

On Their Best Behavior

By Jackie Shannon Hollis

After the wedding and before the reception, I get Mari to go up to my house with me while I change clothes. The dress I have on seems too frou-frou for the Igo grange. I mix a pitcher of Greyhounds, pour us two tall glasses and put the rest in a thermos, for the drive. Mari stretches out on my bed while I try things on. There's not a thing that makes me look how I want to look. Clothes pile up on the floor. "Makes my butt look flat," I say. "Does not," Mari says. "Makes my stomach pooch." "Does not." "Makes me sallow." "Yeah, you're right. It does."

Mari kicks a blouse off the bed to join the pile. She's slim and tall, just like me. She takes a big drink of her Greyhound. "This have anything to do with seeing Frank at the wedding?" she says.

The black and white halter top is a little impractical for so early in spring, but it accents my shoulders. "Nope," I say. "Frank can go poke himself with a sharp stick for all I care."

That halter with a pair of slim black pants and my high heeled red boots, a red scarf around my neck, my cheeks pinked up from the Greyhounds, I look fine, long and lean and for sure a few years younger than forty-two.

Maybe it's the Greyhounds that trigger Mari's headache. Maybe it's all my clothes changing. Or my driving. Or maybe the seeds were set from watching our little sister marry Bode Satler. Me and Mari, her husband Lou, and their boy Reg, made up the whole of our family at the ceremony, sitting in a row all our own at the courthouse. Bode's six sisters, their husbands and kids and grandkids, and Bode's still-alive folks filled the rest of the courtroom. They laughed and cried and clapped through the whole damn thing. Their Bodie Boy was finally getting married. Mari and I looked at each other out the sides of our eyes during that clapping and laughing and crying, our eyebrows raised. Eyebrows that said, 'Can you believe it?' And, 'They are just too much.' And, 'Undignified, these people.' After the ceremony the Satler sisters took us in their big soft arms. Dalia Satler Riggs whispered in my ear. "You poor girls. Orphans you

are. Well you're part of our family now." Our folks died awhile back. We are grown women. We are not orphans.

It's twenty miles of washboardy gravel road from Springs to Igo and we've gone most of those twenty miles. Mari doesn't give any warning, even though I've heard a person can get halos and lights, as a sign of one of those headaches. Not Mari. Her sign is puking. She doesn't tell me to stop, or put a hand out or anything. Just presses the window button and pukes, some of which makes it out the window and onto the outside of my little red Miata, and some of which lands on the inside.

I slam on the brakes. "Goddamnit Mari." We slide a little on the gravel then jerk forward with the stop. "Couldn't you of said something?" I'm out my door and around to hers, getting it open as fast as I can.

"Right, Leigh," Mari gets out and takes a few steps. She spits. "Like I scheduled it." She wipes her mouth with the heel of her hand. Looks at her wrist like there's a watch there. "Oh, it's a lovely spring afternoon. I think I'll vomit and have a migraine and go to my little sister's wedding reception."

Mari gets her purse from the back seat and sets it on the hood of my car. That purse is the size of a feedbag. She digs around in there. "Besides. I'd think you wouldn't mind." Mari takes a water bottle from her purse. Swishes water around in her mouth and spits. "This little car's cute and all. But God, after what Frank did, I'd of thought you'd want to get rid of it or wreck it or at least let me puke all over it." She reaches in the car and gets what's left of the thermos of Greyhounds. She swallows two pills.

A year ago, my husband Frank, now my ex-husband, gave me the Miata for our twentieth anniversary. Right before I found out he was having an affair with Vernie Wethers. Right before he left me for her.

I get an old towel from the trunk and look in Mari's side of the car. There's not so much puke there. "Do you want me to take you back to town?" I wipe off the door.

"No way." Mari scrunches down and looks at herself in the window. "It's our sister's wedding reception." She reaches in the purse for a tube of lipstick. "A person doesn't miss her own sister's wedding reception." She gets in the car and shuts the door. I get in and start the car. "These pills'll kick in. I'll be fine." Mari leans back and closes her eyes. That headache. Those pills. Champagne. She'll be no help at the reception.

Neither of us has been much help so far. The Satler girls stepped in and took care of things. We were informed. Of Grace's colors, (peach and grey); of her dress (a simple mid-calf, ivory silk. Tasteful for a woman getting married a little late in life). We kept saying we could do something and Grace finally asked if we'd serve at the punch and coffee table. Grace gave us corsages at the wedding. When she pinned the corsage on me, she told me she'd invited Frank. "Don't be mad at me." She bit some lipstick off her lip. "I've known Frank almost my whole life. He's a good friend of Bode's. I had to have him here."

I've read too many letters in Ask Amy about people ruining a wedding over this kind of thing. I gave Grace a tissue to wipe her tooth off. "It's okay Grace Ann. It's your big day." That's what Ask Amy always reminds a person of, the wedding is for the bride and groom, and everyone else should be on their best behavior.

At least Frank had the good sense not to bring Vernie Whethers to the courthouse. He came in alone, just when things were starting. I heard the rustling of him and turned. He took a seat in the back. He had a piece of tissue on his chin, where'd he'd cut himself shaving. After the ceremony he tried to get close to me during all that hugging. I was having none of that, and he finally ducked out.

Our parents and grandparents used to come to the Igo grange regularly, for Saturday night dances. It doesn't get used a lot now; but it's kept up for weddings or other things, if people have enough gumption to plan an event so far out of town. But this is a Satler event. The wedding may have been just for family, but the reception. It's for the whole town. Everyone's been waiting for Bode Satler to get married. They want to pay him back for all the times he stood up as best man or groomsman, for all those times where he and his sisters have proven to be better entertainment than the bride or groom. For weeks, in every store I went to in Springs, people brought it up. "Looking forward to the big day?" they'd say. "We're all so excited for Grace. That Bode is such a good guy." It would be a bash, it would be a riot, it would be a helluvatime. Like I'd have something to do with it.

Things at the grange are at full pitch. Four kegs of beer are set up outside in two ice filled water troughs. It's mostly men gathered around those kegs, men in pressed and starched Wranglers and pearl snap shirts, filling and drinking from plastic cups, scraping the foam off

with their fingers. Bottles of JD are handed over, tipped up, and passed on. “Well it’s a Satler wedding, sure enough,” I say.

Mari rolls her eyes. “Don’t be a snot.” She starts up the steps. “Gracie’s happy. Can’t you be happy for her?”

“This Satler crew is going to suck her up,” I say, “Make her one of them.” Music comes out the open doors. Charlie Lilac will have his DJ table set up inside. “I’m getting a beer.”

I don’t have to push too far into the crowd of men before my ex-husband Frank comes toward me with two beers held high up over the heads around us. He hands me one and winks. “Here you go, little lady.” Little lady. Who knows where he picked that up.

“Vernie inside?”

He waggles his eyebrows. “Yep. And you and me are out here.” He must’ve been sucking beer right out of the tap ever since he got here to think he has a chance to make nice now. Someone passes Frank a bottle of whiskey. I hold up my empty beer cup. Frank tips his head at that already empty cup. I hold it until Frank starts pouring. Hold it he gets it half full, me looking at the cup, him looking at me the whole time. “You better get in there and find that girlfriend of yours,” I say. I sip the whiskey, then take the other beer from his hand. “You don’t want to be disappointing her, too.”

“Jesus, Leigh.” Frank shakes his head. He used to have the thickest hair, but it’s thinned some, letting the scalp show through. “Can’t you just forgive and forget?” He takes the steps two at a time. Disappears inside.

I stay at the edge of all those men. Finish my beer and start on the whiskey. Another beer comes my way and I sip back and forth between beer and whiskey, until it seems like time to go inside, to see Grace and make sure Mari’s still standing.

Just as I get up to the top of the stairs, Darla Satler Carnes steps out and yells, “Towel dance is comin’ up boys.” She’s a big curvy woman, like all the Satler girls. She has a big head of hair to match. “Get your butts in here or you’ll miss it.” What my sister Grace sees in this Satler crew is beyond me.

Inside, Twist and Shout blasts from the speakers. Kids are out on the dance floor, jumping up and down and giggling and screaming. And right in the middle of them is my ex-husband, Frank. Him and Vernie Wethers. Doing the Western swing.

I finish my beer and stack the empty cup under the one still part full of whiskey. I take a big long sip. The champagne and punch and coffee table are right next to the front door. One of the Satler aunts is there; doing the job I was supposed to do. Maybe I should give her my corsage. Mari passes by, walking with an elegant wobble that says the two glasses of champagne in her hands aren't her first. Puke smell halos around her.

Vernie follows Frank's every move, eyes locked on his, big old smile on her face. I was the one taught Frank how to do the swing, way back in high school. He got pretty good at it. So good that he started saying to me, "Leigh, you've got to let me lead. It's not right, you trying to take the lead." He's an ass. Doing the Western swing to Twist and Shout.

I go over next to Mari, look around the room for Grace but can't see her.

One of Dalia Satler Riggs's boys is over by Charlie Lilac. Charlie stops the music and speaks into the microphone. "Ladies and Gentlemen." Charlie waves his hand. The crowd keeps talking. Someone tings a spoon on a coffee cup. The crowd keeps talking. Someone lets out a loud sharp whistle. The crowd quiets. "I give you . . . The Towel Dance." The crowd circles. Men come in from outside. There are whistles and whoops and shouts of "Oh, yeah."

The swinging doors to the kitchen at the other end of the grange hall swing open. A trail of Satler sisters, all six of them, comes through the parting crowd. The sisters, the whole curvy bunch, have on matching outfits; pants with a western flare, low-cut yoked blouses with a bit of fringe. Everything tight. Dalia in pastel blue, Donna the softest pink, Darla's light yellow picks up the highlights in her big hair. Deena in lavender, Dorris in peach, and Debra in a pale green. They sashay out to the center of the room, circling kitchen towels over their heads. Like lassos. Gingham towels, flowered towels, plain white terry cloth towels. They line up side-by-side in the middle of the room. I look to Mari, to make eyebrows at her. But Mari's doing a closed eye sway all her own. Dalia's just a few steps in front of her sisters. She holds her towel in front of her pulls it tight with both hands. She nods to Charlie Lilac.

Charlie starts the music. *I'm too sexy*. Dalia twirls her towel three big circles over her head. Her big hips circle too. She switches hands, makes three more circles. *I'm too sexy for my love*. Her sisters follow suit. The fringe on their blouses trembles. Dalia sticks her chest out and

dances her big boobs against that towel. The sisters follow suit. *Too sexy for their shirts.* Dalia puts the towel behind her, sticks her butt out at one angle, the towel at another. She dances against the towel. The Satler sisters. *Too sexy for their towels.*

I take another look at Mari. She's still swaying, but this time with her eyes open. To the beat of the music. To the moves of the Satler sisters. She lets out a small whoop, probably only I can hear amid all the whooping and whistling in the room.

Then the Satler girls twirl their towels and dance into two lines on either side of the swinging doors. They hold the towels in the air. They shimmy their shoulders. They yip. The swinging doors open. Out comes our sister Grace, all long and lean of her, still in her wedding dress, twirling her own towel (peach and grey stripes), down through the two rows of Satler sisters. The smile on Grace Ann's face is toothy and shy and just plain happy. When she joins them, the sisters spread out again, into one row, with Grace in the middle. Bode Satler does a two-finger whistle.

Dalia leads again. She circles her hips and circles the towel and spreads her legs wide. She pulls the towel between those fireplug legs. She rides that towel like a rocking horse. *I'm too sexy.* The sisters follow suit. Grace follows suit. The crowd whoops and whistles and claps. And even though Grace is almost a half foot taller and way narrower, she moves like a Satler woman. Curvy and sexy and glowy.

Dalia's eyes lock on Mari and me. Dalia reaches both arms out, her towel flopping from one hand, the other wiggling a finger at us. 'C'mon girls, you're a part of us now,' that finger says. Someone slaps my butt. Some Wranglered old cowboy. "Yeah." He leans in, all whiskey breathed. "Yeah," he yells and pushes my shoulders. The crowd looks our way, clapping. I dig my feet into the hardwood floor. No way.

But then, damn if Mari doesn't sashay out there onto the dance floor. Someone hands her a paper napkin, a white one with Grace and Bode's names embossed in silver. Mari swings that little napkin around her head, like a surrender flag. The old cowboy pushes me again, so hard I stutter forward, the whiskey in my cup sloshes up. I drink the rest of it in one long slow swallow, my head tilted back, eyes closed, wavy on my legs. *I'm too sexy for this party.* The crowd claps, for me drinking that whiskey, for the Satler sisters and their dance, for Grace so lovely out there with them, for Mari swaying around with her little paper napkin.

I untie the red scarf from my neck, use it to wipe the drips of whiskey from my chin. That song, it has a way of getting in. Into my feet, swirling my hips, making me whiskey warm.

Frank's across the room, eyes on me, jaw dropped open, Vernie Wethers tugging at his arm. Probably wanting him to lead her onto the dance floor, her being the kind that can't take a step on her own.

Grace has her hands out now, fingers curling me to join her. I pull that scarf taut between my hands. The steps I take aren't from a push. It's a pull. The pull of my sisters, and my sister's sisters.