

Rules for
the Southern
Rulebreaker

Misssteps and Lessons Learned



Katherine Snow Smith



SHE WRITES PRESS

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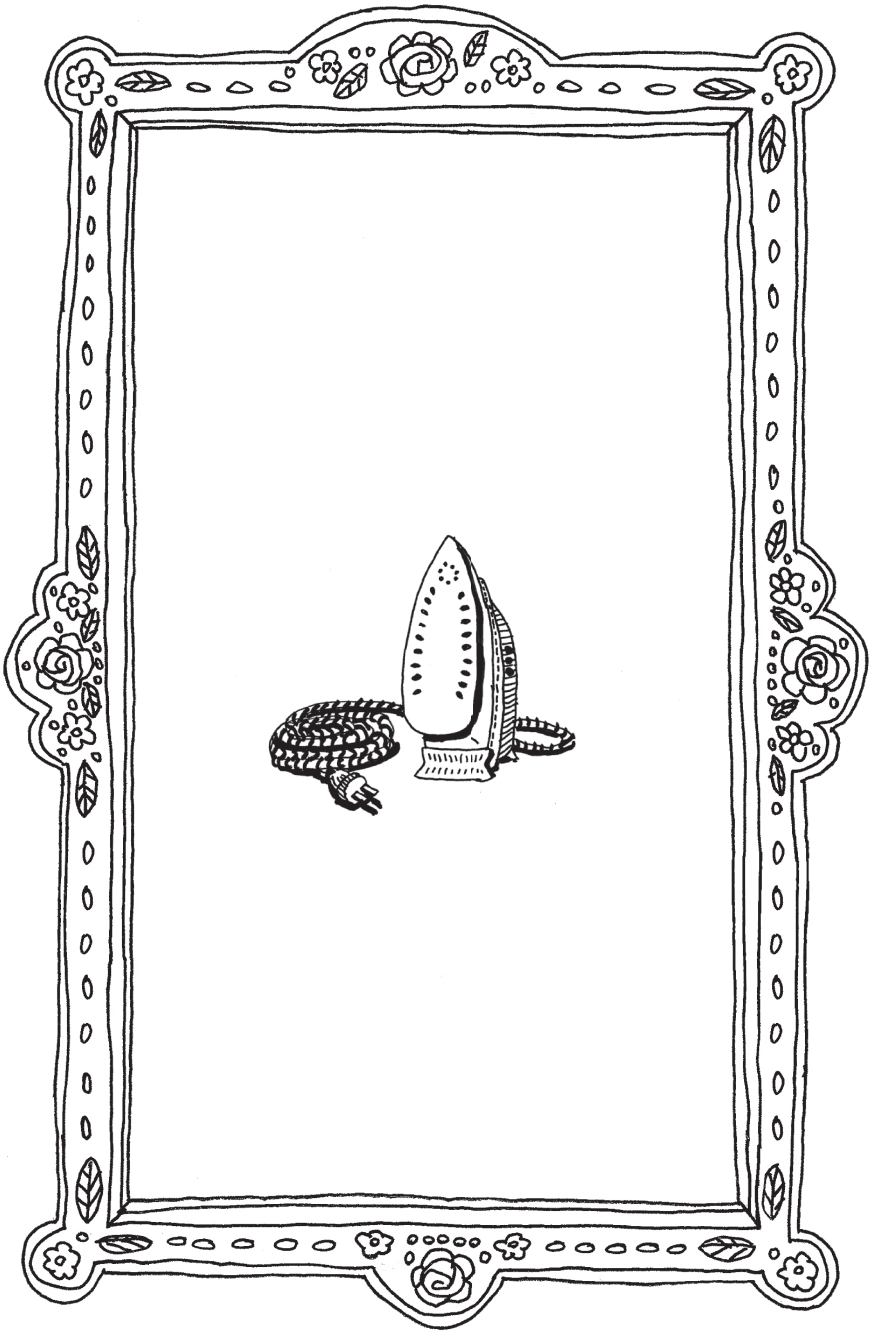
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7. Never Arrive at the Funeral Home Late



I watched from the second-to-last basement stair, which was covered in the original short-pile marigold carpet from 1959. My mother ironed my sister Melinda's tea-length dress. It was the color of orange sherbet, lace overlaying silk. Melinda had worn it to our cousin Melanie's wedding several years earlier. It would be the last dress she would ever wear, because she was to be buried in it the next day.

We had to be at Brown-Wynne Funeral Home to plan my sister's funeral in just about an hour. My mother, who painstakingly pressed every tuck and every pleat, was moving in slow motion. Then she stopped ironing to talk, a habit that always drove me crazy.

"First thing this morning, we heard a lawnmower and looked out the dining room window and that sweet Grady Cooper was mowing the lawn. He did the front and back in all this heat," she

told me, referring to my dad's good friend since sixth grade. Grady knew we'd have people coming over and wanted the house to look good, but more so, he just wanted to do something to help when there really was nothing anyone could do.

"And then that wonderful Glenn Keever insisted on going with your father and Alean to the funeral home this morning," she said as she placed a tulip sleeve over the tip of the ironing board.

Alean was the housekeeper who had stayed with Melinda and me when we were little and my mother taught at N.C. State University. She was still coming once a week when Melinda died at age thirty-one in a car crash. After my father told her the funeral would be closed casket, Alean asked if she could see Melinda once more. He complied immediately, later telling me he wouldn't have done that for anyone but her.

Glenn was one of my father's closest friends. He had identified my sister's body for the authorities after she was killed by a drunk driver. My parents were out of town, and I was living in Florida. This all happened more than twenty years ago, and as every well-wisher promised me at the time, the pain has lessened. The gaping hole will never be refilled.

I still remember how the basement smelled that day with the stiff, clean fragrance of Niagara Spray Starch as my mom ironed. It was a familiar scent because the ironing board was always in our basement, where Melinda and I had spent hours, thousands of hours, playing. She was three years older, so she always directed whatever we were doing, but her unleashed imagination rarely gave me reason to complain.

My mother seemed to have lost five pounds in the three days since we had convened at our brick house in Raleigh following Melinda's death. Her yellow linen dress was a burlap sack on her as she stood at the ironing board. I had never seen her exercise beyond an evening walk, but ironing was an Olympic sport with lots of pounding and intricate turns on flowing fabric. Her hand was always quicker than the eye as she got anything ready to walk

out the door within minutes looking much better than the day it was bought. Today, however, she was taking f-o-r-e-v-e-r. We were going to be late if she didn't pick up the pace.

To my right was the big brick fireplace, devoid of ashes in June. I pictured it two decades before, lined with produce boxes my mom procured from Winn-Dixie so Melinda and I could stack them three high and eight long to build empires for our Barbies. We created more than we'd played. The perfectly proportioned plastic dolls slept on lush beds made from Kleenex boxes and potholders. Lamps were Crest lids stuck on aggie marbles with Silly Putty. For chairs, we cut off the tops of Dixie cups, stuffed them with cotton balls, and covered them with scraps from the sewing cabinet.

Our next-door neighbor Marie Smith complained repeatedly to my mother that when she washed her dishes, she looked out her kitchen window down the hill into our messy basement full of boxes. Melinda and Katherine should clean up their toys at the end of each day like her daughter Betty had always done.

My mother put up curtains.

We had the requisite plastic Barbie furniture, too, and wooden ladder-back chairs Santa put in our stocking every year. Once we were old enough to know, Melinda teased my parents as she peeled the "Made by the Blind" stickers off the chairs and asked if Santa's elves were visually impaired.

Finally, my mother was done ironing Melinda's dress. She carefully hung it on a padded coat hanger. Now if she could just change clothes quickly we could leave in ten minutes and get to the funeral home almost on time. But then she placed a pair of white cotton underwear over the ironing board and gingerly touched the steaming iron to the fabric, an inch at a time.

Nobody, I mean nobody, was even going to see the underwear. What was she doing? And then I got it. I was only four months pregnant with my first child, but I got it. She wanted to be Melinda's mother for five more minutes. She wanted to

keep ironing, caring, teaching, defending, celebrating, helping, consoling, praising. This was the last thing she would ever do for her daughter.

“I love you so, so much and so did Melinda,” I said as I rushed to my mother and hugged her.

“Thank you, Katherine. I love you more than you will ever know,” she said through tears.

We were a good half hour late to the funeral home. Nobody complained.



