.

When Emmie finds them they are holding hands.

"Oh dear," she says. She steadies herself on a chair. The soles of her feet are black from the dirty church floors. She takes Percy Q.'s hand and says, "Let's go home," but he doesn't budge from the couch. Instead, he pulls Mary-Lou towards him and hugs her tightly.

"Oh dear," Mary-Lou sighs.

"I have to tell you how it is," Percy Q. says to Emmie and Mary-Lou. "I have to tell you both so you'll understand."

Emmie sits down in a chair. She can't wait to hear what's going to come out of his mouth. She's had too much to drink, more than ever before in her life and she's feeling sick and fed up with having to take care of Percy Q. It was one thing when he was a kid, it was another when their parents died, but now he's a grown man, a university man, and Emmie knows that if Ted Bubble sees him holding hands with Mary-Lou he's going to beat the heck out of him and there's nothing Emmie can do to save him. She has to save herself now, she thinks, get Zeb to marry her and then wait until he dies so she can inherit half the drug store. She might, she thinks, ask that Life-Saver boy to come over when that happens. She might ask Jake from the Five'n'Dime to drop by the big house on Portland Street. But then thinking of Zeb biting the dust makes her choke up and feel like crying.

Just when Percy Q. wants to tell them both about his deception,

his lies, how it felt to be out of work in the big city picking through garbage, there's a holy commotion in the hallway and half the reception, what's left of them, barges into the room.

"What's going on?" Crazy Ethel shouts. "Did the baby come?"

Everyone is silent suddenly because, although it was incredibly obvious to them all, no one was supposed to mention that Mary-Lou Bishop was pregnant. It was going to be one of those things where, years later, numbers would be added and subtracted and everything would be made to look right in the world. The townspeople would do it for the baby. It's hard enough being born, they agreed, without having to go through life attached to an immoral problem.

When the reception people, including the Bishops (the Mr. pawing and clawing at anyone who is near, male or female), enter the room, Percy Q. stops what he is about to say and stands up.

"Where did you get that dress?" says Tacoma, the tiny church organist. "It's such a beautiful colour."

Emmie throws up her arms. At least with her brother's dress no one has noticed her bare feet.

Mary-Lou looks around for Ted Bubble. "Where's the groom?"

No one seems to know where he is until 12 year old Bets says he's sound asleep beside the juke box with a cup of dirt in his open mouth.

Mary-Lou says the baby was just testing her, just seeing if she can take the pain, preparing her for the big day, and then she gets up from the couch, takes Emmie's hand in hers and Percy Q.'s hand in the other and stands them in front of all the town folk who are waiting to eat the cake.

"I want to say something," Mary-Lou says. She clears her throat, which is sore from howling and crying out in pain.

"Quiet everyone. Speech. The bride's making a speech." This comes from Jacob, the boy who sat on Emmie's hat, the boy who is a little younger than nine, fatter than an old cow, and can't believe his luck at staying up till all hours of the early morning.

Mary-Lou waits for silence and then begins. "You all know," she says, "that I've been mooning over Percy Q. for years and years."

Percy Q. blushes. He can't help himself. Somehow Mary-Lou's large bulk makes him feel important and her words send shivers up

and down his spine.

Someone shouts, "Here, here."

Someone else comments on Percy Q.'s dress and how it must be all the rage in the big city.

"Well," Mary-Lou continues. "Even though I'm in the family way," she pats her belly, "even though this baby is Ted Bubble's baby," she shakes her head mournfully, "even though I just got married a couple of hours ago,"

Someone shouts, "Where's the cake?"

"I've decided that I don't want to be married anymore and want to stay true and faithful to Percy Q. until he's finished his degree."

Percy Q. sits down on the couch again. He puts his head in his hands.

Emmie looks around the room and then down at her bare feet. She can't believe her little brother might get married before she does. She's going to have to whip that old Zeb into shape.

Ted Bubble picks that time, just that second, to wake up. He spits the dirt out of his mouth and then grumbles quite loudly. He looks around the empty room. Only the Life-Saver boy is still there and he's still dancing quietly in the corner.

"Where is everyone?" Ted asks but the Life-Saver boy can't hear him because his mind is full of little candy circles in green, red, yellow and orange.

Ted then searches the halls of the church basement. He gets lost in the boiler room for a minute and then he, too, catches the minister sitting on the toilet, but he finally finds the whole room of people gathered around his fat-bellied wife and that stupid Percy Q. in the green dress. Something's going on, he thinks, something he doesn't much like.

Emmie groans when she sees Ted Bubble walk into the room. She groans when she hears what Percy Q. says next, his back to the door.

"I love you too, Mary-Lou," he says. "But I'm not a university man." Emmie sees all her hard work, her suffering, going down the drain. Every penny she saved, every penny she gave him, poof, up in smoke.

"What do you mean?" Mary-Lou looks startled.

As Percy Q. explains the last two years to the crowd, his humilia-

tion, his constant devotion to Mary-Lou, Ted Bubble gets angrier and angrier, for all he can think about is the fact that the guy in the green dress just told his new wife that he loves her. Ted Bubble can't remember if he's ever told Mary-Lou that. His head aches from all the beer and his mouth is gritty from dirt. He roars and lunges and the sea of people parts and Ted Bubble attacks Percy Q., ripping the green dress into shreds and bloodying his nose.

There is hoopla, there is chaos, there is wildness. Hilly Mount's kids take to beating each other up and Mary-Lou throws a chair at Crazy Ethel because, out of spite, the woman is pulling Percy Q.'s lovely puffy shoulders off, ripping at the green material. Emmie stands back, by the couch, careful not to get her delicate toes trampled upon.

Zeb is standing up beside his bookshelf at home, leaning on his cane, scouring his mind for the passage he used to ask his sixth wife to marry him. He can't remember if it was Shakespeare or Marlowe or Donne. He can't remember and he can't ask her because she died twenty-odd years ago of old age.

"It's a pity," he says to himself and then he starts to shake because he can't get over his luck having such a pretty girl like Emmie to love him. Such a pretty girl must certainly have a pretty belly button, he thinks, and he quivers so much that he has to sit down.

When it is all over Percy Q. lies on the floor groaning and holding his nose. Emmie triumphantly holds up the chair she used to bang Ted Bubble over the head and knock him senseless. Everyone else stops fighting and starts laughing and shaking their heads. They are amazed at Emmie, still protecting her brother after he lied to her about university, and they suddenly forgive her for fooling around with the oldest, richest man in Onion Corners.

"It must be love between them two," Irene MacDougall says to Mrs. Bishop, as they wipe the sweat off their brows. "What else could it be?"

When the minister finally comes out of the bathroom everything has been cleaned up. Ted Bubble is back in the chair, still knocked-out, beside the juke box in the reception room and the music is still

going and the kids are all dancing. It's four in the morning.

Mary-Lou asks the minister to annul the wedding. She says she doesn't care if Percy Q. is a dry cleaners boy for the rest of his life, she's loved him fiercely since she was eleven years old. She says he makes her world crazy and happy and fun. Percy Q. dances around in his ripped, blood splattered green dress and hugs and kisses Mary-Lou like there's no tomorrow, he pats her little growing baby belly like it's his. The minister won't annul a wedding until the groom is awake and he wonders aloud how this tragedy will affect the little unborn Bubble. Mary-Lou and Percy Q. say they can wait. They say the baby won't know the difference, they say it'll have two papas instead of one. They say they've waited their entire lives to be together as husband and wife, one more night won't matter any. The baby in Mary-Lou's belly kicks and jumps and hiccups, as if it's telling the town that everything will be fine and dandy, and Mary-Lou and Percy Q. look lovingly into each other's eyes.

A couple of months later Emmie is sitting, barefoot, in Zeb's lap and he's playing with her belly button in his huge house on Portland Street. She's found that she can't wear her shoes anymore. They feel uncomfortable and small, something she never noticed before. Zeb and Emmie are getting married in the spring and she's decided she isn't going to wear shoes under her wedding dress. She's decided that she isn't going to do anything she doesn't like anymore. She's going to be rich and in love and well taken care of.

Emmie tickles Zeb behind his hairy ear and thinks about how she likes being an aunt to little Quince and that makes up for her disappointment with Percy Q. over his university career. She likes little Quince so much that she hopes she can have a baby one day herself. Zeb's already had fourteen of them in his long life so she doesn't see why one more would make a difference.

Zeb used Donne's poem about the compass to win Emmie's hand, the poem about how the compass stays fixed at one point no matter how far the other point wanders. He used that poem, he told Emmie, to make her understand that, even though his eye may wander occasionally, stopping ever-so-slightly on some of the heavenly bodies

strolling through Onion Corners, it doesn't mean he won't always be faithful. It just means he's a man, he says, he can't help himself.

It's the same line he used on his last wife, the sixth one. Zeb figures he's getting old. He figures he shouldn't have to make up new romantic sayings for every young lass who snatches his heart. It's about time he relaxed. It's about time he let his mind take a rest or two.

Mary-Lou and Percy Q. are at home, in his parents' old house, lying together in bed with little Quince beside them. They have carved M + P + Q on the headboard of the old bed and they are snuggled down in the warmth of the quilt staring at the new little baby girl.

They can't imagine anything happier. They can't imagine anything nicer. And Quince giggles and coos peacefully beside them, thinking about nothing but milk, milk, milk in her peaceful, wonderfully unformed, tiny mind.

Baby Quince is wearing a taffeta green hat on her head, made carefully from the remains of the dress. It keeps her warm and her parents think she looks beautiful.

"You look like a million bucks," Percy Q. tells her. "You look like the Queen of England." And he dabs a little green eye shadow on her for effect.

Nobody worries about Ted Bubble because he's found true love in the bony church lady (who's name is Tiny) and, even though he was wearing protection that night, she's knocked up with another one of his babies and they are soon to be wed. It doesn't matter an ounce to the church lady that when she marries Ted she'll be called Tiny Bubble. In fact she likes the name so much that she whispers it to herself any chance she gets.