

# WHISPERINGS

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# Confessions of a Juicebox Mom

by Janie Wilson

“WHO WANTS A JUICEBOX IN HER LUNCH?” I screamed cheerfully from the empty kitchen.

My 15-year-old daughter yelled back, “I’m not seven, you know! Gimme a bottled water!” Then she strutted into the kitchen wearing a miniskirt, wedge heels guaranteed to create a wobble in her walk, and a frown that said, Mom, you are such an airhead.

For the twenty-ninth time that morning I thought about my two grown-up children and missed them. Well, to be fair, I missed who they became after the age of 15.

With a stubbornly perky smile, I pointed out the obvious. “Katie, that’s against the school dress code, and they’ll send you home again. I have to work and can’t come get you today.”

My gentle princess snatched a tissue from the counter and blew her nose loudly. “Read my lips. This is fingertip length.” She dropped the tissue on the counter and tottered her way to the pantry for a ritual breakfast of instant cheese-grits.

I stared at her back and wondered not for the first time how a child could go from a sleeping angel to a nightmare of full-on, teen-angst attitude.

“Let’s go, mama. I’m gonna be late.”

I know what you’re thinking. Dang, how awful to deal with a kid like that. She’s probably trying to decide whether to smack her on the butt or flick her in the back of the head. And to that I’d say nope. Dead wrong. I stood there looking at that underdeveloped back and overdeveloped ego and thought, When did I become a deep-south, Georgia-cracker, juice-box mom?

Can I blame the minivan? Sure, the van is a gas-guzzling heap that shouts your defeat to the world. But you do get to choose it. You are the one standing in the dealership – or worse, haggling with a beer-bellied good old boy who’s moving on to a hummer for the little woman. “Eyah, you girls need to drive a tank to keep all ‘em youngins safe,” punctuated with a smile of teeth stained around the edges.

While you stood there selling out, did you realize what was

happening? I didn’t. It didn’t hit me until I drove the soccer-mom van to happy hour. That’s when I knew that fun Sharon was gone and boring, shoot-me-now mom-Sharon had taken hold. Everybody has that moment of realization. And it always comes as a surprise. Huh, I’m a sellout. I might as well eat that cheesecake, scratch my rear end in public, and start offering unsolicited advice to anyone who will listen.

THE good news is that southern women are allowed to own a minivan, insulate their waistlines, and become annoying as they age, but only (and this is important) if they are married with children. Nope, you can’t just be married. You have to have children, and only one won’t do. Two is passable, but four or five reaches respectable. With three children, logical people will accept you into the club and let you moan about the trials of parenthood, but a real southerner will always look at you with a little question mark.

The children and the husband make you legit. You can really let yourself go. Everybody will understand that you struggle with life every minute of every day. You wear that badge.

I know this because I’ve been that woman. I wallowed in the muck and belonged.

“Oh, y’all know how men are. Geesh, mah husband Jimmy is the worst. He never even bothers to wipe his feet when he comes in from huntin’. You’d think he was raised in a barn.” I’d spout off my plight at anyone who’d listen just to make sure they knew I was in the trenches. I’ve heard soldiers who returned from Iraq do the same thing, talking loudly about the horrors of war so people can appreciate their sacrifice. And make no mistake, having a big family to put up with is war.

Sometimes it pays off. You stand there complaining to the cashier at WalMart even though she’s a complete stranger, and she nods wisely. “Honey, I know ex-actly what you mean. Mah Bubba ain’t got a lick o’ sense. He don’t know the first thing about washin’ a dish.”

I’d shake my head, chuckling in a long-suffering manner, “Ahh, what can you do, God bless ‘em. At least they need us.”

"Amen to that." She'd bagged the last block of cheese and the Double Stuf Oreos. "Y'all have a nice day, now."

So there you go. Southern women make temporary friends out of utter strangers because most of us are fighting in the same war. And when we start that conversation with someone who isn't in the club, we watch the vacant response and feel sorry for the poor thing for not being a card-carrying member. And yes, we secretly wonder what's wrong with her if she might be over 20 and still not at least married to a husband she loves but doesn't like. Maybe she lacks the nurturing gene that appears to be dominant in women of the south.



FAMILY veterans complain like crazy, but we do love to take care of people, and men who figure that out tend to snap us up as fast as they possibly can. Why wait until you're in your 30s – or heaven forbid, your 40s – to have a woman look after you and be mommy to both you and your spawn? A man in his 20s can easily persuade a romantic 17-year-old to warm his bed and make him a sandwich. By the time she's realizes what she's gotten herself into, she's pregnant with number three.

And as much as we love to *give, give, give*, we expect certain things in return. We expect to be taken care of. That's right, and we're not ashamed either. We want doors opened, expenses paid, and breakfast in bed on Mother's Day. A southern woman has no idea how to change the oil in her minivan, she does not do yard work, and she absolutely does not touch the grill. She understands what a hammer is for but has never lifted one unless she's 16 and trying to look adorable to the boy who needs said hammer. And let me assure you that she could not pick out from a line-up needle-nose pliers, a ball peen hammer, or a socket wrench. We expect our men to dirty their hands. But we do not expect our men to wash them.

Which brings me to a common problem that leaves southern women shaking their heads. We are lost without our worse halves. A woman who has "lost" a husband is worse than a woman who never had one. She mourns the loss of her club membership. Other women scorn her, and it doesn't matter in the least that a good many of us lose our husbands because they get tired of being taken care of and just want to get laid. A divorce based on a cheating husband is still a divorce, and the man wins. He is the valued member of any relationship. Once you're out of the club, people you used to talk with are suddenly unavailable. You can't really blame them. They don't

know what to say.

The second thing you lose is as important. A divorced southern woman loses her protection. I don't mean physical protection, although if she starts dating again she'll quickly realize how important that was too; I mean protection from yardwork, changing the oil, and using (gasp) tools.

The third loss is important, but you can find ways around it by smothering your children with juiceboxes and taking plates of fried chicken and cupcakes to coworkers. A divorcee loses a target for all of her nurturing instincts. I think it's why widows in the south die quickly. All that take-care-of-people energy churns up inside you like a tornado, leaving behind bitterness that pinches your face and makes you cut your hair in a "bob" and wear clothes sewn by the Amish.



I have to admit, I have made fun of dried-up old women who really do seem to have too many pets, and I have stopped talking with women who are suddenly sans husband. I secretly felt sorry for any woman who had to do her own yardwork. I didn't understand the unspoken complexities of divorce among southern women.

Until it happened to me.

So when I looked at my daughter in that short dress and ridiculously high heels, I wasn't mad at her. I was mad at me. A juicebox wasn't going to solve my problems, and a minivan waited in the driveway. And later, after Katie was at school, I had to start learning to do jobs I never even thought about before. Today I had to tackle the pool, a divorce settlement gift that probably left Jimmy laughing all the way to his tidy, manageable apartment.

After years of choosing cheesecake over carrots and going to the bathroom with the door open (he's seen it all anyway), suddenly I wasn't allowed to be who I had become. I had to start over and try to avoid getting 12 cats to feed, pet, and care for. But today I simply had to live through my first male-owned task. Which required me to be outside. By myself. In the winter air.



IT'S cold in south Georgia. You toss on a sweater, step onto the back porch, and cold smacks you in the face with an

open hand that still leaves a mark. People from up north don't get it. They laugh in the face of Georgia cold, but natives know the truth. It's colder in Georgia than upper Michigan because southerners have absolutely no idea how to deal.

But I had decided to be one of those steel magnolias that everybody lies about when they want women to seem strong and capable.

I slammed the screen door and marched outside, pausing to survey the monstrosity of my rural back yard. The grass lacked any memory of green, but patches of sand promised rapid growth. Ten yards away, a refreshing in-ground pool boasted a diving board, a deck, and a grill ready for the Fourth of July. No matter that the water rippled with whatever managed to thrive in black slime.

Every time I looked at it, I remembered my husband's clichéd plea, "But honey, we neeeeed a pool. It's so hot here." Southern men love to pretend they're asking women for favors even when they full-well know they'll do what they want.

Now that all the pecan leaves had fallen and festered for months, the pool just meant work. Cold work. And I didn't have a clue how to turn sludge into blue refreshment. I certainly didn't know how to make that magic happen within four weeks, which was about how long it would take for winter to turn into spring.

"Just do it," I complained to myself. "Get the job done." Grinding my teeth together to stop shivering, I approached the leaf strainer set deep in a concrete pool deck that promised to stay cool all year. Removing the plastic cover, I peered into the sloshing hole. The smell of rotten leaves and putrid, decaying frogs burned my nose, and I gagged a little. That smell was worse than the time Jimmy fluffed the covers after consuming large quantities of prime rib smothered in onions and washed down with Jack Daniels.

"Just do it." I mumbled again.

Holding my breath, I dug into the black leaves and icy water, pulling debris from the pit of Hell.

Steel magnolia, steel magnolia.

Did Jimmy really put his beefy hands in this mess? Maybe his beer-fed padding insulated him. Never in my life had I experienced such cold. But dammit, I would not fail at my very first

man-task. I dug deeper, feeling the thick gunk shove under my fingernails.

By the time the leaf basket was empty I couldn't feel my fingers. I walked to the pump house to turn on the stubborn machine, but my fingers wouldn't bend. With claws that threatened to snap, I struggled to flip the switch, still determined not to give up. Then I'll admit that I ran to the porch holding my hands in front of me like foreign objects.

Steel magnolia, steel magnolia.

I could barely open the door and was nearly in not-so-manly tears by the time I turned on the hot-water spigot and shoved my hands under the spray. As the water turned from cold to warm to hot, my frostbitten hands began to thaw. Done and done. Mission accomplished.

But hold on a minute.

Don't be tempted to think I felt the glowing pride of accomplishment. I did not. I was running late for work, the pool still looked like crap, and I had a minivan in the driveway waiting to ambush me. With a closet full of beige clothes and a couple of juiceboxes and cheesecake for lunch, I looked forward to a day of selling houses that nobody could afford. Later I'd pick up my precious pea from school and head to WalMart for a hammer.

END