

Purple

By

Julie Showalter

By the time I reach St. Louis, I'm sick of Don's voice droning from the cassette player, now listing the fifteen characteristics of Romanticism. We made these tapes two years ago when he was studying for his doctoral exams. It was his second time, and he was determined. "It's a day and night effort. Carol didn't understand that. That's why I failed before." Carol was his first wife who didn't understand much. I, on the other hand, was a fount of understanding, a bubbling brook of encouragement. Even so, he failed a second time. In a month I am taking those same exams. What will it do to our marriage if I pass? If I fail?

I am driving home to Joplin, Missouri, after a three-year absence.

I turn off the cassette when I hit beltway traffic around the city. I've been on this road only once before, three years ago, when Don and I left Missouri pulling everything we salvaged from two wrecked marriages in a U-Haul trailer. Full of hope, on our way to Indiana where he'd polish off his doctorate and I'd begin a master's program. I don't like to think about the difference three years has made. I turn the tape back on. It's my voice now, explaining Mathew Arnold's major work.

Two weeks ago I saw the engraved invitation and knew that I had to come. There are some events you can't miss and still belong to a family. Granny was an orphan, married at sixteen so she never had a wedding. She was never prom queen or head cheerleader. Never rode on a float. Never, despite fourteen years of entering, won the Pillsbury Bakeoff. Her fiftieth wedding anniversary would be her moment in the sun, and she wanted all her grandchildren there.

I called my sister Karen. Karen and I haven't gotten along since I was sixteen and she was fifteen and she convinced me that I didn't dance well enough to go to the prom with Jack Perkins, then went with him herself. "I really can't get away," I said. "My orals are in August and I'm spending the summer studying day and night."

"Granny won't understand about orals. Besides, she's making dresses for everyone. You have to come."

"How's Gramps?"

"He wouldn't dare die before the party. Granny'd kill him."

"How does she know what size to make my dress?"

"Oh, that's easy," Karen said. "She made it just like mine with a smaller bust."

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From *Heck Of A Guy* Blog
<http://1heckofaguy.com>

I tried my other sister. Billie is a year younger than Karen, and listened to everything I said while we were growing up. We were always close, at least until the divorce. She wasn't in the mood to talk. The baby was crying. "You have to come. She's making dresses."
 "Has everyone settled down?"

"Jill, believe it or not, your adultery, divorce, and new husband aren't all we have to think about."

"He's not a new husband. We've been together three years."

"Don't be so touchy." The baby was really screaming now. "I'll talk to you later. You have to come."

I approached Don. "I think I'd better go."

"Your family has never accepted me."

"I know, but it's my granny." He couldn't have a grudge against Granny. He'd never met her.

"She never congratulated you on our marriage." That's the problem. My family didn't think congratulations were in order when I traded my first husband, Glenn, who'd been part of the family since he and I started dating at sixteen, for a married night school teacher who was fifteen years older than I was.

"She made me a dress."

The silence stretched on. Then Don laughed. When we met, his laugh convinced me that he was a man with an appreciation of life's quirks and ironies. It comes from deep inside him, and sounds sincere — oh so sincere — intelligent, and wise. It had seemed worth throwing my life away for a man who could laugh like that. "Go, go," he said, still laughing. "It'll be fun for you to observe them. They're so Faulknerian."

Three years earlier, before I passed Don in credentialed education, I would have been intimidated, or even awed, by this comment. "How Faulknerian?" I asked. "Like which family? Compsons? Snopeses? Bundrens? Sartorises?" I didn't stop until he left the room.

The last time I saw my parents, as we were heading out with the Uhaul, my mother said, "We're not angry that you're getting a divorce. There've been divorces in our family. It's the way you've gone about it." Don laughed his laugh. My father didn't speak.

Later, on the road, Don had said, "They're mad because their perfect daughter isn't behaving the way they programmed her. They're mad because they don't own you any more." He ran his hand up my thigh, under my shorts. He smiled, looking ahead at the road. "You're mine now. They don't like that."

I pull into my parents' driveway about six. I try not to hear Don's voice in my head. "A Winnebago?" he said when we pulled in together. "A Winnebago in the side yard. It's priceless." I didn't tell him that a Winnebago represented a level of affluence my parents could only dream

about. Their motor home was a Coach Master. Coach Master is to Winnebago as Taurus is to Mercedes.

I get out of the car and stretch, and my father's head appears in the back glass door of the motor home. He bends to get through the door and walks down the dimpled metal steps. When I get close to him, I put my arms out, but he's wiping his hands with a blue cloth and doesn't notice. I hug his left arm awkwardly. Too late, he realizes what I'm doing, and puts his right arm around me, patting my back with the cleaning rag. When we pull apart, he looks at his hands, continuing to wipe them. "Cleaning up some," he says, as if we talked every day. "Kind of a mess from fishing last week."

I can't tell if he's embarrassed or angry. "What did you catch?" I ask.

"Not much. Nothing to brag about." He stuffs the cloth in his back pocket, but instead of looking at me, looks at the car. "Been on the road long?"

"I made good time. Just under eleven hours."

He smiles and glances up at me briefly, then back at the car. "What kind of mileage you get?" Then, "What's gas cost in Indiana?" Then, "How's the weather back there." Finally, he says, "Your mother and the other girls are over at your granny's having final fittings. You'd better get over there and make sure your dress fits."

"Did she make you a dress too, Daddy?"

He shakes his head and smiles at the ground. "No." His smile broadens and he looks at me. "But she did make me a tie. It's color-coded."

"Huh?"

"Your mother or your granny can explain it to you. It's too complicated for me."

Granny opens the door, wearing a pin cushion on her wrist and a measuring tape wrapped around her neck, looking younger than I remember. "Oh, Jill, honey, I'm so glad you could come. Now I'll have all my daughters, all my grands, and all my great-grands here." When she hugs me, she doesn't smell at all like the Granny of my childhood — fresh-baked biscuits and vanilla extract. In fact, she smells somewhat overwhelmingly of Shalimar. "Come on into the living room, Hon. Look everybody, look who's here for my fiftieth."

The living room which has always been filled with nubby nylon furniture and blonde oak tables, is now overfilled with heavy dark pieces in a style which I think is called Mediterranean. My sister Billie is sitting on a red and black velvet sofa feeding her baby. Karen is standing on a coffee table and our mother, the beautiful temperamental Mildred, is kneeling before her pinning her hem. Everyone, including the baby, is dressed in shoulder-to-toe brocade with puffed sleeves. Only the colors are different.

Mother hugs me and I smell her combination of White Shoulders and the milky breath of new puppies. The smell of safety after nightmares when she opened up her sheets and said, "Get in

with me,” then pulled the covers over us both. For that moment, it feels as if everything can be fixed. My mother still loves me. “You smell good,” I say, holding to the hug.

“I am good.” She drops back to her work.

My sisters and I have never hugged on greeting. First we were kids, then we were wives who saw each other every day. We have no rules for what we do after a three year absence. I pat Karen on the arm, then sit next to Billie and look at the baby. My baby sister’s baby. “She’s beautiful. Can I hold her?”

Granny says, “No time for that. Put your dress on and let’s see how it fits. You can change in here. It’s just us girls.” I undress in front of these four women who have always had the right to see my body. But I’m no longer used to being watched, and I find myself embarrassed, hurrying as if it were the first day of gym class.

The dress is worse than I thought. I hadn’t noticed the sash in back. “Aren’t they beautiful?” Granny says. “Color-coded. Rose for me, that’s the best color for an old granny. Blue for my daughters. Purple for the grands. Green for the great-grands. Ties for the males. Colors the same for direct descendants. An off-shade of each for in-laws. Eighteen dresses and twenty-six ties, I made. I gave up on the girls that have married in and just made them scarves. Eighteen dresses, twenty-six ties, and five scarves. I figured that if I can outfit every one of my daughter’s and granddaughter’s weddings, I can do this for myself.”

When I was eighteen and marrying Glenn, I longed for a dress in *Modern Bride* that cost \$4,000. “I can make that,” Granny said. And she did. Granny doesn’t know that she made my second wedding dress, too. When Don and I stood before the justice of the peace, I was wearing a Harve Bernard-like suit she copied from *Vogue*, my gift for being the first in the family to graduate from college.

A bell rings from the back of the house, a delicate crystal sound. Mother freezes, but Granny continues pinning. It rings again. “Mother,” Mother says in her not-to-be-ignored voice.

“That’s just your gramps, Honey,” Granny says to me. “He’s just gotten to be such a big baby lately. Wanting me for every little thing. He’s probably mad because he doesn’t know what’s going on.”

The bell continues to ring. “Well, I’ll go,” Mother says.

At that, Granny jumps up. It’s a race to see who is the more dutiful caretaker, as they disappear down the hall.

I look at my sisters, gesture to the room, “What’s going on?” Of all the oddities, I am most struck by this oversized, ugly, expensive furniture.

Karen whispers, “You know how he always had her on a budget. How she’d give us dimes and say, ‘Don’t tell Gramps?’ Well, since he had the stroke, she’s been spending money like crazy. All new furniture. We don’t think he even knows about it. She never brings him into the living room.”

Billie says, “You notice the face lift? She had that done while he was still in the hospital.”

“A face lift? She’s sixty-six for Christ’s sakes.”

“I know. This is really funny.” Billie looks toward the hall and lowers her voice. “Mother took her to the doctor. He said, ‘Mrs. Henderson, I’m afraid you’re too old for a face lift to give you the look you want, but your daughter here is the perfect age for me to help.’”

“He told Mother she need a face lift?” I almost choke on the idea. The three of us giggle quietly, like the three little girls we once were, sitting on the back step, knowing we weren’t ever supposed to laugh at Mother.

Granny calls from the back room. “Jill. Gramps wants to see you.”

My grandfather is lying in a hospital bed in what Granny used to call the grandkids’ room. It must be Gramps because Granny is patting his hand and calling him Walter, but there is no sign of the huge man who used to rub me with his whiskers and let me ride in his lap while he drove the tractor. Only the hawk nose is the same, but it looks bigger now that he has diminished around it. “Walter,” Granny says in her voice usually reserved for willful children, “Walter, honey, it’s Jill. Jill’s here.”

Gramps’s eyes dart around the room, never lighting on me. “Jill,” he croaks.

“See, Hon,” Granny says. “He knows you. Give his hand a squeeze. He likes that.”

When we leave, Mother and I take our dresses. “I’d like to say I did every stitch myself,” Granny says, “but I have to ask you girls to help out with the finish work.”

At my parents’ house, no one talks during “Dallas.” I don’t recognize many of the characters, not having seen the show for three years. Don only approves of television for news, culture, and education. When it’s over, Daddy says, “It just gets sillier every year. I swear I’m going to stop watching.” He kisses Mother, puts his hand on my shoulder as he walks past, and goes to bed.

It’s the moment I’ve dreaded, being alone with Mother. We are sewing. Mother is wearing reading glasses, something I haven’t seen before. I begin to think she’s not going to talk to me. Then she sighs and says, “Well, we wondered what would be big enough to get you home. It wasn’t your gramps’s stroke. And it wasn’t your sister’s baby.” She bites off her thread. “It’s nice to know you care enough about your granny’s feelings to come for her big party.”

“So it’s wrong for me to come home now because I didn’t before?” If I counter-attack I can evade the real issue. How can I still be a member of this family after missing the things I have missed? The reunion every summer. Christmas Eve with Mother and Daddy. My baby sister’s pregnancy. “What could you do?” Don asked when I wanted to come home when the baby was born. “Besides, she’s never been civil to me. Why would you want to help her anyway?” I didn’t say because I was the one she ran to when she broke her arm, the one they came to get from fourth grade when the bee stung her, the one she cried to all night when Hoopy Morgan broke up with her to date Karen.

Don has explained my guilt at all this. “The fact is, Mother,” I say, “this family is unnaturally close and co-dependent. It’s not normal the way everybody’s tied up in everybody else’s life.”

“Unnatural?” Her voice rises and her eyes snap. “That man has poisoned you. Listen to me, Young Lady--”

“Oh, Mother, don’t young lady me. I’m a thirty-year old woman.”

Mother diminishes instantly, like the wicked witch hit by water. “You are not thirty years old.” Tears fill her eyes. “You are twenty-nine. I am not old enough to have a thirty-year old daughter.”

When I was eight, my sisters and I sang together at a Mother’s Day program, a song I picked. “You are a wonderful mother, dear old mother of mine,” we sang to our slim, beautiful, twenty-seven year old mother who sat there with a frozen smile. I go to her and put my arms around her neck. “Poor old mother of mine,” I say. “It’s not my fault you and Granny were child brides. If it makes you feel better, tell people we’re sisters.”

Mother pats me absently, then musters a wan smile. “I’d do it if I could. But we’re color-coded.”

The next morning Mother and I drive to the Fatted Calf in my car, arriving an hour early as Granny has requested. The parking lot, usually empty at 11 on a Saturday morning, is filled with women in long brocade dresses getting out of their cars, carrying special dishes. I carry Mother’s broccoli casserole. Mother carries her pretzel surprise herself. One of the younger cousins holds open the massive oak doors emblazoned with an Arthurian coat of arms, and we move from bright sunlight into cold, beery darkness. Past the bar into the banquet room where Granny, wearing a corsage the size of a rat, is telling people where to put things. On the wall behind the buffet table is a studio portrait of Granny in her rose dress, touched up to look not a day over fifty, standing next to Gramps in a suit and wheel chair, touched up to look lucid. The women of her family crowd around the real Granny, speaking the nasal twang that I don’t remember as being quite so southern. Someone taps my shoulder.

“Hi, Jill, you haven’t seen my babies.”

It takes a moment to place the young woman in a purple dress cut high in front to accommodate a seven-month belly, carrying a child in green on each hip. “Patty?” She’s what? Seventeen? Eighteen? Don left a message for me on my last study tape, one he’d worked on the night before I left. “Give my love to the Joads.” He chuckled, a variation of the laugh. “You don’t need to correct me, Dear Wife. I still know the difference between Faulkner and Steinbeck.”

I seek out Karen standing in a corner. She says, “I need a cigarette.”

“I thought you quit.”

“I did. I have. I just smoke one every now and then to prove I can do it.” She motions to Billie across the room. “She’s the one who hasn’t really quit. She hasn’t smoked since she found out she was pregnant, but she admits she still wants to. As long as you still want to, you haven’t quit.”

She lights a cigarette and draws it deep into her lungs. “Now, me, I’ve quit. I can take it or leave it.”

Granny calls me toward the table. “Jill, I want you to serve the punch when people start arriving. I’ve planned it so you and your sisters will stand together. I made my famous ice ring just like I did for all you girls’ weddings.” Karen and I try not to smile. The famous ice ring is made by putting plastic flowers into a Jell-O mold and filling it with water. It won Granny honorable mention in the decor category at her club one year.

The men of the family are arriving, all wearing ties to indicate generation — bright colors for descendants, paler for in-laws. A man with a camera, not wearing a brocade tie, comes in, and Granny shouts, “Pictures. Mildred, we’ll start with you and me and your girls. Billie, get over here by your sisters.” To the photographer, she says, “This is my oldest grand, Jill. She’s just the smartest thing. I thought I was going to be the writer in the family, but she’s writing a book.”

“It’s a dissertation, Granny,” I say, “It’s book-length, but it’s not a book.”

“Well whatever it is, I can’t wait to read it.”

I think of my nearly three hundred pages on *Eye of the Beholder: Reality and the Deconstruction of Point of View in Post-World War II American Novels*. “I don’t think you’d like it, Granny,” I say, “it’s pretty technical.”

“No,” says my mother, coming up behind me. “We’re not smart enough to read anything Jill writes.”

We stand in a semicircle, smiling, our arms around each other. “Say cheddar,” the photographer says. “Say Velvetta.”

When Granny moves away, I elbow Billie. “Where’s Gramps?”

Before she can answer, Karen goes, “Uh-oh” and yells across the room, “Granny, get back here. You need to talk to Jill.”

I look up and standing just inside the door is my ex-husband Glenn wearing a pale purple brocade tie.

Granny is coming at me, “Now Hon, now Hon,” she says. Karen has grabbed my arm. I must look like I’m going to faint. Or bolt. Granny draws me to the side. “Now, just settle down. I knew this would be a shock. I meant to tell you but I just got busy.”

“Why is he wearing a family tie?”

“You know we’ve always loved Glenn. He still fixes my TV for me when it goes out. We couldn’t not invite him.”

“Why is he wearing a family tie?” Don was right. He always said they’d choose Glenn over me. “I’ll leave,” I say. That’s what I’ll do. Get in my car, get this damned dress off and go back to Don and my books.

Granny’s fingers dig into my arm. I look into her eyes expecting to see tears and pleading. I see fury. “I might have made a mistake, but this is my party and you are not going to ruin it. Do you understand?” She gives my arm a shake. “Do you?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Good. Now go talk to your ex-husband.”

Glenn smiles as I walk toward him, a bashful smile like my father’s, a boyish smile. What did Don say about him three years ago? “Your husband is a very nice boy, but he’ll always be a nice boy. You need a man.” It made sense then.

“Howdy, stranger,” Glenn says. “Long time no see.” God, he’s practiced this. Don’s voice in my head says, that’s the best he could do.

I try to look at him directly, but I can’t hold his gaze. I’m too embarrassed. Or too guilty. I didn’t end this right.

Someone has set up a boom box and Willie Nelson is singing “Stardust.” “Dance?” Glenn asks.

Sweat prickles where the stiff brocade touches my waist. “I don’t know, Glenn. I’d feel disloyal. To Don.”

“Did you sleep with him when you were married to me?”

I look at the floor and don’t answer.

“Come on,” he said, pulling me with him, “I don’t think one dance is going to make us even.”

Dancing with Glenn is something I’ve done since I was sixteen. His chin rests on top of my head. My left hand lies just where his collar ends. His right hand fits the small of my back. Glenn leads me through some of our high school moves — a gentle twirl then a quick reverse, a modified dip. I laugh out loud.

“I’ve missed you,” he says.

I can’t respond. How can I say I’ve missed everything, Glenn included, but that I’d still do it all over again?

There’s a commotion at the door, and my dad and uncles wheel Gramps in. The wheel chair is angled back so that he doesn’t have to sit straight. Even so, he needs the pillows propped around him to keep from falling. He has on a blue suit with a rose colored tie. There’s a rose bud in his lapel. His eyes dart from face to face. The roomful of people cheer when they see him. Granny walks over, takes his hand, and kisses his cheek. “Here he is,” she says, “the grandfather of us

all.” Everyone cheers again. Then someone starts singing, “Happy anniversary to you.” Granny beams.

“That could have been us,” Glenn says.

“I hope not. It’s awful. Look at him.”

“It’s not awful. It’s what people look like after fifty years. They don’t grow old at the same speed. But they stay together.”

I look around the room. My dad is standing behind my mother with his arms around her. Billie and her husband are fussing over the baby. Karen and her husband are smiling at each other. Boy cousins kiss women in purple scarves. Girl cousins without husbands hug each other.

For the first time, I wish Don had come. I need to belong with somebody.

I find Billie sitting alone, watching the men wheel Gramps back to the van. “Does this seem like a good thing to you?” I ask.

“Granny hasn’t had an easy life. She deserves the celebration.”

“What about Gramps?”

“He’d want her to have her party. She’s been talking about it for years.” We watch Granny dance with several children in a circle. Some older cousins join in. “I think she’s relaxed now,” Billie says. “She wouldn’t admit how worried she was about Gramps, if he’d be able to make it through this.”

“But he didn’t make it through.”

“He made it through his part.”

I shake my head. The dread I’ve been pushing down for months surfaces, and telling Billie my troubles seems like the most natural thing in the world. “I don’t know if Don and I are going to make it. Somehow I can’t see us at fifty years. Or even ten. Maybe there’s something that’s missing in me that I can’t make two marriages work.”

“Maybe. But it looks to me like you just made a bad choice.”

“So I should have stayed married to Glenn who hasn’t read a book since high school?”

“Don’t be silly,” Billie says. “We all know you’re too smart for Glenn.”

“You do?” This is a revelation.

“Yeah. But that doesn’t make Don any less of a jerk.”

I close my eyes and shake my head. “If I divorce him, all of you will think you were right.”

“We were right,” Billie says.

“Who’s right about what?” Daddy puts a hand on each of our necks from behind. “Sounds pretty serious.”

“Oh, we’re just talking, Daddy.” Billie walks away. Daddy sits in her chair.

“When this is over, I want all you girls to come over to the house. We can sit around and all be together. Maybe talk the son-in-laws into taking the kids home. Just be our family for a while.”

Our family. I’m still included.

At the house, we sit on the screened-in back porch. Daddy has taken off his tie and jacket. Mother and my sisters and I are still in our dresses, but we’ve taken off our shoes.

Know what I remember about this porch?” Daddy says. “You girls playing jacks.”

“How many games you think we played?” Billie asks.

“About a million, all of them three hours long.”

“No,” I say. “It was more like three games, a million hours long. Remember, the summer we had our tonsils out, we played one game for three months.”

“And Karen was always inventing new rules,” Billie says.

“What’s this about me?” The conversation has become interesting to Karen.

“Jacks rules. You’d miss and all of a sudden there was a rule we never heard of that said you got another chance.”

“Well what about Jill? Remember the time she convinced us to play a game left handed? It’s the only game she ever won.”

“We played for years,” Billie says. “Why did we stop?”

“Boys would be my guess,” Daddy says. “Jill got more interested in boys than jacks.”

Anger flares in my stomach. When did this criticism start? That I was to blame for growing up first? Somehow that’s still the feeling here, that I shouldn’t have grown up and moved away.

“Maybe you don’t remember that the year I started dating, I also got a summer job. Maybe that’s why I didn’t have time for jacks.”

Both my sisters make a booing noise. “Jesus, Jill,” Karen says, “Can’t you ever admit that anything you did was less than perfect?”

“It was a joke, Jill,” Daddy says.

I relax, just a little. “Well, if you really want to know why I quit jacks, it was because it ruined my nails. And because of the black callous on my little finger.”

Mother joins us. “Jill always had beautiful nails. They’re her best feature. Her nails and her teeth.”

Billie says, “What was my best feature? Oh yes, that I was such a hard worker. I got dates by showing my muscles.”

“Well mine certainly wasn’t my boobs. Not until this year.” Karen thrusts her chest forward and for the first time I notice that her dress is cut lower than anyone else’s. Daddy clears his throat, looks at the floor a minute, then leaves the room. We hear his car start.

“Really clever, Karen,” Billie says. “Talk about your new boobs in front of Daddy.”

“Your father never did get used to the physical reality of living with four women,” Mother says.

My sisters and I squeal. “Tell me about it,” I say. “Trying to hide Kotex in a house with only one bathroom.”

“And when I got my first bra. I wore sweatshirts all summer so he wouldn’t know,” Billie says.

We continue that way, laughing, bringing up memories. Old irritations surface and prickle, then are covered over by the next joke. After twenty minutes we hear Daddy’s car return. When he comes into the room, he’s smiling like it’s Christmas. “Here, Jill.” He thrusts a small paper bag at me. I open it and smile. Inside is a set of jacks.

My sisters and I sit on the concrete floor in our long brocade dresses. Karen starts, throwing the jacks out, yelling, “Kissems, touchems, overs.”

“No overs.”

“We never play overs.”

Daddy sits behind us watching. We fall into the patterns of the game. Arguing, laughing. Mother brings us all lemonade.

And now, it’s a movie that I’m in, and I’m watching. The camera pulls back. The three sisters in the circle, the mother reading, the father sorting out his fishing tackle.

I am outside and inside at the same time, and I will always be part of this scene, this family, no matter where I go. Glenn or no Glenn. Don or no Don. I am my sisters’ sister, my parents’ daughter, my grandparents’ granddaughter.

I am part of the purple generation.