

"Sure," said Carol, their eyes sparkling like Carol's zircons, although they both knew Fred would never see Martha's closet. It had been six years since Fred had gone out for beer — and never returned. They'd heard he'd moved in with a 28-year-old widow.

"When he comes home," Martha said, almost reading their minds, "he'll have his creases extra-straight."

"Terrific," they said, eager to go home.

When the doorbell rang, Martha opened the door. It was Fred.

Edie and Carol opened their eyes wide as their drooping mouths.

"I got the beer," Fred said.

"Come see your shoes," said Martha, leading Fred by the hand into their bedroom.

DRESSING MARIA

When Maria Mello died, her sisters agreed: Maria's casket should be open for the two-day viewing service at Cabral's Funeral Parlor. They did not agree on how Maria should be dressed.

"Her blue dress is perfect," said Olivia. "Her favorite one with sequins that she wore dancing."

"You want Maria buried in a dance dress?" Carmen said. "Mother of Mercy! I never heard such a thing."

Olivia had graduated from Warwick Community College and considered herself modern. "Maria loved that blue dress," she said. "And her hair should be pinned up with her diamond barrette."

Carmen made a sign of the cross. Her olive skin blanched white. "Maria should wear the black dress she wore to Church. And her hair neat and plain. She's going to visit God — not Alfie's dance hall."

"The blue dress," Olivia insisted.

"The black dress," said Carmen, wedging both hands on wide hips.

Finally, Olivia suggested, "How about this: Monday — the viewing — Maria can wear the blue dress; Tuesday, she can wear black."

Olivia and Carmen turned to Mr. Cabral. "That's very... irregular," he said, taken aback. "Of course, I'd have to charge an extra fee for dressing the deceased twice."

Satisfied, Olivia and Carmen agreed.

Suddenly, it occurred to Mr. Cabral: his customers might really like this, having their loved ones wear two attractive outfits instead of one. Who knows, he thought, I might get a reputation for having the best-dressed deceased in town.

— Cynthia Lelos

East Freetown MA

SOME FRIENDS OF RUTH AND ELLIS GET MARRIED

— For Dan Lenihan

An obvious gatecrasher
slides up to me, belches,
and says that the wedding cake
represents Alcatraz;
I'm invited back and forth across the room
to hear these bad stories about
Adelaide, Morocco, and how
they amputated the wrong leg
on cousin so and so.
After a while
I stand off in one corner
pretty convinced
that I've found a pubic hair
in my vol-au-vent.

The band at the reception
was called the "The Yawning Haloes,"
an a cappella group,
all with speech impediments.
Someone had invited an undertaker —
he went red
trying to tell me a joke about
a left-handed gynecologist.
The guy reading the telegrams
lost his glasses
in the soup tureen.
When we left the reception
most of us
had parking tickets.

The wedding was held
in a really nice public park