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Gypsy's Wedding

By DarbyLee Patterson

Gypsy Latreaux peered into the smoky bathroom mirror. This time she'd get it right, finally.

She poked a last carnation into her upswept hair that made her neck look long and graceful. The white flowers encircled her curls like a petal crown and also camouflaged the army of bobby pins that held up her hairdo. There was no hint of sagging skin that often afflicted some women her age and only a few faint lines on her forehead.

Her dress was pewter blue with a waistline cinched in by satin ribbon laces of the same color. Damn, she wished that Bubba had a full-length mirror in his single-wide. She'd have to wait till they got to the courthouse to check out the whole picture. But she already knew she was looking good, and Bubba was damn lucky to have her. Here she was, somewhere in her late 30s, with the tiny waistline of a 15-year-old, and her teeth weren't too bad, considering.

She draped a powder blue, floor-length satiny cape over her shoulder, from head to toe, looking like a mature, southern version of the Princess Bride. A Loretta Lynn tune was floating through her mind as she sashayed from the bathroom down the narrow hallway that emptied into the living room.

Bubba reclined back in the Barca Lounger, watching ESPN on the 46-inch TV, Lone Star Beer in one hand and an unfiltered Camel in the other. Gypsy posed in the doorway. "Well, what'd ya think?"

"I think them sumabitches gonna lose again," he answered, keeping his eyes glued to the screen.

"No, Bubba, baby – I mean what'd ya think of me. Do I look like a bride?" Bubba rotated his head 45 degrees and checked her out.

"I'll say. You clean up real good. I am one lucky cuss. Shee-itt!" His attention snapped back to the screen where the Cowboy's defensive end had just racked up a penalty.

Undaunted and carrying on the princess theme, Gypsy said, "Thank you, kind sir." She smiled sweetly. "We better think about getting on over to the courthouse, Bubba. I sure want to be there when Patsy Mae Wilson comes flyin' in."

"Five minutes, baby. It's the last of the fourth. They could still pull it off."

Gypsy sighed and lit a cigarette. She wasn't about to have an argument on the most important day of her life. Of course, there had been a few other similar "important days," but she'd have been a fool to stay with an unemployed carpenter who liked to wear women's clothes or that bozo with the alligators. Bubba was all right. Had a steady job. Owned the mobile home outright. Drove a nice quarter-ton Ford truck and had a motorcycle to boot.

She looked at her husband-to-be. Big man. Tall, well over six feet. He had that wild, natural sort of look you find in men who prefer a rural environment. His graying hair tickled the collar of the black western dress shirt he wore under a black denim vest. Gypsy didn't mind the longish hair but she didn't much care for the beard. At least Bubba could trim it now and then. Jesus, he looked like Father Time. But she kept her silence, figuring that was something she could fix after they were man and wife. Along with that beer belly of his. The man looked about eight months along!

On the drive into Austin, Gypsy sidled up next to Bubba and put her hand on his leg. She moved it softly up and down the stiff black denim, knowing that if she wanted to, she could drive Bubba right out of his mind. Lust played a pretty big part in their attraction for each other, and it was a lot more fun than talking. To pass the time, Gypsy sang "*Your Cheatin' Heart*" and noticed that it brought a little smile to Bubba's lips. She had some worry about his mood because the Cowboys did not, in fact, 'pull it off.' Bubba had the potential to be righteously crabby.

They were getting married in the city because her very best friend from grade school was flying all the way in from Australia to be her bride's maid, and there wasn't any airport back there in the Hill Country. Gypsy had looked at a map to find out precisely where Australia was. It was a hell of a long way off and an island to boot. Bubba told her that everybody in Australia was a criminal except for the "Originals," who were cannibals. Gypsy didn't believe him because Patsy Mae wasn't a crook, and neither was the man she went over there to marry. He was a rancher with plenty of money and land.

A handful of other friends were meeting them at the courthouse as well. The crowd was limited by the number of running vehicles in their circle of acquaintances. No matter, pretty soon Gypsy would be a Mrs. for the best and final time. Gypsy checked herself out in the rearview mirror. Some of the carnations were looking a little droopy. They drove into the city with its tall glass and steel buildings and saw the Goddess of Liberty atop the great dome of the capitol building. Winding through construction and one-way streets, they pulled up in front of the courthouse. "You got any quarters?" Bubba asked her. Gypsy said she only had the tens and twenties she was saving for the celebration after.

"I get a dang ticket, it's your fault," Bubba said. He jumped out of the cab and stood on the sidewalk, hoisting up his jeans.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Gypsy asked and extended her hand like a proper lady. "You going to help your future wife from this here carriage like a gentleman?"

Bubba reached out to her, and she slid off the seat on the driver's side. It was a brilliant winter afternoon, cool air kissed by the sun. She slid her arm into Bubba's and gave him her best smile. "The Lord has smiled upon this day," she said. "Couldn't be finer weather for getting' married."

"That's so," Bubba responded. "But while he was at it he might've smiled on them Cowboys. I lost ten damn bucks."

They walked toward the courthouse doors, big carved wooden doors that looked too heavy to open by hand. Gypsy carried two small bouquets of carnations in her hand, one for herself and the other for her bridesmaid.

The hometown members of the wedding party had already arrived and were waiting at the bottom of the steps, smoking cigarettes and grinning at the couple walking toward them. Except for Gypsy, the color of the day appeared to be black, though no one had sent out any directions about that. The Preacher, Bubba's best friend, and frequent designated driver, pulled himself up to his full five-foot-three height. He was wearing his best hat – a black Stetson with a silver-conch band holding a hawk feather. The rest of his outfit was standard black-on-black - shirt, vest, jeans, boots with pointy toes. He had trimmed his white beard for the occasion and given his handlebar mustache an extra turn on the ends. Bright blue eyes peeked out from beneath the brim of the Stetson.

Towering over him at six-foot-five and shoulders wide as the midsection of a whiskey barrel, Billy Ray wore a grin of genuine joy and anticipation. His lips parted some, revealing the absence of two incisors and a couple of lower canine teeth. He was honoring the occasion by wearing his black sports coat with the narrow blue stripe and dress pants that very nearly matched. His black tee-shirt had been freshly laundered by his mama who looked after him. She'd stuffed a white hanky in the breast pocket of the sports coat. The jacket was covering up a cute image of a squirrel on the front of the tee-shirt. Lettering on the back read, "Squirrel, it's not just for breakfast anymore." Bubba and Billy's mama had been real good friends and Bubba tended to treat the slow but well-intentioned young man like a son. In his beefy hands, Billy grasped a bouquet of yellow daisies that he had squeezed till the stems turned to limp green strings.

Between the two men was a short, stout woman with lemon-blond hair and strawberry-red lips. Stella Curry had once been the toast of the Hill Country among gentlemen of a certain social circle who frequented the Blue Dawg – a homey late-night spot just off Highway 87 near Brady. Though it had been many years ago, Stella assiduously hung onto her former glamour and was thus sporting one of her better gowns – the black cocktail dress with sequins on the bodice and a layer of flamingo pink satin ribbon

around the hemline. It had been quite a trick to fit into the dress that morning, and she'd required help from two people to urge the zipper up as she sucked in her belly and held her breath. One of her friends made a bad joke about stuffing sausage as they collaborated on the effort.

Stella had also applied black false eyelashes and an extra layer of pancake makeup and rouge, thinking that she just might find somebody interesting later at the reception. Already, she was counting the minutes to when the zipper would come down and release her innards to fully suck in air. Stella picked at her teased hairdo with a pointy comb, hoping to conceal the dark roots that had sprouted in the depths of the blond mound.

The Preacher spoke as Bubba and Gypsy reached them. "Well, look at you two! Like the cover of a magazine. Lord be praised. He has looked down upon you." He reached out his hand and shook Bubba's, grasping Bubba's elbow with the other in a sign of a deeper kind of friendship. "This is the Big Day." The Preacher turned his eyes on Gypsy and said the words she longed to hear from Bubba. "And you, Missy Bride, pretty as a picture and twice as fine." Gypsy started to lift the sides of her dress to curtsy, but the Preacher grabbed her around the waist and was giving her a close-up hug in which the lower regions of their bodies briefly but firmly, met.

It was back-slapping and hugs all around, except for Billy Ray, who was never quite certain what was appropriate in social situations. Stella craned her neck up and looked at the big boy. "Billy Ray, what you planning to do with them flowers? Plant 'em,?" she asked. "Give them flowers to Ms. Gypsy here."

Suddenly aware of the bouquet and the long stems surrendering to his grip, he reached out his arm and handed them to the bride. "Here, Ms. Gypsy. These are from me and my Mama. She said to send you her good luck wishes." Billy Ray's smile widened, giving him the appearance of an oblong jack-o-lantern. Gypsy graciously accepted the flowers and handled the situation of the drooping stems. She broke off the blossoms and stuffed a couple of daisies into the lapel-holes of the men's jackets. She poked Stella's behind the woman's left ear, penetrating numerous layers of hairspray to position it correctly. She saved the rest for herself and for her bridesmaid, Patsy Mae.

Just then, a black Lincoln Towne Car pulled up to the curb. "That just might be Patsy Mae," Gypsy said. "You know her husband owns a big old ranch, and I'll bet he has a garage full of cars like that."

"You s'pose them cars have paddlewheels on 'em?" Bubba joked. "Cuz I done told you that Australia is a dang island!" Gypsy smacked him in the belly with the back of her hand.

"Course I know that! I'm just sayin' that Patsy Mae's done all right by herself. Anyway, it ain't her."

A black driver in a suit and livery cap had opened the rear door for a paunchy, older white man who was having trouble rising from the car seat. He gripped the sides of the door and pulled himself out, waving away the assistance offered by his driver. Judge Herman Floutz was fresh from the golf course and wearing a jaunty little cap that pushed his white hair out like bat wings along side his ruddy face. His double chin flapped from side to side as he righted himself. The Judge moved his bulk down the sidewalk, heading for the wedding party as the driver stood at attention beside the sleek car.

He walked slowly, with a broken gait, as if he were experiencing some pain, although the main impediment was the fact that the Judge was still wearing his spiked golf shoes and was at least 100 pounds overweight. The Judge had told his secretary to call him on his mobile precisely a half-hour before the wedding and well into the Saturday round of golf that he was guaranteed to lose, along with a hefty wager. The phone peeled just as the Judge lopped a divot the size of Rhode Island onto the fairway, his ball heading for a sand trap. Bailing on the 11th hole after the call, the Judge said; "Hell's Bells, ya'll have to play ahead without me. Dang secretary double-booked me. Sorry as I can be. And just when I felt my game taking a turn. Y'all have a drink from the cart on me!" He made this offer knowing the \$15 for beer would be considerably less than the silly bet he'd made on the outcome of the game.

Judge Floutz stopped in front of the wedding party and lifted his head, eyeballing his customers. "Stella," he said, letting a lurid grin swipe across his face and nodding a greeting. "Billy Ray, Preacher, Bubba. Good to see ya'll under *other* circumstances." Billy Ray was very impressed with the Judge's friendliness, having experienced his Honor's wrath after the incident with the blue pig. Bubba and the Preacher felt a mite pissed off by the remark but held their tongues.

Stella looked the Judge up and down. "My sentiments exactly, Judge Floutz, ya'll know what I mean?" The Judge snorted. There was a knowing smile on Stella's lips, and a shade of purple-red crawled from the jurist's neck to his forehead.

Although she wasn't certain about the details, Gypsy knew something negative was inappropriately brewing on her wedding day. "Judge, let me introduce myself," she said, extending her hand in greeting. "I am Gypsy Latreaux, the bride-to-be, and I am pleased to make your acquaintance."

Rescued, the Judge shook her hand and gifted her with the kind of smile he only used on the campaign trail. "Well, the pleasure is mine, ma'am. And may I inquire about your origins? I don't believe I've seen you before in our fair city, whereas I am acquainted with your colleagues."

"I hail from the fine city of N'awlins, your honor," Gypsy said, batting her eyes.

"Gypsy here is a entertainer," Stella offered.

"I see," said the Judge, raising one eyebrow.

“She sings,” Bubba interjected, guessing the direction the Judge’s imagination was headed.

“Well, now, that’s real nice. Would I have had the pleasure of hearing any of your recordings?” the Judge asked politely, trying to keep Stella from participating in the conversation.

“I mostly sing at fairs and little clubs,” Gypsy said, “although I did have a gentleman promise me a recording contract once. Turned out he was married.” Gypsy shook her head and shrugged her shoulders.

“Aren’t they all?” added Stella, looking at the Judge.

“Yes, well,” the Judge cleared a bullfrog from his throat. “Looks like you might have done right by yourself this time. To my knowledge, your groom here is not in a marital state.” To Bubba he said, “Talented little lady you got for yourself.”

“Regular songbird,” Bubba offered. Gypsy wasn’t sure just how Bubba meant this. She’d been longing for him to pay attention to her singing, say something complimentary. On the other hand, she seemed to recall that “songbird” had a sort of negative connotation. And, Bubba had the tone of voice that he sometimes used to say the opposite of what he really meant. “Put that thought clean out of your mind Miss Gypsy,” she thought to herself. “Negative, negative!”

On balance, Bubba was not a bad deal. There came a time in every woman’s life when priorities shifted. So Bubba was not the youngest, best-looking guy on the planet. In fact, he was a genuine slob of a man. So, he might not fully appreciate her God-given vocal talents that could have landed her in Nashville had she done a few things differently a decade or two ago. For example, the clogging gig with the carnival out of Sarasota was probably not a good career move.

But, the man had a house on a semi-permanent foundation, running transportation, a source of income and he wasn’t all that bad in bed.

The Judge slowly climbed the stairs. “See y’all in my chambers,” he grunted. His golf shoes left little peas of dirt on the marbled steps.

“We’ll be there shortly,” Gypsy trilled. “We’re just waiting on my best friend. She’s coming all the way from Australia for my wedding. She is a wealthy woman!”

As if on cue, a taxi pulled up to the curb and, without waiting for the driver to open the door, a red-headed woman with a tan that was incongruous to her hair color, burst out and ran down the sidewalk into Gypsy’s waiting arms. The women embraced like teenage girls, squealing and jumping in circles like a pair of Spanish dancers. The wedding party stood grinning, waiting. Finally, the reunited friends held each other at arm's length to

assess the passage of time. Gypsy quickly noticed the landscape of fine lines that etched on Patsy Mae's face, kind of like the pattern on a shattered windshield.

"You are lookin' fine! Not a day over 21!" She said to Patsy.

"You lie as good as ever," Patsy said. "That sun Down Under just dries your face up like an old prune! But, you, Gypsy Latreaux, you look like a young bride. Like a Princess Bride in that dress."

Gypsy noticed that Patsy Mae's dress was a little crumpled from travel and that she was wearing casual sandals, no doubt for comfort through the long trip. The real sign of her friend's good destiny was right there on her ring finger. Gypsy held Patsy's hand out and was almost blinded by three of the biggest diamonds she'd ever seen. Bubba had promised to get her a real wedding ring down the road. For now, she was wearing his sterling silver Harley ring. Gypsy turned to the wedding party and made enthusiastic introductions.

"This is Clyde Rumsfield, Patsy, but folks around here call him Preacher – cause, well, he has a very spiritual way of talking." She tried to explain Billy Ray's presence but since she didn't entirely understand it herself, just called him a young friend of Bubba's. Stella stepped up and introduced herself. "I take care of everybody around here, honey," she said. "There is nothing that happens in this town or in those hills yonder that I don't know about."

"I am just so pleased to meet you all," Patsy Mae said, spreading her smile across the wedding party. "As we say back home, G'day!"

"Listen to her talk Australian," Gypsy chirped, just as three loud blasts sounded from the taxi.

"Crimmey, I was so excited to see you, Gypsy, I forgot to pay the cab driver," Patsy Mae started to rifle through her bulging purse. "Now, what did I do with my wallet? Hello, hello, where are you?" she sang to the seemingly bottomless bag. The horn blasted again, and a head wearing a white turban emerged over the roof of the taxi. The driver stared keenly at Patsy Mae.

"Twenty dollas!" he shouted.

"Oh, bugger! I think my wallet is in my suitcase," Patsy said.

Enchanted with what she took to be Australian expression, Gypsy pulled a twenty out of the bodice of her wedding dress. "Here, honey, you can pay me back later."

"You are just a doll, as always," Patsy Mae trilled and ran back toward the cab. She returned pulling a large, worn suitcase that bounced and rolled behind her. Gypsy recalled that her friend had been quite a dresser, so the fact that she seemed to have

packed for a month instead of a long weekend was not surprising. She told Bubba to toss the bulging suitcase in the back of the pickup.

“Sure. Billy Ray, why doncha just heave that bag into the truck bed,” Bubba ordered. There was nothing Billy liked more than being helpful, and a smile lit up his face. By all accounts, including his own, Billy was not real smart, but he compensated by being helpful to folks and being strong as a Clydesdale in heat. This was both a blessing and a curse, as Billy didn’t have a firm grasp on when to use his God-given muscles. It was this proclivity that landed him in front of Judge Floutz more than once. But, since Bubba had never asked him to do anything that got him either a whuppin’ from his mom or trouble with the law, Billy was happy to sling the big suitcase like it was full of empty beer cans instead of Patsy’s wardrobe.

“Well, just look at that!” Patsy warbled. “Aren’t you the strong one? Thank you kindly.” She returned Billy’s smile - the difference being the number and condition of teeth they showed to each other.

“Tell the lady ‘you’re welcome,” Bubba instructed.

“You’re welcome,” Billy Ray said, lowering his eyes and shifting from one foot to the other.

Gypsy was once again congratulating herself for choosing such a gentleman this time around. She looked dreamily up at Bubba. “Shall we?” she asked, raising her eyebrows alluringly.

“Right here, in front of God and everybody?” Bubba smirked. Gypsy hauled off and belted him in the bicep, causing Bubba to laugh heartily at the off-color joke he’d made and making Billy take a protective step forward in case he was needed to defend Bubba from further attack.

Gypsy linked arms with her betrothed, and the wedding party moved through the ornate courthouse doors with awe befitting the gates of Oz. Being the weekend, the hallway was nearly empty, and the stone floors were buffed to a high shine. Dark wood wainscoting decorated the bottom portion of the walls, and above hung larger-than-life portraits of long-dead, stern-faced white men whose eyes appeared to follow the gaggle of people below. Gold picture lights illuminated the portraits. “I wonder who all these folks were,” Gypsy whispered. So elegant and hallowed was the courthouse that it seemed church-like behavior was called for.

Patsy Mae glanced up at a man in a blue uniform with a gold sash across his chest. “Rich, that’s what they were,” she answered. The group walked slowly along the corridor, the heels of Gypsy’s shoes tapping sharp echoes. Patsy’s sandals flapped against her bare heels.

“Why y’all whisperin’?” Stella blurted out. “This ain’t the dang cathedral of the bleedin’ heart. It’s Floutz’s office!”

“It just has that feel about it,” Gypsy answered. “I have never been here before.” She stopped in her tracks. “I’ll bet my songs would sound dang good in this hallway!”

“Go ahead, honey,” Stella barked. “Light one up!”

Thus, as they proceeded slowly to the mahogany double doors of the Judge’s chambers, Gypsy served up a taste of “Amazing Grace” that floated on the air and, bounced off the high ceiling and ricocheted off the walls and floor. She sounded like a throaty choir of fallen angels singing for sweet redemption. At the courtroom doors, they paused. “Was blind, but now I seeeeeeeeee,” Gypsy crooned, liberally decorating the notes of the last two words. Then, silence fell like a velvet curtain. The party stood immobilized until Bubba reached out and grasped the oversized brass doorknob. The heavy door swung slowly open, letting out a stream of cool, rushing air. They moved forward, feet falling on a red and gold carpet that repeated the ornamentation of wood carving on long benches that stretched clear up to the bar separating magistrate from the masses.

Gypsy and Bubba led the way. The Preacher, Stella and Patsy followed close behind. Billy was absent. “Where’d that boy go?” Bubba asked and marched to the back of the courtroom. He opened the door to find Billy immobilized like a freeze-dried flounder. “What’s wrong with you Billy Ray? Come on. We’re waiting on you,” Bubba said.

“I cain’t go in there, Bubba. I cain’t go back to that jail. It wasn’t my fault!”

“What are you talkin’ about. This here is my wedding. I’m getting hitched. You ain’t in trouble Billy Ray.”

“You promise? You’ll tell that Judge?”

“Just git your butt inside this here room. I think that judge charges by the minute!” Bubba held the door open, and Billy Ray walked in like a frightened kindergartener on the first day of school.

“I didn’t do it, Bubba,” Billy quickly whispered. “It wasn’t really me who painted the pig.”

“It don’t matter Billy. This here has nothing to do with that. Just take a seat and be quiet. You think you can do that for me?”

“Yessir.”

“And take off your cap. It ain’t respectful.”

“Yessir.” He slid the cap, emblazoned with a Hooters logo, into his back pocket and sat down beside the Preacher.

Stella readjusted her chest inside the too-tight dress. “Old Floutz likes to keep people waiting. Makes him feel important,” she said in a low voice. “He’s probably back there in those chambers of his practicing his putting.”

“How come you know him so good?” Gypsy asked.

“We go back a long way, honey. Someday, I tell you all about it. But this ain’t the time or the place.”

An enormous elevated judge’s bench dominated the courtroom. A smooth, deep brown, it showed graceful wood grain that swirled like smoke across its surface. The Preacher was in awe. “Looks like an altar, that does,” he said. “High justice from on high.”

As if trying to prove Stella wrong, Judge Floutz came bursting in from a door that was stage-right to the courtroom. From the sleeve of his black flowing robe, he pulled a white handkerchief, blew his nose, and then wiped his brow. “’Bout hot enough to make a sidewinder go straight,” he said, walking in front of the dais. “Gather round now. Come on. Don’t be shy. You too, Billy. I ain’t gonna bite.”

Stella let out a snort, and the Judge shot a glance her way. “Bubba, you and Miss Latreaux stand right in front of me. The rest of you file in behind them so I don’t have to shout.” The party moved into place, and Gypsy grabbed Patsy Mae by the hand, pulled her to her side, and handed her a bouquet. “You’re my bridesmaid, honey. Get right in here.”

“Now, Bubba, you got your choice of ceremonies. I can do the short kind or I can lengthen it out. What’ll you have?”

“What’s the difference?” Bubba asked.

“Oh, about \$50 or so,” Judge Floutz answered.

“I think what Bubba was askin’, your Honor,” Gypsy said. “Is what is the difference in the ceremony?”

“I knew that! Well, the budget ceremony takes about five minutes, and the other takes a good fifteen cause I put in all the whereas’es and whyfore’s and such. The brides, they seem to like that.”

Gypsy looked into Bubba’s eyes. “Well, I ain’t like everybody,” Gypsy said. “If we take the five-minute ceremony we can get over to Friday’s in time for Happy Hour. They got a killer jukebox. I’d rather spend the money on that.”

"That's my girl," Bubba said with a smile. "Practical."

"Okay, let's get started," the Judge ordered, and everyone straightened up like cadets awaiting inspection. The Judge momentarily closed his eyes and threw his head back, waiting for inspiration. His generous chins stretched out making him appear frog-like. The silence continued. All eyes were on the Judge, who snapped-to as if he'd been jolted awake from a dream.

"Dang, I hate it when that happens!" he said and stormed up the stairs to his bench, where he grabbed a big, green book with gold leaf pages. "Forgot how to start. Happens when you got a ton of things on your mind." He flipped through the book. "I got it marked." The Judge took a sip from a blue plastic cup on his bench as he read a passage. "Aaahhh," he uttered.

Stella leaned over to Patsy Mae. "That ain't water in that cup," she whispered. "Take my word for it."

Floutz brought both the book and the cup with him when he returned to preside over the wedding. "Ya'll ready?" he asked as if it had been his clients holding things up.

"All right, let's get on with it." He looked back and forth from Bubba to Gypsy before tilting his head back again. "Dang, dang!"

"Dearly beloved," the Preacher spoke up, prompting the Judge.

"I knew that!" Floutz barked. "I was just setting the tone." He cleared his throat. "Dearly Beloved, we are gathered here to unite Bubba Smith and Gypsy Latreaux in holy matrimony." He stopped and looked quizzically at Bubba. "By the way, that your real name? I mean, I never did meet anyone with Bubba as a given name. It'd be illegal for me to marry this lil' lady to a nickname."

"My Mama named me Bubba, Judge. It's smack on the birth certificate. Told me she wanted a name that was more uncommon than most."

"Just makin' sure. Stayin' within the guidelines of the court. Now, where was I?" The Judge looked up at the ornate ceiling.

"... unite Bubba Smith and Gypsy Latreaux in holy matrimony," the Preacher said. "Now comes the part about ..."

"I am going to hold you in contempt of court if there's another outburst, Mr. Rumsfield."

"My apologies, your Honor. Just tryin' to help," the Preacher said.

"Well, it's throwin' my game off," the Judge said, sticking his lower lip out like a pouting six-year-old. "Here, hold this for a minute." He handed Patsy Mae his blue cup and

Gypsy the big legal book. He started slapping his body with his hands. "Glasses. Lookin' for my glasses. What did I do with those dang things?"

Stella rolled her eyes as the Judge thwacked his robes some more. "On your head," Stella said, grinning and pointing to the Judge's shiny pate where the rimless pair of glasses rested. Billy suddenly grasped what had happened and struggled to hold in a laugh. A courtroom, he knew, was not a place to laugh. But, the situation with the Judge and the glasses and Stella was just too funny, and a laugh started to escape – first from his nose, sounding like a grunt, and then full-out, punctuated with snorts.

"Order in the court!" the Judge commanded, and Billy held his breath. It was quiet as the Judge put the specs on his nose, took the book from Gypsy and turned to the page with the \$50 dollar ceremony. He took up where he'd left off, reading the proper words to avoid any further unfortunate events. "Is there anyone present here who knows why this couple should not be united in matrimony? Speak now or forever hold your peace." Floutz looked up, fully expecting no response. But Billy had his hand raised.

"Billy? You have something to say?"

"I'm sorry," Billy said, hanging his head.

"I am just sorry. I didn't mean to, but I was holding my breath so hard I couldn't help it. I'm sorry Uncle Bubba."

"What are you talkin' about?" the Judge demanded. As the words slipped out, it became clear to everyone in the courtroom what Billy was apologizing for. A wafting odor had attached itself to the molecules in the air – a smell reminiscent of baked beans.

Bubba turned. "Excuse yourself from the room, Billy. It's all right," he said quietly. "We'll see you outside. You wait." Bubba turned to the Judge. "I think you best get on with it." Billy turned and scuttled out of the courtroom.

The Judge was pressing a wadded-up hanky to his face. Gypsy and Patsy buried their noses in the bouquets of carnations. Stella covered her face with her hands. The Preacher and Bubba pushed through the pain.

"UnderthepowervestinmeInowpronounceyouamanandwife," the Judge garbled out. "You might want to wait to kiss the bride outside. Court is adjourned." Floutz bolted from the room with impressive speed, considering his physical condition. The wedding party also didn't tarry. They moved as one motivated body through the courtroom doors and into blessed air where Billy was waiting on the steps.

He was red-faced and shifting from one foot to the next. He opened his mouth to apologize, but Bubba and his bride cut him off. "It's okay, Billy," Bubba said. "I get gas myself sometimes."

"Don't you fret," Gypsy added. "I'm just so dang happy, I could sing!"

Patsy Mae was teary-eyed. "It was so beautiful. If I had half a voice, I'd sing with you!"

"Let's all sing," Gypsy said. "What's a song we all know?"

It was Stella who started the rendition of "Don't Let Your Babies Grow Up to be Cowboys" The wedding party sang in a chorus as they headed for the reception in the lounge at T.G.I. Friday's.

It was early evening, and the bar wasn't crowded. There was only Gypsy's party and a scattering of suited-up people from a conference at the nearby Convention Center. She and her friends had been on a straight tequila run (except for Billy, who was sucking up a Roy Rogers like a dying desert rat). They'd lick the backs of their hands, sprinkle salt on the wet spot, lick it off, toss down the Quervo Gold, and bite into a lemon wedge, making a variety of not-pretty faces.

The Preacher, who'd fallen off the wagon for the blessed occasion, was telling Bubba about his adventures on an offshore oil rig that had exploded, sending him flying thirty feet into the air to fortuitously land on a rubber life raft deployed by the oil company's safety officer when it became clear that bad things were about to happen.

"There I was. A sinner, Bubba. A certified, card-carrying student of the devil's workshop. A womanizing, cursing, impure-thinkin', drunken son-of-a-bitch with a death wish that was about to come true. Flyin' through the air like a clay pigeon. I had surrendered my soul to Satan." He knocked back another shot of tequila without the ritual salt and lemon. Bubba listened, nursing a Lone Star beer. The Preacher exhaled. " ... Anyway, as I was sayin', me, a flea on the shag carpet of the Lord, I landed smack jimmy in the life raft, on my back on top of George Clinton, the safety officer." He paused. "Nice guy. I wonder what he done to deserve dyin' like that."

Stella and Billy were at the jukebox, flipping through selections, Billy rattling the quarters that everybody had given him to be the party's jukebox D.J.

Gypsy and Patsy Mae were forehead to forehead in conversation. Gypsy lost track of how many tequilas Patsy had downed, figuring her friend was a little rummy after the marathon trip from the other side of the world. "Show me that ring again," Gypsy said. The flame from the votive candle on the bar hit the stone's facets and made the ring dance with light.

"Nearly three carats," Patsy said. "Wish it wasn't my entire savings account." She looked down and then slowly raised her eyes to Gypsy.

"You mean?"

"Yep – that's it. Kaput. What's in that suitcase in the back of ya'lls truck and this here ring, well, that's all I got. If you wouldn't have sent me that plane ticket, well, I'm not sure where I'd be." She crumbled up a cocktail napkin and pressed it to her eyes. "Figure I'll just sell this ol' ring and start over Sorry, didn't mean to dump this on you on your weddin' day."

Gypsy, who'd had a few shots but not too many, put her arm around Patsy's shoulder. A carnation fell from her hair and landed in the salsa dish. "Honey, I am so sorry. What happened?"

"The man was an animal. He caught me by danglin' this big ol' ring in front of me, and I fell for it – went halfway around the dang world to get it. Then, I found out he took it off some South African dope dealer in a card game, and all he wanted outa me was a maid to cook, clean, and give in to his manly desires. He treated me like one of his dang bulls. No, excuse me! He treated them better 'cause they sold by the pound." She sobbed and blew her nose in the napkin.

Gypsy handed her a tissue she'd had stuffed down the bodice of her dress to kind of "flesh out" her bosom. "There, there, honey. You musta felt so alone, being in a different country and all. Poor Patsy Mae."

"I did, I did. Thankfully Mr. McVee came along and I had a little civilized company."

"Mr. McVee?"

"Nice old guy. Treated me wonderful, till his wife got home from her sister's in England." Patsy gave the bartender a nod.

"You drivin'?" he asked.

"No," Patsy snapped. "And mind your own damn business." She turned back to Gypsy with an apologetic smile. "Anyway, this is not your problem, it's mine. Men, with the exception of your Bubba, are your basic pond scum."

Gypsy noted to herself that any hint of Patsy's foreign accent had vanished in favor of the odd mix of a Louisiana, Alabama, Texas drawl. She was a little disappointed. Having an interesting and exotic friend was kind of a plus. "Ya'll just hang in there, Patsy. It'll be all right. Bubba and I will help you. Tomorrow is another day, I always say. You never know what's gonna happen."

"You are right, Gypsy Latreaux Smith," Patsy said, shaking herself out of the mood she'd fallen into and raising her glass of shimmering gold liquor. "Here's to tomorrow 'cause today ain't too shabby, and yesterday is plumb gone." They clinked shot glasses and performed the ritual, the tequila doing its slow burn on the way down.

"You be mindful of this stuff, Patsy Mae. It's not regular booze. It's got some kinda drug in it – something from a cactus, I think. Makes a girl crazy."

"You mean, like, it's vegetable juice? Like V8?" Patsy giggled. "I don't give a hoot nor a holler. I am broke as a broke-dick dawg, but I got a good friend."

Gypsy retrieved the carnation from the salsa dish and flicked off little pieces of tomato before shoving it back into her hairdo. "So, you ever see one of them kangaroos?" she asked, thinking that changing the subject might lift Patsy's spirits.

"Kangaroos, wallaroos, buckaroos, I seen 'em all," Patsy said, giving the bartender the high sign. She turned back to Gypsy. "You know, I hate to ask you this, Gypsy, but while you and Bubba are on your honeymoon – do you think I could maybe house-sit? I don't exactly have a place to stay and, well, until I sell this here rock, I 'm a teensy bit short of funds."

"Well, you are in luck," Gypsy beamed. "We can sure do that. Me and Bubba are going off for three glorious nights at the Alamo Inn. I'll just give you the key, and you can make yourself right at home. Course, it ain't exactly a solid, anchored to God's-green-earth house, but it's a dang nice singlewide, and after I get my hands on it, it'll be a little piece of Heaven.

Patsy Mae's face reddened. "You are just the best friend a gal ever had. The best ... f-f-friend ..." and tears welled up in her bloodshot eyes.

"Ya'll stop that now," Gypsy said. "My weddin' is no time for tears. Let's sing. Ya'll come over here Stella. You too, Billy. Here's a quarter. Play B-5."

Bubba leaned back on the bar and watched as his wife pulled Stella to her right and Patsy to her left. Billy shuffled off and dropped the quarter in the slot, being extra careful to get the letter and number right. He'd had enough mishaps for one day. A soft instrumental drifted from the glowing box, and Gypsy tilted her head to listen. "Y'all back me up, ya hear? I like this cause it ain't got no words. It's like havin' a whole band behind me." Soon, the tune became familiar to everyone, and Gypsy let her eyes fall gently shut.

"Take this ribbon from my hair, set it loose, and let it fall. All I'm askin' is your time. Help me make it through the night." Gypsy's voice rose over the small crowd in the bar and fell like misty rain on the few men and women in business suits, sipping martinis and glasses of white wine. They stopped their conversations and listened.

"I don't care what's right or wrong. I don't try to understand. Let the devil take tomorrow, tonight I need a helping hand." Up to the high notes, her voice lifted like a kite on a breeze. Back down to the deep, throaty notes. "Come and lay down by my side..."

A man in a three-piece suit stopped smoking his cigar and held it perched on his finger three inches from his waiting lips.

Patsy and Stella, who had tried to provide some back-up 'ooooohhs' and 'doo-whaass' had fallen silent. It was no longer Gypsy singing a familiar melody; she *was* the song. Patsy started to cry. Stella bit her lower lip.

Gypsy begged for the last time, "Help me make it through the night," holding the last note in a mournful breathiness that faded to silence. Silence, that set her skin to tingling. Then, suddenly, applause erupted, and as if snapping out of a trance, she smiled and bowed her head like a true professional.

"Dang you," Stella said. "You about made me run my eyeliner, girl! That was downright beautiful." Patsy was still trying to compose herself, blowing her nose in a cocktail napkin, when the three-piece suit walked up.

"Very fine singing, ma'am," he said. "Allow me to introduce myself." He handed Gypsy a business card. "I'm Carl Ventura, here for a conference of music performers looking for an agent – which I am. And I am very impressed."

"Well, thank you kindly, sir," Gypsy replied, glancing at the embossed business card. "I am Gypsy Latreaux *Smith*, and this here is my weddin' party and that gentleman is my brand new husband, Bubba." Bubba slid off the bar stool and joined the gaggle of folks surrounding his bride.

Carl shook his hand, wincing from Bubba's grip. "You have a very talented wife, congratulations."

"She can sing, all right, cain't she," Bubba said, causing Gypsy to look at him in awe. She had not been sure he'd noticed.

"So well that I'd like to have her pay me a visit at my office. Maybe in a couple of weeks. Call me at that number. Make an appointment."

Carl was dripping with confidence, good looks and very expensive clothes. Patsy Mae had quickly noticed these attributes and was repairing the damage done to her face by all the sobbing. She dabbed her nose with a napkin and reached out her hand, palm down.

"And I am Patsy Mae, this talented lady's best friend. I came all the way from Australia just to be with her today." The Southern twang disappeared from her speech.

Carl took her outstretched hand and held it for a moment. "Pleased to meet you." Carl let himself smile, almost as if he'd remembered a joke. "Why don't you all come on over to our table. Let me buy the wedding party a drink."

Amid "Thanks," and "you don't have to do that," and other mumbling, Patsy and the Hill Country folk joined a small cadre of dressed-to-impress conventioners. The fact that the two groups had little in common, other than an appreciation of the bride's vocal abilities, did not prove uncomfortable since everyone, except for Billy, was pretty well oiled-up.

Patsy maneuvered herself to sit next to Carl, immediately sliding her hand under the table and switching the triple-crown ring from her left hand to her right.

Carl was the center of the universe – the three men and two women with him were, ironically, young talent looking for an agent. Gypsy, being freshly married and thrilled that such a fine man had liked her singing, did not notice the occasional glares behind their uptown smiles. And, when she revved up another tune, she asked them all to sing. It was as glorious a chorus as had ever graced the lounge at Friday's. As the singers belted out tunes – occasionally glancing to see if Carl was watching – Patsy was entertaining Carl with tales of life Down Under.

Gypsy had switched to Club Soda, and Bubba was slowly sipping a draught beer. He'd pretty much been quiet since they'd moved to Carl's table. After Gypsy led a particularly fine rendition of "Mamma He's Crazy," Bubba reached beneath the table and, in an unusual display of public affection, took her hand. "Just so ya know," he whispered in her ear, "I'll be getting' you that weddin' ring week after next – when ol' man Miller pays me for that deck job. Just so's ya know."

Gypsy was momentarily taken aback. She had already accepted the fact that it would be she who infused their relationship with romance, Bubba being the silent type. It was fundamental to her philosophy of "Everything is a trade-off." Maybe this old dog could learn a few new tricks, she thought, giving her husband a bright smile. "That'd be mighty nice, sweetheart," she said, noticing Bubba's quick glance in Carl's direction and figuring a little competition was a healthy thing. Bubba smiled back at her, looking like he'd just won a poker hand.

Carl, on the other hand, looked like a man needing air. Patsy Mae had moved in so close her elbow was resting on Carl's shrimp appetizer plate, and her breasts were caressing his left arm. The young blond woman on his other side was making her fingers walk up his right arm as she sang a familiar soap jingle into his ear. The others from the music conference were also competing for Carl's attention, and, for a moment, Gypsy felt sorry for the man.

The Preacher had taken to telling tales to Billy, who was trying to listen while helping Stella build a house out of the cardboard coasters. "That's when I saw her. In all her glory," the Preacher said to Billy.

"Saw who?" Billy asked, taking his eyes off the steeple of cards.

"The Blessed Virgin, that's who!"

"Oh."

"It was a miracle, I am tellin' you. There she was. Her face appearing as clear as the nose on your face. Of course, I could not eat that pancake. No, sir. I asked the manager at Denny's for a box so's I could take it to my church," the Preacher said, taking a slow sip

of his drink and shaking his head. "Course, by the time I got it there, the syrup had all soaked into the pancake, and you couldn't make out her face like before. But I saw it. And, it was a sign."

"Of what?" Billy asked, leaning forward with interest and knocking Stella's four-tier tower down.

"Damned if I know. Still working on that, I am. You can't tune a revelation in like one of them satellite channels," said the Preacher.

"You can't?" Billy asked.

Stella, whose capacity for drink was a legend in the Hill Country, stood up and waved at the bartender. "One more," she shouted, raising her shot glass and looking at Gypsy. "Then, I gotta go. I have an urgent matter to attend to." That was the matter of the sequined dress that, as the evening wore on, was increasingly constricting circulation to her extremities. Drinks were ordered all around - beer, tequila, a Roy Rogers, and a Club Soda for Gypsy and friends, and Martinis, Cosmopolitans and scotch for Carl's crew. Patsy, intending to seal her bond with Carl, also ordered scotch straight up.

Everybody stood and raised their glasses. The Preacher, being accustomed to presiding over momentous occasions, stared at his tall glass of honey-colored beer. "Here is a toast to Mr. and Mrs. Bubba and Gypsy Smith. May the good Lord Bless and keep you, and may you be in Heaven for half an hour before the devil knows you're gone!"

Glasses met over the table and clinked in different tones. Best wishes for Gypsy and Bubba issued forth, and drinks were downed. Billy forgot to remove the straw from his Coca-Cola drink and poked himself in the eye, spilling most of the drink as his hand darted up to his face. Stella grabbed cocktail napkins to soak up the puddle on the table. "I'm sorry," Billy sputtered. Stella reached up and wiped his hand off with a napkin.

"You're rubbin' soda into your eye, Billy," she said. Bubba gave him a comforting pat on the shoulder as the wedding party got ready to leave. Patsy Mae was urgently whispering something into Carl's ear when the Preacher's voice rose.

"Holy Jesus!" he exclaimed. "Holy Mother of God!" All eyes turned his way as he pointed to the glossy spill mark on the table. "There he is!"

"Who is?" Billy asked, peeking at the Preacher through one eye.

Stella picked up her purse. "He's seeing another one of them faces," she said with a tone of exasperation. "Who is it this time? Elvis?"

"Don't blaspheme, Stella!" the Preacher shot back at her. "Ya'll just look at that, and you tell me!"

The group huddled around the Preacher, except for Carl, who made a pistol with his thumb and index finger and pointed at Gypsy. "Call me," he mouthed and winked at Patsy before slipping quickly to the door.

"Well?" the Preacher asked again.

"Sure don't look like Elvis," Bubba offered with an amused tone. Mostly, the group was saying things like "I don't see anything" and "where?"

Just as the Preacher started to outline what he saw as a tiny head and outstretched arms, Patsy Mae pulled Gypsy close and whispered into her ear. "Forget about that key. I got a hot date. I'm slidin' outta here. Ya'll hang onto that bag of mine? I've got a mean old stretch Lincoln waiting for me curb-side!" Patsy had a little trouble with the consonants, having downed the better half of a bottle of Cuervo Gold before the shot of scotch.

"You think you should do this? After all, you just met the man," Gypsy said.

"Girl's gotta look out for nummer one," Patsy responded with a lazy wink. "Ya'll have a wonderful honeymoon. I mean moneyhoom. Whatever."

Gypsy's attention snapped back to the Preacher who was announcing the identity in the spill. "It's the Baby Jesus. That's who it is. Here to bless the union of Bubba and Gypsy." By the time Gypsy turned back, Patsy Mae had taken off.

With Carl gone, the young singers from the conference felt no particular urge to be sociable and were howling with laughter about the Preacher. Bubba, who never did like folks making fun of others, gathered his buddies together and headed for the door. He walked with a certain pride, being aware that there were days in the past when he would have made a bunch of greenhorn wiseasses like that eat a fistful of teeth. That was before his court-ordered anger management classes. He'd come a ways, he mused.

Two-by-two, they passed through the revolving glass door into the early evening. Billy, who had recovered from the straw incident, went through alone, making two complete revolutions before being pulled out to the street by Bubba. The sun was just beginning to set, and the sidewalks of downtown Austin wore a soft pink glow. Gypsy linked her arm with Bubba's and they stood for a minute looking up at the tall buildings and down the grand street that led to the state's Capitol building with its majestic dome reflecting the sunset hues. There, about a quarter block up the avenue, was a sleek black Lincoln. Shuffling unsteadily toward the Towne Car was Patsy Mae.

"I'll be," Bubba uttered. "I thought he'd bolt." Patsy slapped the trunk of the Lincoln with the flat of her hand, and the driver stepped out. Stella let go of a laugh. "He did!" she said. "That ain't Carl's car, it's old Judge Floutz's rig."

They watched as the driver opened the back door of the car, and Patsy Mae bent at the waist to crawl inside. She stopped halfway and looked around, stood up, and glanced

back at Gypsy. Patsy smiled and opened her arms in a gesture like the one the Preacher had seen in the liquid image of the Baby Jesus. "Whatever," she shouted and ducked into the back seat.

"Well, what do you know," Bubba said.

"I know one thing," Gypsy answered as she watched the long black car pull away from the curb. "Any man who stands up my best friend is no friend of mine." She reached into the bodice of her dress, retrieved Carl's slightly damp card, and ripped it in half.

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