

MAGNOLIAS By Edna Ellison

I spent the week before my daughter's June wedding running last-minute trips to the caterer, florist, tuxedo shop, and the church about forty miles away. As happy as I was that Patsy was marrying a good Christian young man, I felt laden with responsibilities as I watched my budget dwindle . . . so many details, so many bills, and so little time.

My son Jack was away at college, but he said he would be there to walk his younger sister down the aisle, taking the place of his dad who had died a few years before. He teased Patsy, saying he'd wanted to give her away since she was about three years old!

To save money, I gathered blossoms from several friends who had large magnolia trees. Their luscious, creamy-white blooms and slick green leaves would make beautiful arrangements against the rich dark wood inside the church.

After the rehearsal dinner the night before the wedding, we banked the podium area and choir loft with magnolias. As we left just before midnight, I felt tired but satisfied this would be the best wedding any bride had ever had! The music, the ceremony, the reception - and especially the flowers - would be remembered for years.

The big day arrived - the busiest day of my life - and while her bridesmaids helped Patsy to dress, her fiancée Tim, walked with me to the sanctuary to do a final check. When we opened the door and felt a rush of hot air, I almost fainted; and then I saw them - all the beautiful white flowers were black. Funeral black. An electrical storm during the night had knocked out the air conditioning system, and on that hot summer day, the flowers had wilted and died.

I panicked, knowing I didn't have time to drive back to our hometown, gather more flowers, and return in time for the wedding.

Tim turned to me. "Edna, can you get more flowers? I'll throw away these dead ones and put fresh flowers in these arrangements."

I mumbled, "Sure," as he be-bopped down the hall to put on his cuff links.

Alone in the large sanctuary, I looked up at the dark wooden beams in the arched ceiling. "Lord," I prayed, "please help me. I don't know anyone in this town. Help me find someone willing to give me flowers - in a hurry!" I scurried out praying for four things: the blessing of white magnolias, courage to find them in an unfamiliar yard, safety from any dog that may bite my leg, and a nice person who would not get out a shotgun when I asked to cut his tree to shreds.

As I left the church, I saw magnolia trees in the distance. I approached a house . . . no dog in sight. I knocked on the door and an older man answered. So far so good . . . no shot gun. When I stated my plea the man beamed, "I'd be happy to!"

He climbed a stepladder and cut large boughs and handed them down to me. Minutes later, as I lifted the last armload into my car trunk, I said, "Sir, you've made the mother of a bride happy today."

"No, Ma'am," he said. "You don't understand what's happening here."

"What?" I asked.

"You see, my wife of sixty-seven years died on Monday. On Tuesday I received friends at the funeral home, and on Wednesday. He paused. I saw tears welling up in his eyes. "On Wednesday I buried her." He looked away. "On Thursday most of my out-of-town relatives went back home, and on Friday - yesterday - my children left.

I nodded.

"This morning," he continued, "I was sitting in my den crying out loud. I miss her so much. For the last sixteen years, as her health got worse, she needed me. But now nobody needs me. This morning I cried, 'Who needs an eighty-six-year-old wore-out man? Nobody! I began to cry louder. 'Nobody needs me!' About that time, you knocked, and said, "Sir, I need you."

I stood with my mouth open.

He asked, "Are you an angel? The way the light shone around your head into my dark living room . . ."

I assured him I was no angel.

He smiled. "Do you know what I was thinking when I handed you those magnolias?"

"No."

"I decided I'm needed. My flowers are needed. Why, I might have a flower ministry! I could give them to everyone! Some caskets at the funeral home have no flowers. People need flowers at times like that and I have lots of them. They're all over the backyard! I can give them to hospitals, churches - all sorts of places. You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to serve the Lord until the day He calls me home!"

I drove back to the church, filled with wonder. On Patsy's wedding day, if anyone had asked me to encourage someone who was hurting, I would have said, "Forget it! It's my only daughter's wedding, for goodness' sake! There is no way I can minister to anyone today."

But God found a way through dead flowers.

"Life is not the way it's supposed to be. It's the way it is. The way you cope with it is what makes the difference."