

JASMINE'S MARRIAGE

Rodney Willett's sister got married at 16 and went off to Norfolk with some guy in the Navy that she met at the car wash, so I reckon 15 isn't too young for me, Sam McPherson, to accept an invite from Rapunzel Shockley to a koolade sock-hop if I really wanted to, though I'm partial to sandals and short hair. My cousin Jasmine got tangled up with a fellow named Mize a couple of years back and that little episode has made me skittish about getting too close to someone. Some folks say that you don't really get to know a person until you live with them. I don't necessarily believe that. I'm sure that my friend Chester Hairston would lie or die for me, and that my Uncle Sanford is looney, and I've never lived within 8 miles of either of them. Jasmine never even had a chance to live with Larry Mize, although she married him.

Jasmine was 29 when they walked the aisle. Yeh, old maid. Before then she had gone out with a few guys, but there's only so many in a small town, and a Christian girl who works as a receptionist for a lady doctor isn't gonna meet many of them unless the Lord provides. She could've worked down at the hardware store like my sister Melinda, who won't there a month before some bucko in overalls who don't know a wing nut from a washer comes in there and turns out to be a lawyer, and they're married within the year.

When Jasmine and this Larry Mize fellow got engaged, the Sunday school down at Shiloh Independent Baptist was buzzing like a band saw convention. I sat behind Jasmine at church that next Sunday and eavesdropped without interrupting one time while she told my second cousin Betty Ann McPherson (we pronounced it the country way, "Mac fear son") how

she felt about her first serious beau. “I just feel like I’m part of the real world at last, B.A.” Her brownish red hair trailed down her back and decorated the top of the pew. I could have reached out and snagged the end of it, but she was almost a married woman now and beyond such foolishness. “I’ve been to community college and spent summers in Atlanta and Charleston, but I’ve always felt like I was standing on the sidelines of life.” Her brown eyes got even bigger. “I was watching life like it was a movie.” She used her unpolished fingers to form a rectangle of the silver screen. “Now, I’m in the picture. I feel the same way I did that year I won a blue ribbon at the county fair for my pecan pie, and everyone clapped and stared at me like I was somebody.” The choir sang “Amazing Grace” and I guess it had a special meaning for her that day. When they took up the collection Jasmine put in a check instead of the usual five dollar bill.

Well, Mize won’t no pecan pie but Jasmine must have felt some relief at getting hitched. People had started making polite jokes about her. To her face they asked if the men in town weren’t good enough for her. Behind her back (well, this is not so polite) some folks were taking bets on whether Jasmine or Nadine Sledge would be the last of their generation to get married. (Nadine, 32, had hip replacement last year and smoked little cigars). Some folks wondered if there was something wrong with Jasmine. Was she a mental case, or did she have some fatal disease? Did she prefer the safe company of women over cantankerous men? What did she do all by herself night after night in her Lantana Road apartment, rub bones together and try to contact the spirits of dead house pets? Her mother passed around a poem Jasmine had written in the 10th grade about disappearing some day on an African safari. You cannot leave that kind of stuff in the attic when you move out.

The wedding was simple on account of the lovebirds weren't exactly a couple of kids and Larry Mize, 33, had been married before, when he was young, so I heard. Besides, Jasmine's folks hadn't saved up a fortune by selling blueberries by the bag along I-26.

Jasmine wore a long white dress that was actually held up by shoulder straps, and a little hat with lace around the edge. Larry wore a black suit that was brand new to him, but he hadn't bothered to get the cuffs on the pants taken up. They just about hid his shoes, if he was wearing any. I thought he was going to trip over the cuffs or the altar one. He had a confused look on his face as he stood there peering around for his bride, like he hadn't spent too much time in church and was amazed at how one looked on the inside. When the congregation sang all 4 verses of "Holy, Holy, Holy" Mize, standing at the altar minus a hymn book, kept singing the first 3 words over and over through the whole thing. He must have sung 100 holies.

Boy he was a character, alright. He'd done a bit of everything from being a mechanic, working in a feed and seed store, even tried catching catfish for a living. He was your basic jack of all trades and master of mayhem, a right good looking guy in a devilish way and real slick with the ladies.

He and Jasmine did not seem a match made in heaven, except the Lord does have a sense of humor, I believe. Look at the cactus. She had needed some repair work done to the Dodge inherited from her daddy, and a friend of hers knew Larry's touch with cars and sent him by the doctor's office. He must have found Jasmine to be real different from the kind he usually went out with. She had manners and everything, and didn't chew 2 pieces of gum at once. People thought if Larry got married to anyone it would be Carolyn Poe, who moved to town from the

suburbs of Atlanta. She had sung opera at Six Flags Over Georgia during the summers and her hair was 3 colors, none natural. Maybe he truly thought he needed a change and was ready to act respectable.

What Jasmine saw in him the Lord only knows. He could sweet talk a girl; he'd had plenty of practice. He was a joker and something of an adventurer, going off on weekend trips, he told her, to the beach and mountains, and big cities. Course, he didn't add that he usually drank beer with friends and floozies in all those places. Maybe she saw in him a way to change her small town life and make it more exciting. They both sort of liked the notion that they were mismatched. Each lacked in their lives what the other seemed to have a lot of.

They had reservations at a motel in Myrtle Beach, America's Sandbox. It being off season Larry could have gotten them a good rate at a fancier place on the water but he said those palaces they were raising on the sandbar didn't have shuffleboard. They also didn't have pink and green wallpaper and tv that only picked up 4 channels.

Well, they checked in at 5:00 pm and fell on the bed kissing with the door wide open, the cool air conditioning just flowing out into the warm Palmetto afternoon. Jasmine pulled out of the lip lock to take a breath and say, "Larry, you mean everything to me. You're the most important thing in my life. I've got so many plans for us. We're going to be so happy forever." She had said similar stuff throughout the ride down while Larry was dragging his Newports. She must have had that faraway look she'd get sometimes in Sunday school when they sang "I'll Fly Away", and Larry must have felt like an object of worship at that moment.

Mize then gallantly announces that the honeymoon could not proceed one step further until he replaced the ½ pack of cigarettes he had killed on the way down. Jasmine said she'd get things unpacked while he went across the street. Larry stopped at the door, walked back to Jasmine sitting on the bed, looking up at him all goo-goo eyed. He kissed her gently. His hands shook as he told her that she was a wonderful woman and he appreciated that she loved him so much. Telling the truth can make you more nervous than lying.

Well, he was the one with the faraway eyes because he walked out the tacky green door and never came back. Jasmine asked about him at the front desk, and at the restaurant across the street. They had driven down in Jasmine's little Dodge. It was still in the parking lot and Larry had the keys in his pocket with his Life Savers. After 4 hours of gnawing her nails and drinking Orange Crush in the motel room she called the police.

"Maybe he was kidnapped," she suggested to an officer, and he chuckled but got real quiet when he realized that she was serious.

"Chances are he just went out to buy you a present at the Gay Dolphin," he suggested.

"You'll need to wait until he's been gone 24 hours before filing a missing person's report," another officer told her. He had a moustache and was in charge.

"Does he have to be DEAD 24 hours?" Jasmine mumbled into her hands, covering her face. "He might be lying in a ditch hit over the head", she protested tearfully. "And it's our honeymoon. He had at least 25 dollars on him. "

“Check the casinos in Cherokee”, the guy with the moustache told his partner.

“We’ll keep a lookout for him, ma’am,” the partner said, very professionally. “You got a picture of him?”

She had half a dozen but didn’t want to give up the best one. “Could I get it back, pleez?” she begged.

Jas stayed at the pink pagoda the full week, pestering the police every day. They learned that Mize had bought cigarettes and a cup of coffee at a diner across the street and had a conversation with a rough-looking guy who turned out to be the mayor of a nearby town.

Hizzoner had left the restaurant right after Larry and the police had lost track of both of them before they left the parking lot. Larry had left the keys to the Dodge on the table at the restaurant.

Finally, Jasmine drove home across the Sandhills. Somewhere between Columbia and Jalapa, getting real close to the town where she’d spent all of her life, she thought less about Larry and more and more about what people would think. It was a mystery, Larry disappearing like that. Maybe somebody saw Larry’s wedding suit and figured he had money. Maybe they offered him money to go somewhere with them and repair their car, then they tried to rob him and beat him. Mize would fall for a trick like that sure enough, if money was involved.

Or maybe it was something else and Larry was alive. That’s what Jasmine believed. Somewhere he was alive and trying desperately to get in touch with her, but he couldn’t. Maybe he’d been beaten up and taken to a hospital unconscious. The police had checked all the hospitals on the Grand Strand without success, plus the bus station and airport. That was a waste of time. Larry wouldn’t even fly a kite. But maybe he had lost his memory after a hit and run

and had wandered along the highway for a few days. Now he wouldn't know who he was. He'd taken a new name like Trip Mindless and lived in a fishing village, where he carved wooden ducks out of abandoned dinghies for a dollar apiece.

It's a terrible mystery, she told herself as she drove back. That's what everybody will say. I'll bet the newspaper will want to interview and photograph me. Maybe Larry will read the paper and the shock of seeing my face will bring his memory back. Mama will be so sad; my friends too. They won't know what to do for me. She was hurting and sad too, but she felt that she had to sniff back the tears for their sake.

Well, lo and behold, her family had spread the tale around town and Jasmine was welcomed home a celebrity. Newspapers and radio interviewed her and she was on the front page from North Charleston to Whoville. Friends from church and social clubs brought her food and flowers (I myself carried her some daffodils from our front yard) and she got a bunch of notes of encouragement (U R so brav. Violet).

Everyone in town had a theory about Old Larry. Since he'd been a young punk Larry had run with a rough crowd. Some of them might have showed up at Myrtle Beach to gawk and tease the honeymooners. Larry had defended his bride's honor, gotten into a fight, and been deposited in the lagoon.

The hit-and-run amnesia story was popular. The thought of Larry being plastered by an 18-wheeler appealed to some folks.

Or, according to a retired school teacher who had taught Larry in the third grade and still

had bite marks on her arm, he had been called by the Lord to do some important work and would write Jasmine soon from the Congo or somewhere. The Lord does move in mysterious ways.

Well, folks were scratching and clawing to find some reason, and no one dared breathe to Jasmine that he might have just turned coward and run.

Jas moved into the duplex that she and Larry had picked out. She had saved quite a bit of money over the years of her working life and bought some new furniture, fixed herself up a respectable place, went back to her job, and waited for her husband to return.

Jasmine got invited to eat at just about every table in town. They prayed for her outloud at church and took up special offerings for her. Through it all Jasmine was so calm, so peaceful and sweet. She smiled nicely and hugged folks, told them how special they had always been to her, and how she remembered kindnesses they had shown her over the run of her life. She began to get out more often, visiting the sick and elderly, folks she figured were worse off than she was. Jasmine became a regular heroine, excuse the expression, and young women came around to ask her advice on dating and the Book of Revelation.

She had been all goo-goo over that Larry Mize and he vaporizes without a trace, but Jasmine didn't fall apart. She seemed tougher and better for it all. My own sweet cousin became the best loved person in town, replacing Zeb Newly from the Dairy Freeze who gave senior adults free ice cream in the park on Christmas Day. Yeh, it was cold on Christmas but you'd be surprised how much you can put away when it's free.

She had suffered a terrible loss, yet compared to the way the town had regarded her before she met Larry Mize, she was much better off, she figured. And so it went on for a

solid year.

Then someone she hardly knew, Mabel Tucker, who had a little store between the railroad tracks and the highway (been robbed half a dozen times by lucky criminals just passing through) came back from a vacation with a smirk on her face as big as the Grand Strand and told Jasmine that she was sure she had seen Larry working in a surf shop. She hadn't spoken to him but she was sure it was him from the tattoo of a skunk smelling a rose and the initials "L.M."

Jasmine didn't know what to think. Someone else might have had a tattoo like that. She was desperate to distraction. She had to check it out. So off she goes down Highway 301 to Myrtle Beach just like she'd done after the wedding, and passing the same sights and remembering how excited she'd been a year ago, before Larry did his ghost act.

She didn't drive straight to that surf shop but stopped by the motel where she'd stayed on the not-so-honeymoon, sat in the car in the parking lot and thought: what if it was old Mizenheimer, what would she say to him? Maybe he had flipped out a year ago and didn't know who he was. (what a break!) She might discumbobulate his brain even more. Or what if he had some other reason for leaving her and was planning to return? She'd embarrass him by just walking up on him like that. Isn't that something, worrying about embarrassing him?

But she went on over to the shop after awhile because it was a mystery, you know, and she had to find out. Maybe they'd be a married couple again and then they'd be the two most famous people in the county.

The Lord must have been with her because she found a parking space near the beach on Saturday afternoon. She had pulled back her hair and wore sunshades and a Braves ball cap, along with a blue jean skirt and flip flops, so she didn't hardly look like herself (she had gained some weight too, from all those luncheons) and into the shop she goes.

There is Larry Mize big as life, sitting on a stool by the cash register, eating boiled peanuts out of the bag and telling fishing stories to some cute girl who looks about my age. Jasmine pretends to look over seashells while eyeballing Larry, then he begins to eyeball her, and finally their eyeballs wore out and the doorbell rings and Larry says, “Hello”.

“Hello, Larry,” she says, taking off the shades. “How are you?”

“Fine”, he says, “and how are you?”

“Okay”, she says, and he tells her she’s looking fine and they go on like that for awhile like a couple of bridge club matrons instead of her choking him like she should.

Larry sells a rubber swordfish to a customer and then says, “I guess you want to know what the deal is, huh Jasmine?” And some people say he ain’t a genius. He goes on to tell her that he just couldn’t handle marriage, like he’d suffered with it for years. “I just didn’t see it the way you did, Jas. It was all so important to you. I was so important to you. I thought it was all a lot of fun, getting hitched, having a home to come to each night. It was like trying something new, which is what I do a lot of. You was the sweetest thing to me for sure.”

He glanced at the kid beside him and smiled. She was wearing one of those shirts that didn’t quite make it to the waist so you could see how out of shape she was. “But to you, I was like a king, and being married was your dream come true.” Right out in front of everybody he was telling this, while old ladies fumbled with string bikinis and listened. “I just couldn’t live up to it, Jasmine. I got scared I’d let you down. So...I bolted. I’m sorry”.

It had to be a shock to Larry, hearing the truth come out of his own mouth. Maybe a few hours of marriage had been good for him.

Jasmine stared at him and felt more sympathy than anger. “I was wondering all this time, Larry. I was worried sick.”

“I was going to tell you someday. But I couldn’t find the words just yet.”

At that point Jasmine should have leveled him with one of those shiny canoe paddles hanging on the wall. Some women would have, but she had become a kind of saint in the past year, so she nodded with understanding, or at least pretending to. “I didn’t know I put so much pressure on you, Larry. You could have told me,” she said. Her voice was calm, I heard it told, reasonable, like she could get him to rethink it all. “I thought you enjoyed my attentions.”

Funny how most of the customers took a sudden interest in a bunch of tie-dye shirts behind Jasmine that looked like they had been created by blasting parrots out of a shotgun.

“Oh sure, babe.” Larry shrugged. “But a man doesn’t like being smothered.” The girl with the bandana grunted, like she had been smothered but survived.

Jasmine nodded. Her head was high, I’m told. “Larry, wasn’t it nice having somebody, not being alone? Couldn’t you have tried it a while longer?”

Well, if that was her ace in the hole the weasel skunked her.

“Oh I’m not lonely, Jas,” he informed her. He nodded at the teenager who was just taking it all in, not even looking at Jasmine. “A nice family here in town gave me a place to stay.”

Jasmine heard snickers and finally realized that others were listening. It hadn’t taken a total stranger more than a few minutes to figure out what had puzzled Jasmine for a year, she was so pure in heart.

She walked out quietly. Larry didn’t hinder her any.

She got in her car and hit the highway. Her head must have been spinning, but I don’t think it was because of low-life Larry. She realized that she was well rid of him. But she was on the road home where she had been the noble mystery woman. Now the mystery was over and she would be the town fool, or so she figured. Instead of being the center of attention she’d be the object of pity that everyone was looking down their nose at. She saw herself skulking around

town in a kerchief, hearing whispers about the old maid that Larry Mize had wigwagged.

Tears must have filled her eyes. That's why the car left the road, I'm sure. A Dodge don't just run off the road. That's what a lot of us believed back home, that Jasmine's eyes must have filled with tears till she couldn't see, and she didn't turn when the road did. Her car bounced off a couple of trees. It was totaled before it stopped rolling.

* * *

She got mangled pretty good but somehow nothing major was hurt. They stuck her in a hospital a hundred miles from home and she laid there fretting for a few days, reading magazines about hospice care in Panama.

When she was well enough to go home she was back no more than a couple of quiet weeks, receiving no visitors except the closest of kin, and then one day she rents a Ryder truck and grabs a couple of us cousins to help her load it up, then moves over to Florence with Aunt Jessamine. She hasn't come back to see us since, not even during blueberry pickin, 2 years solid now.

I guess some people figure it's better to live with outrageous dreams than with an evil reality. Jasmine had felt sort of rejected by the world before she met Larry, like one of those Poker Flat outcasts, and she could build up walls of dreams to deal with that, but it's tough being rejected by a real person you love. There is no defense for that. She could live forever, even grow and glow, on the hurt she felt over the mystery of the missing Larry, but she could not last one hour with the humiliation of the truth.

Rapunzel and I were sitting in rocking chairs on the front porch the other day when my sister comes up with a letter she got from Jasmine. She bragged about how popular she is in Florence. She is the darling, and the youngest, of a group of widows who meet each Monday night.

