



Courtesy of the Sixth Floor Museum Archives

The Pink Suit

New Fiction By Barbara F. Lefcowitz

I've never told a soul before: you, reader, are the first to know that for over 25 years I, Mrs. Arlene Schramm Duley, have had in my possession the pink suit that the late Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis wore that day in Dallas. Bloodstains, the little black velvet collar, buttons and all, though I don't know what happened to the matching pillbox hat.

I suppose she never included the hat when she sent the suit out to be cleaned. Back in 1963, my father, the late Henry J. Schramm, owned a dry-cleaning store on 7th and F Streets, less than a mile from The White House. It was called Congressional Cleaners and my mother and him—her name was Matilda Schramm—did indeed take care of lots of congressmen's suits and shirts. They would give personal

attention to each customer's clothing, as if they were grooming a poodle or piping frosted roses on a wedding cake. Mamma would iron some of the collars and ruffles by hand. Not at all like today, when you're lucky if your skirt shows up on the computer. Mrs. Kennedy—to this day I can't bear to call her Mrs. Onassis—would send daddy all of her outfits. Mamie Eisenhower had recommended him to her. In

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F I C T I O N

fact, he went all the way back to Eleanor Roosevelt, though she never fussed much with clothes. I remember as a kid how once she came into the store herself and how I stared up at her, feeling a little bit sorry that she was wearing this flowery cotton smock-like dress instead of the shiny purple silk gown I imagined a president's wife would wear. I think she smiled at me but I'm not absolutely sure.

When daddy died of a sudden heart attack in 1969—mamma had passed away two years before—my sister Jeanette and me went through the store, contacting customers, cleaning up, doing inventory, all those sad post-mortem chores. If I hadn't tripped on a torn place in the old tan linoleum back in a dark corner of the store, I would never have found *The Suit*, which was hanging like an empty skin inside a plastic bag that was stuck to it in several places because of the heat. Immediately I knew it was *the suit*, I can't explain why, it's just that I had that certain feeling. And I snuck it home making sure Jeannette didn't know, hiding it inside a garment bag way in the back of a closet in the attic of our house in Wheaton, so my husband and kids wouldn't suspect nothing. Of course, I did cut through some of the plastic and, sure enough, there were the bloodstains still on the suit, though they were considerably faded.

Did I feel guilty? Well, in a way, yes, I've got to admit it. But I also felt I had been blessed with a special privilege; maybe responsibility is the right word. You see, Mrs. Kennedy and I were the same age almost to the day, and from the first time I saw her picture, I adored her. My Mary Ellen was born a few weeks after Caroline and my Kenneth two months before John-John. To top it off, I, too, had a miscarriage, the same time she gave birth to poor lit-

tle Patrick who died of Hyaline Membrane Disease. Though I'd never heard of that disease before, I couldn't get it out of my mind no matter how hard I tried. Hyaline Membrane Disease, even now it sounds terribly important and scary. I guess I was luckier than her, though, because when I miscarried I never had to look at the lost baby. Oh, how I cried for her then, and so many times later.

Unlike some of my friends, though, I never tried to look or act like her. How could a short plump woman like me even pretend to look like a goddess? How could Arlene Schramm Duley, born 1930 in Baltimore and raised on Farragut Road off 16th Street in Washington; a commercial track graduate of the now demolished Central High School and wife of George Duley, branch manager of a Peoples Drug Store; Arlene Schramm Duley who except for one trip to New York City when I was eleven, had never been out of the Washington area, let alone to a foreign country; Arlene Schramm Duley whose greatest talents are baking snickerdoodles, embroidering guest towels, running up simple dresses on my old Singer, and doing some china painting—how in the world could I be so uppity as to pretend I looked and acted like Mrs. Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy? Besides, I was perfectly content with my life, dull as it might sound. I never even kept a scrapbook of her pictures like my friend Betty Walsh did. Every single picture and news article she could lay her hands on! I guess I'm just not that kind of person; I don't even have no pictures of my own kids' graduations or the time George and me rented a place in Ocean City. One time we considered going all the way up north to Maine, a place called Ogunquit where George's cousin has a house, but we were afraid it would be covered with ice, even in summer.

Just to pick her brain, I once, in a

real cagey way, asked my daughter Mary Ellen (she was taking courses at the community college) what she would do if *she* had secret possession of the pink suit. At first—would you believe it—she said she didn't even know what I was talking about. When I explained, she just laughed. "Oh *that* pink suit. With the little black velvet collar? It's nothing but a cliché." When I pressed her further, she said it was trite, out of date, and she couldn't imagine for the life of her why I asked about such a dumb thing.

Still I wondered what to do with it and back around 1978 approached The Smithsonian about donating the suit to them, but I guess they thought I was just another one of those crackpots, like all those weirdoes writing books about assassination conspiracies. They never gave me an answer even after I went there in person, suit in hand, all nicely wrapped in a fresh plastic bag and tied with pink ribbons. So back it went into the attic closet nobody ever opened. I myself actually forgot about it after a while.

But then I heard back in May, 1994, how sick Mrs. Kennedy was. I could hardly believe it when she died so suddenly; just a couple of hours after I arrived in New York on the Greyhound to stand outside her apartment house with lots of other people. Don't ask me why I went, I just had to, that's all. I didn't even get to see Caroline or John-John or that paunchy bald guy, whatever his name is, her lover.

I did, though, get to see the hearse on the way to Arlington Cemetery after standing four hours in the hot sun. Just to glimpse it for a few seconds. I think I saw one of Bobby's sons, the one

with lots of curly hair, and another nephew, not the kind of sleazy guy who got in trouble last year with a girl down in Florida, but maybe Teddy's son, you know, the one who had cancer. I also saw Hillary Clinton, but to be honest, I don't like her one bit. Much too uppity, as if her mother never taught her the proper way to be a woman. Yes, I know, it's the mid-1990's and like Mary Ellen tells me, oh, mother—in that mocking way of hers—things have changed. Even so. I'm entitled to my opinion, right?

So what if I'm a cliché. What Mary Ellen and Hillary don't realize is that they themselves are clichés, just a different kind of cliché.

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It was when I went to Arlington the next day and placed a bunch of roses on Mrs. Kennedy's grave that I realized that now I really did have to do something with the suit. It just didn't seem right to keep it hidden now that she was dead. Just leaving it on her grave with all the flowers and notes was one possibility, but the park police would

probably remove it right away and put it in the trash, not even bothering to donate it to Good Will or the Purple Heart. If only I had more imagination! Like I had when I was a kid!

Some lady with bright orange hair was kneeling over President Kennedy's flame, so close her dress almost caught fire before a guard ushered her away. Something I had seen once on TV crossed my mind: how in India the widow of a dead man has to throw herself into the flames when he's cremated. I forget what they call it but I thought it was pretty awful.

Why should the wife have to die just because her husband died? I'm no libber, as you know, but that really seems unfair to women. Well, one thought led to another and I decided I would sneak back at night with the suit and toss it, all bunched up, into the Eternal Flame. I could just see it burning up, the flames leaping higher and higher and little shreds of pink wool soaring over the Potomac like a great storm of cherry blossoms, or better yet, like what happens with the fireworks on the 4th of July. And then the suit would be gone, one last great salute to Mrs. Kennedy, and my conscience would be free. Yes, it was exactly the right thing to do.

The only problem was I couldn't get anywhere near the flame when I drove to Arlington a few nights later. I could see it all right, glowing in the warm distance. All the tourists had left and it was so peaceful and quiet I could have stayed outside the locked gate all night. But the park police got suspicious and told me to leave. Maybe they thought I was

■ FICTION ■

carrying a bomb in the plain Giant Food sack I had stuffed the suit in. For a minute I tried to explain my mission but I could tell the man just thought I was another of those nut cases on the loose from Saint Elizabeth's. So much for the great wild flames and pink shreds soaring over the Potomac! And there I was again, wishing I had some imagination.

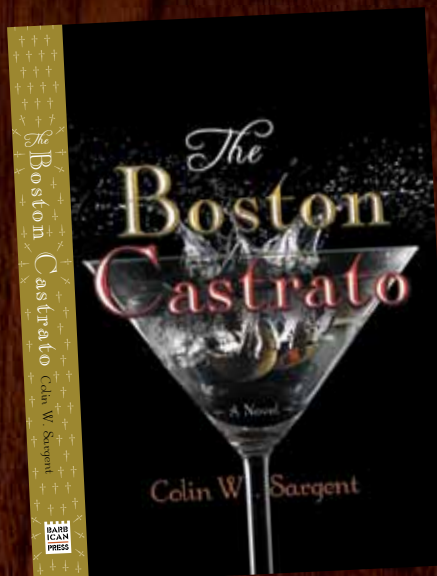
If only I could consult Mrs. Kennedy herself, I remember thinking. Sure enough she would have some bright idea what to do with the suit. Not that I believe in any after-life. But it did cross my mind that she must be very busy catching her husband up on all the things that happened since he was shot. Just think: he never heard of Lee Harvey Oswald or Jack Ruby or the Warren Commission or how Bobby was assassinated or about Chappaquiddick and Mary Jo Kopechne, or Watergate or how Vietnam finally ended or how Ronald Reagan ended the Cold War or all the nasty stories about him and those Mafia women and god knows what else. Would she tell him about that awful man, Aristotle Onassis? I hoped not.

I guess I would never have thought of the solution if Mary Ellen had not complained to me over the phone (she's married now and a mother herself) how the stores had no summer skirts that looked right on her. Either they were too short—unfortunately she inherited my fat legs—or too long, all the way to the floor as if you were going to a ball. Could I run her up something on my old Singer? Of course. And while I was at it, having chosen some real nice cotton with daisies on it, why not make a few nips and tucks on the pink skirt, add an elastic band and an extra panel so it would fit me and wear the darn thing myself? How crazy that I hadn't thought of doing that a long time ago. Now the jacket was a real problem,

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there wasn't much I could do with that, but the skirt would be perfect.

Naturally, I didn't tell a soul that my new pink skirt had been remodeled from Mrs. Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy's skirt. The bloodstains I concealed with a clever little sash. I don't think I can possibly express to you how great I felt when I wore that skirt. Tall, rich, beautiful, clever, every bit as worthy as the late Mrs. Kennedy. Like I was wearing a brand new skin. Soon I began to feel that way even when I

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wasn't wearing the skirt, like I really had created for myself a new skin. I didn't even care that nobody seemed to notice, not George, bless his heart; not Mary Ellen or Kenny; not Betty Walsh or any of the girls I went bowling with. Not even the teacher of my china painting class at the Y. But, like I said, I didn't even care. What was important was that I myself noticed.

So when later that summer there was a special show at the Smithsonian about the Kennedy era called "Camelot Revisited" I didn't even blink when I saw on display the pink suit, complete with the little black velvet collar and buttons. Not one blink. Because I knew it was no more real than the silk roses that supposedly stood for the roses she was carrying thatdayindallas. ■