

ON PARADE - SOUTHERN PRIDE

by Donna Lyerly

December 5, 1980 was a day of many personal firsts. That Friday morning I was nearing the end of my first trimester with my first born. It was also the first day I succumbed to maternity wear, choosing a conservatively styled ensemble of navy stretch panel slacks and a generously cut bull plaid blouse with matching corded tie. Perfect attire paired with mandatory close-toed shoes and pantyhose for Palmetto Bank's dress policy where I worked as a teller at the flagship branch in Laurens, SC.

The workday was exceptionally busy due to social security deposits (digital banking and direct deposits were yet to be). But the frantic activity and long lines were tempered by the festively decorated lobby and chatter of the Christmas Parade taking place the following morning. The day ended on a high note - all the tellers' drawers balanced on closeout! We lightheartedly wheeled our locked cash carts into the vault in record time. After which I drove the short distance home to our small bungalow off West Main and promptly stripped out of my work clothes; blouse, bra, then grabbing pantyhose and pants in one quick move I carefully layered the clothes on a chair with intentions of wearing the outfit the next day.

Laurens is a small town located south of Greenville and considered part of the Palmetto Upstate. A once genteel agricultural town named in honor of Henry Laurens, a prominent low country rice farmer and successful slave trader. Henry was also the father of John Laurens,

of the alleged Alexander Hamilton and John Laurens' Civil War love letters. Laurens County enjoyed a revitalization and continued respectable growth when manufacturers located there after WWII for cheap, dependable labor. And it is manufacturing, textiles to be exact, that took us to Laurens after my husband Keith's graduation from Clemson University. The town square and the beautiful tree lined mansions on West Main were old South charm at it's finest.

And with charm came pride. I say this because in all our 20 moves, I've never encountered a group of individuals who thought more highly of themselves than the Laurens elite. Upon meeting some Laurens bred the question second to none was "Who's YOUR daddy?" with "your" pronounced in such a way that was meant to embarrass you if you didn't already know the petitioner's royal lineage. The highbrows of the old south have brazenly been petitioning strangers for centuries about their daddies to determine their immediate and lifelong regard of the them. The art of old south sizing up in Laurens was new to me and I detested it.

It's been decades since my last visit and I'd like to think most of the pretentiousness has faded. But in December of '80 the pumped up pride of the polo shirted was as alive as the freshly cut Christmas wreaths of magnolia and longleaf pine adorning the stoic mansions of West Main.

Saturday morning we awoke to sunny and mild December weather. Perfect day for a parade! I chose the outfit from the chair but opted for socks and walking shoes. A heavy cardigan and scarf completed my

ensemble. We drove to the parade securing a parking spot down N. Harper in front of a diner, a good walk from the square.

Making our way up hill, we passed vendors selling inflatable Christmas toys, popcorn, and cotton candy before reaching the overcrowded sidewalks on the square. The temperate weather attracted an unprecedented crowd of characters from Laurens and neighboring townships of Gray Court, Hickory Tavern, Clinton (the "T" is silent to the locals), and more. There was a group of Presbyterian College students decked out in their Blue Hose regalia seeming equally amused and aloof. Walking past the undergrads, each fixed their gaze upon me. I smiled and received mixed responses.

Shouldering our way through the crowds for a better view of the pageantry I became increasingly aware of folks watching me. No matter the direction of my gaze the locals were downright ogling. I caught many giving me the once-over and then focusing back to my face. Some smiled slightly, some just continued their unapologetic staring. I wondered to myself if perhaps I looked like someone they knew, or maybe someone famous? Or perhaps...a fleeting panic, "Is something out of place?" I quickly glanced down for wardrobe malfunctions, then I checked my hair. All seemed in order. I leaned into Keith who always walked ever so slightly ahead of me and asked, "Is it me, or do you notice people looking at me?" Squeezing my hand my husband of few words assured, "Yes, I notice. You're beautiful, that's all."

Keith's pride and loving assurance gave me a new found poise. Which, in turn, seemed to elicit even bigger smiles from the ever growing

onlookers or "admirers" as I began to regard them. "*Everyone is so nice*", I mused to my celebrity self. Thoughts racing, and confidence swelling I wondered, "Could it be that I have *THE GLOW*? Could I be exuding that radiant flawlessness that women are said to get their second trimester?" For the better part of 8 weeks I had spent an unprecedented amount of time with our toilet attending to upper and lower functions of first trimester perdition in between fits of crying and exhaustion. First trimester hormones sucked. But the second trimester hormones were really looking up.

The parade was like all other southern small town parades. There were bands, beauty queens, dancing troupes, scout troops, the 4-H club, the Lions Club broom brigade, football teams & cheerleaders, proper floats from Belk and the "first churches", plastic nativities in pickup beds from the less blessed churches, antique cars, Shriners festooning bejeweled fezzes and maneuvering miniature cars and straddling thunderous oversized motorcycles (Freudian fanfare at it's finest), fire and rescue vehicles, elected officials flinging peppermints and Dum-Dums, horses and riders, horse shit, and Santa.

The Christmas procession ended but the parade for which I am recounting had only begun. Keith and I traced our steps back to our parked car at the diner for which the name of the establishment fails my recall. Reaching the car we observed the packed tables and booths and contemplated a drive to The Sweet Shoppe beside Pigg's Red & White but opted to take our chances on a seat inside. As luck would have it, we were able to secure two empty stools at the counter up front beside the register, our backs to the diners.

My most vivid recollection while perched on the too-tall stool, pregnant feet dangling, was a stranger patting my shoulder while wishing me a Merry Christmas on his way to pay. For some reason, the surrounding folks found the fella's familiarity funny. Keith and I joined the others with a chuckle and a shrug. No doubt about it the folks were finding me radiant.

As Keith was paying, I made my way to the exit. It was the first time I had been ahead of Keith all day. And it's then that he noticed an inanimate floppy object stuck to my shoe. He quickly paid and caught up with me outside the diner. His reaction was to step on the inanimate floppy object, deducing the inanimate floppy object would then dislodge. Unfortunately, Keith's first 3 or four dislodging attempts were unsuccessful. However, his valiant efforts of jumping and lunging were quite successful at engaging the attention of the diners! Mind you, I was clueless and continued to make my way to the car.

Keith got my attention by declaring, "You're dragging something." I stopped. He stomped and bent down to examine his kill, but alas, it wasn't dead. As I turned, the inanimate floppy object - over 2 feet long and not attached to my shoe - turned with me.

Thoughts of, "What the hell?" and the realization of the matter occurred simultaneously and I began laughing uncontrollably while my mortified husband, now Don Quixote, was determined to slay the critter we both realized was slithering from my pant leg.

Had the inanimate floppy object trailing from my pants *just* been the forgotten pantyhose from the day before I would like to imagine the humiliation would have been less. But to make matters worse - much, MUCH worse - the two feet of trailing nylon sported a scrapbook of memorabilia of the day's events; small rocks, dead leaves, popcorn, a cotton candy cone, a Dum-Dum stick, peanut shells, a cigarette butt, and possible traces of the steaming gifts left by the horses.

Back to Don Quixote. Keith was mortified and determined to pull the offensive social awkwardness out of my pants. The diners had dropped all pretenses and were standing at the window cheering us on. I was in the passenger seat of the car laughing so hard I couldn't catch my breath while simultaneously peeing uncontrollably as only a pregnant woman can.

The elasticity of pantyhose is impressive: Keith had wrangled out over 20 feet but they were nowhere close to being exorcised. I finally had to insist Keith stop after the inside of my thighs began to burn. I'm convinced the urine was the only thing that kept me from bursting into flames. He abandoned his windmill, offered a nod and a bow to the spectators, and drove us home and we lived happily ever after.

Pride, pretenses, and parades are the birthright and bane of all humanity. But I have yet to meet a group of folks more brilliantly accomplished at the fanfare and fuss of it all as we southerners.