

There are many different types of lace found at Runcot&Slayer Dressmakers, LLC. Mrs. Laurie Withers will personally show patrons to a room where she produces a large linen bound volume, two feet long by thirteen inches wide (per page) of samples. Mrs. Withers wears a pair of white gloves as she turns the pages for her clients, each sample of lace preserved between two sheets of white parchment paper. She flips the parchment apart to reveal an ivory sheet of flowers. It thin as spring lake ice and cool to the touch with preservation. Mrs. Withers says nothing when customers lightly finger the lace, though she worries they have grease on their fingers. There are Chantilly samples ("classic, classic aristocracy,"), duchesse linings ("perfect for trimming a veil,"), French bobbin lace ("I believe this was what Marie Antoinette wore to her beheading."), guipure for bodices ("This is for a girl who likes to have fun!"), schiffli trains ("sooo romantic,"), Venetian over lays ("Erotic." She says with an uncomfortable wink to her guests), and Spanish sleeves ("it's really the same thing as Venetian," Mrs. Withers says quickly. It's almost her lunch hour and she is tired).

There are always a few debutants who wander in and out of the store for fittings in April, but the majority of Mrs. Withers's appointments are brides. She takes her job seriously, guiding each exquisite (and even less so) bride to her perfect gown. Though she treats them all like the high paying clients they are, privately, Mrs. Withers wonders if the girls she helps are virgins. She wonders if a mother's choice to pay with credit card instead of check is indicative of private financial ruin. The sister who came along with one bride was too stalky, and too old to be unmarried. Perhaps she is perverted. Yes, beneath her charming smile and teased bouffant, Mrs. Withers assumes the worst of every bride who comes to Runcot&Slayer. She wonders how many of the wedding gowns she sells will be loaded into the backs of moving vans after divorce. Mrs. Withers is at liberty to wonder these treacherous thoughts because she is an expert on marriage. She has had three.

People will ask her, years later, if she helped Layla X when she came to be fitted for her gown. Mrs. Withers will tell them yes, she had helped Layla X and she *knew it all along*. Of course everyone knew, Mrs. Withers will say. You don't let a dress out that much before a wedding and not wonder. The choice of empire waist *at all* is suspicious. But there was no judgment, Mrs. Withers assures. They were good kids, and both with degrees. And Tommy was a nice boy. She still calls him a boy, though by now he is 29. Like the rest of Layla's legacy, her age has been lost and no one can remember now if she would be 28 or 27. For the purposes of the story though, no one really cares.

Mrs. Withers always starts the story like this: of course we didn't know it at the time, but as Layla X walked down the aisle Christopher Reeves was breaking his neck in Culper, falling off a horse. The date was May 27th. This detail is of particular importance to Mrs. Withers. She is a woman of faith and (she would never call it this) superstition. She doesn't mention Christopher Reeves or his shattered second and third vertebra again. But who's to say God wasn't striking down a sinner and only missed by 60 miles? Layla rode horses, after all.

Mr. X had ordered nearly two hundred flower arrangements with a white orchid at every center. Mrs. Withers heard, as many people at the wedding did, that the orchids

were flown in from Thailand that morning. There were *so* many young people, Mrs. Withers gushes, a detail both damning and traditionally inoffensive to the older generation. It reminded Mrs. Withers of times past when girls married up quickly and sometimes didn't even finish their schooling first, or at all (Mrs. Withers is of the latter group). "When the right fish jumps in the boat, you don't throw it back!" She laughs, though that particular fish did divorce her 14 years later. Regardless, Mrs. Withers feels the hairs on back of her neck stand at attention, a prickling sensation of superiority, when she reminds her audience that Layla was only 21. Mrs. Withers had the good sense to wait until 22 for her first.

Layla was the image of innocent beauty (this is said for irony) in a Venetian lace gown, the color cold milk. Tommy looked like the happiest boy in the world. After, they went on honeymoon to Greece for two weeks. This detail is difficult for Mrs. Withers to swallow. Her first husband took her to Key West for four days and her second flew her to Abaco. She was disappointed to find international travel so dingy and lacking glamour; she remembers a veil of gasoline that shimmered above water clear enough to see trash at the bottom. Her third took her nowhere at all. Mrs. Withers wonders, when she tells this bit of the story, if the newly wed couple suffered any dysentery while they were away.

When Layla and Tommy returned to Mt. Palle Tommy went back to work and Layla applied to grad school at Vanderbilt for her masters in English. Or maybe it was Engineering. It's been a long time and Mrs. Withers can't remember. They moved in the fall and by then Layla was no-denying-it showing. Even when people would remark how soon it was, Layla never seemed ashamed. The newlyweds came home at Christmas and stayed with the Xs, and after the holidays returned to Nashville. Mrs. Withers saw Mrs. X in town several times and each time she said that Layla was "heavy" and that the two of them were "very happy." In an honest recollection of the conversation Mrs. Withers admits she can't remember if Mrs. X said Layla was "heavy" or "healthy." This, of course, is private.

Layla was due in the middle of February, which anyone with a calendar can deduce what they will (*Oh!* This comment makes Mrs. Withers feel so diplomatic). Everyone knew Layla came back to Mt. Palle to give birth but no one heard a word from the Xs about the baby until one week *after* it had been born and Tommy was already back in Nashville. Layla would stay, Mrs. X told her friends, because she and Tommy just needed "some time" (heavy air quotes).

This was scandal enough. And if you asked Mrs. Withers (which no one did) the Xs would have been better off putting a birth announcement in the paper and *getting it over with*. But instead the information trickled out, visitor by visitor. Layla's friends hardly said a word when asked. Everyone knew what to expect: Downs Syndrome. Mrs. Withers had a friend in Monroe whose daughter had a Downs baby and she will assure her audience: it is heartbreaking.

Several weeks passed and people forgot. Plenty of babies are born all the time, Mrs. Withers reminds. It wasn't until Layla was seen pushing a trolley with a colored baby in it that people began to talk again. Mrs. Withers is clear: the baby wasn't *black*. She would never unfairly implicate Layla. But facts are facts and the baby was colored. No one could tell what the other half of it was. Some said Persian, others Mexican. But (and keep in mind Mrs. Withers is no fortune teller) because it was just a baby there was

really no way to tell where it was from. But everyone agreed on this: it wasn't from Tommy. This can be said with either drama or comedy. Mrs. Withers prefers comedy.

Tommy divorced her. It was heard that Layla asked for no marital assets. Again, *it was heard* that Mr. X had been giving Layla 1,000 dollars a month *while she was married*. Mrs. Withers has no comment on this part of the story. 1,000 dollars a month without earmark is a lot of money.

Money aside, the divorce was fast. Tommy became a resident of Tennessee while Layla lived at home. Mrs. Withers pauses, "there was a lot of talk then." Some of which was true, and, Mrs. Withers will stress, some of which was not. Mrs. Withers cares not to speculate (this is always said directly), BUT some girls who had gone to Hellensway with Layla reported that in the sophomore year they went to the bathroom with her at a dance and all (some) noticed that Layla was not wearing underpants. Layla's high school boyfriend confirmed that she picked him up in her father's coupe (a stick shift!) at two am on a school night. Many Hellensway girls remembered seeing Layla chewing gum on campus, and a few even recalled her smoking cigarettes in the trees behind the art department. For some reason that it was done in *trees* seems exceptionally disrespectful to Mrs. Withers.

No one really knows what Mrs. X advised Layla to do. Mrs. Kennisworth, whose daughter had been in pre-school all the way up to Hellensway with Layla, was over heard telling Mrs. Inness that Mrs. X suggested sending the baby up for adoption. Mrs. Kennisworth was heard another time describing a catastrophic fight between Mrs. X and Layla in which she demanded Layla do it. And the fact (it is a fact) that Mrs. X was never seen in public with the child seems to support this theory.

One can only imagine the delivery room, Mrs. Withers thinks. She envisions the birthing scene: great maternal horror and then the surprise of poor Tommy (poor Tommy!) when the skin aerated and showed itself the color of milked coffee instead of reverently white. Ground cedar chips, the gelatin of pecan pie, the droppings of a dog that has eaten too much fat- *BROWN!*

It wasn't until March that the real controversy began. The Spring Parade, a tradition in Mt. Palle since 1896 when the first Spring Queen was crowned, was soon to take place. Dazzling floats (Mrs. Withers only describes this for out-of-towners) blockade 4th Street on the first day of May. Decorated in dense, wet flowers that have only just sprung, the parade is a celebration of rebirth and forgiving the world of winter. Every year a newborn baby is selected to ride on the final float in the Spring Queen's lap. "It is always the most enormous and lavish float of them all," she explains.

Mrs. Withers lowers her voice and speaks faster now, with an air of panic. It's easy to see she is incensed. "I know a lot of people that feel the same as me," she says. "And I know a lot of people that have known ("and respected!" She sometimes says in a high trill) Mr. X for years, and even they agree that what he did... Was. Wrong." Her lips, coated in lipstick that bleeds to the four corners of her mouth, purse tightly together.

The Spring Bean, as they call the baby selected to ride with the Spring Queen on that final, ethereal float, is said to be the choice of the community. Mrs. Withers can remember which children were the Spring Bean years after they've graduated high school, even married. It is an honor in Mt. Palle to be either Bean or come from the stock that produced it. Sure, it's silly, Mrs. Withers admits, but Mt. Palle is one of the last nice

towns in America. “Good people.” She said smugly, even if she is talking to a fellow Mt. Pallian.

“*Alright*,” Mrs. Withers then says exasperatedly, throwing her hands up to issue surrender, “everyone knows the child is really selected based on donation to the city council office.” But this is neither here nor there, she will explain. The ones that belong on the Queen’s lap always make it there, as if fate wrote the check.

But as legend has it, Mr. X shot through the doors of the city council office one pleasant April morning and demanded to know why he’d over heard his neighbors talking about Louisa Kimball’s baby’s invitation to serve as Bean. With his fist clenched around tax records, records of deductibles and (Mrs. Withers hisses the word) *charitable donations*, he slammed it down on the desk of the receptionist Mrs. Deguise. Demanding to see Mayor Funkie *that instant*, he didn’t listen to Mrs. Deguise when she politely told him that if he *scheduled an appointment* he could see the Mayor then. Mr. X, instead, walked right past her to Mayor Funkie’s office, interrupting his snack. “Preposterous!” could be heard emanating from the open door of his office.

Mrs. Withers, to this day, believes that Mayor Funkie was acting in the best interest of the city when he calmly told Mr. X that the letter had been sent and the matter was closed. Mr. X then threatened to sue the entire county. Mrs. Deguise (who recounted the entire tale to Mrs. Withers) watched Mr. X storm from the office with Mayor Funkie following him muttering (in his raw, masculine voice that Mrs. Withers finds so attractive), “R-----, R-----, stop and think about this for a minute,” to which Mr. X roared, “I’m thinking for the first time since this entire thing began! I thought this town could come around, see the joy in something...*imperfect*...but...but...you’re all just BUFFOONS!”

(Mrs. Withers will always point out that Mt. Palle is an entirely civil place and that people do not throw around words like “buffoons” lightly.)

But, Mrs. Withers says knowingly, he was far from done. Poor Mayor Funkie, dedicated civil servant and chair of the Polio Club (actually, the Polo Club), leaned in and asked Mr. X, well, what did he expect? And Mr. X wound his fist back and knocked one of Mayor Funkie’s teeth out. Mrs. Deguise told Mrs. Withers that, cool as a pan undisturbed jello, Mr. X strode out of the office while Mayor Funkie was still on the ground. Can you imagine?! Mrs. Withers certainly does.

It was April 3rd, which turned out to be another auspicious date. Mayor Funkie and his tragically fated first upper left incisor were not, actually, the talk of the town that evening because this was same day Ted Kaczynski was found hiding in Montana. Two madmen exposed in one day, Mrs. Withers thinks. God spoke with his hands again.

But news did get around about the “meeting” (heavy air quotes again) between Mr. X and Mayor Funkie. In some renditions there is said to be a pool of blood beneath Mayor Funkie as Mr. X walked away. And in another telling Mr. X was seen getting into his Buick outside the courthouse with two red lines drawn under each eye. Mrs. Deguise, for the life of her, can’t remember if there was blood or not. Mr. X was spotted in town the next day buying groceries and stopped at the liquor store on his way home. Eyebrows are raised and Mrs. Withers takes a sip of her iced tea.

“We had no idea, but it turns out that the punch wasn’t the worst of it,” she says sadly. Mr. X *was* (with great emphasis on the past tense) a powerful man in Mt. Palle. The owner of the only gas and coal mines in all of Naven County, Mr. X was at the helm

of immense financial power. It happened that the majority of his contracts were up for renewal that spring and Mr. X wrote up the new contracts himself. Explicitly stated in Paragraph 14, Clause 2, was that any company or resident receiving X Gas and Electric would be legally forbidden to donate funds or goods to the Spring Parade.

“This didn’t seem legal,” Mrs. Withers says bitterly. But it was. She had the good fortune of eavesdropping Mr. Savly explaining to Mrs. Savly the legality, which goes as follows: Mt. Palle was established in 1839 as a coal mining community. With the intention of creating an advantage, the top mining management drafted the county by-laws themselves. And though the by-laws have been updated since, the original laws often technically remain even if they go unobserved. But on a formality they can be enforced. And tragically, such an outdated law existed. As the sole head of all coal operation within Naven County Mr. X had the legal right to include “moral, legal, and fiscal stipulations” in his terms of service. “The fact is,” Mrs. Withers explains, “there just isn’t any other way to buy electricity in Naven County.”

The new contracts went out. Mayor Funkie called Mr. X back into his office. But Mrs. Withers heard Mr. X declined invitation and Mayor Funkie was forced to drive over to the X’s instead. Mayor Funkie had no choice; he offered the Spring Bean to Layla’s baby. “Oh, how Louisa Kimball cried!” Mrs. Withers mournfully recalls.

Interestingly enough, Mr. X did not readily accept. Years later Mayor Funkie was overheard telling several people that Mr. X told him to go to hell while it was Layla who cried at the foot of the stairs and begged him to reconsider. Did she want her baby to serve as Bean? Certainly she could see the *problem* (it’s difficult to find the right word) with it. Layla was rarely seen outside the house now. Mrs. X was already suspiciously absent. No one knew she’d left for her extended trip to Charleston already. She has yet to return.

Mrs. Withers straightens up, pulls her shoulders back, feeling moisture beneath her arms, and comes into her second wind. The story is nearly at its crescendo. “He did eventually accept.” She says coolly. No one can know what was said inside the walls of X’s mansion during this time. Layla had long since abandoned her friends and spoke to no one of the impending parade. The neighbors saw her once through the slats in the wood of their shared fence. She was sitting in the yard, cross-legged, bouncing a tan baby in her lap, softly singing Bruce Springsteen. It seemed (though they admit it was too far to be sure) she wasn’t wearing a bra. Mrs. Withers snickers as if such a thing is unimaginable to sane people.

“And then it was here!” She says dramatically. May 1, 1996. The Spring Parade. “So excited, everyone was. It was the centennial.” Paragraph 14, Clause 2 was abandoned and miles of silk were supplied with hundreds of carnations clipped, sewn, draped and donated. The MP Business Association Float rolled dreamily down the streets, cloaked in rich purple fabric, the color of commerce. The First Evangelical Awakening of Good Nature Church’s float drifted after, manned by the Sunday School. Everyone, *everyone* was there, Mrs. Withers beams. Cotton candy machines hummed with frail spools of pink thread and hot dogs were given away freely (Mrs. Withers remembers ingesting two (and-a-half)). Even the Mt. Palle Humane Society had set up a tent of puppies where “every year all of the puppies are adopted.” As if this is not satisfactory explanation, she elaborates: “We’re not the kind of town that turns away even one dog.”

And finally, after twenty minutes of jubilation- the colors! The silk! The flowers! The puffed pink cotton candy that hovered radiantly above white sticks! The Spring Queen float was hitched to Mr. Raagg's red convertible and slowly wheeled down 4th Street with the Queen sovereignly at her throne. It was a windy day but not a single hair blew out of the Queen's tiara. Mrs. Withers smiles affectionately. "There's really something special to it." She says. The Queen looked, in Mrs. Withers opinion, like a Senator's wife.

But as the float made it's way down 4th street the cheering slowly stopped. In the arms of the Queen, a girl so American her blood ran a color revolutionary red, sat a brown little baby. "The blackest hair you've ever seen," remarks Mrs. Withers as if this too, is another sign from Him.

Mrs. Withers does not know where the first call of "booooo!" came from. She was standing near the end of the parade but even there she could hear the roar, one uniform syllable - BOOOOOOO!!!!- grow louder as the float processed. The Spring Queen wept openly. "Tragedy," Mrs. Withers says, indignant. Despite the colossal noise ("it was deafening!"), not a single person moved from the sidewalk to the street. Mr. Raagg, without knowing what to do ("He always struck me as a dented can,") drove the float forward.

Mrs. Withers saw the entire thing unfold. She saw Layla run from the crowd, her hair untethered and blowing behind her in the wind. Imprinted in her mind is the image of Layla's long, spidery legs as she quickly scaled the float and took the baby from the Queen. Mr. Raagg, wouldn't you believe it, kept on driving.

Layla quickly descended the float with the child cradled in one arm. But instead of moving away from the parade she stopped in the street. Still, almost like art, Layla just stood there. Mrs. Withers can't understand why she would do this. Some people remember her laughing; others said she screamed obscenities to the crowd. Only a few nearly expired old women remember her crying. The colossal baying of "boooo!!!" was now heard from every corner of the parade. Mrs. Withers even threw a few herself though like many people in Mt. Pale, she now defends she did not.

No one knows who threw the tomato juice. It was impossible not to watch the red viscid stream stretch across the bright spring air, rising in lustrous waves like a silk scarf caught in the wind before it splattered across Layla's chest. She recoiled from the impact, crumpling backwards in an attempt to lessen the blow. Useless. The juice detonated across her body and it looked, in color and texture, as if she had been shot. "AB-so-lute silence." Mrs. Withers says. Layla looked up from the blast covering her and the baby. Mrs. Withers was just close enough to see her face. She scanned the crowd, searching for someone, or something. Finding nothing she tipped her head heavenward, gazed up at the cloudless sky and said, "Yes, yes." She turned then back down to the crowd, looking at no one face in particular, and screamed (so urgent Mrs. Withers remembers her voice nearly sexual), "YES!!!"

"It was the *strangest* thing," Mrs. Withers says. No one moved a muscle. Even the wind stopped. Those closest to the incident (as it is now called) remembered hearing Layla's loose, ragged breathing and then the baby started to cry. Mr. X broke through the crowd, "Layla! Layla!" he cried, shouldering her beneath his arm. He cast the most hateful look at the crowd before he led her silently to its edge where it parted to let them through.

They were never seen again. The X's elegant home on Baptist Avenue was sold to a young family. The lawn is now full of construction vehicles and Mrs. Withers wonders what the renovation will look like. Mrs. Withers heard from Mrs. Shuffler (whose husband acquired the majority of Mr. X's holdings when he sold them) that Mr. X was living in Chapel Hill teaching chemistry. As for Layla, no one really knows. One of her high school friends claims she moved to a California commune. Another heard she was traveling Europe with a band of Israeli people. Someone else said Layla was living in New York, and this is what Mrs. Withers is inclined to believe. "Brooklyn, not Manhattan." She says with an air of knowing though Mrs. Withers has been to neither. "I just worry about a girl from Mt. Palle in New York City." Mrs. Withers says. "There are all kinds of cruel people in the world," and she would hate for Layla to meet one of them.