

Life Experience

Wedding Plans Almost Foiled

By Lorraine Martin Bennett

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I always suspected my soon-to-be-husband decided to marry me when he learned we had purchased the same make and model car on our meager cub reporter salaries at the old *Atlanta Journal*. His was a red Chevrolet Chevelle, straight transmission. Mine was navy blue, automatic transmission. Except for color and transmission, the cars were identical. But my payments were lower. I believe he decided then and there I might be a smart catch.

Because we would be living together and working in the same office (he in sports, me in news) we decided we would only need one vehicle, therefore one car payment. He gave his car to his brother. We planned a December wedding in my hometown in the western North Carolina mountains. His task was to drive to the town on his day off, complete marriage license requirements, return to the city and pick me up at the end of my 3:30 p.m. shift at the newspaper.

At the appointed time, I waited. And waited. And waited. This was before cellphones, so I could not track him down and learn why he was late. After a half hour I decided he had been detained. I took the city bus to the small apartment we had just rented. I believe at that time it contained my bedroom furniture, his television set, and that was all.

In the apartment I continued to wait. And wait. And wait. Our phone had not been installed at that point. About 8 o'clock I decided I had paced enough worry steps across the bare floor. I would find a pay phone and call my parents to learn when he might have left the town for the city.

Just as I was about to walk out the door, I heard a tentative knock. To my great joy and relief, my fiance was standing just beyond the threshold.

"I'm in trouble," he said, barely looking me in the eye. "I drove your car off a mountain."

He had, in fact, attempted to pass a pickup truck on a rain-slickened two-lane road on *Blood Mountain*, no less. He later told me how eerie was the feeling as the car skidded off the road, went over the curb (there was no guard rail), trundled down the mountain between trees

and came to rest against a sapling. During his impromptu ride the radio continued to play merry Christmas music.

He was uninjured, not a scratch, but his pride was badly damaged. The undercarriage of the car was not unscathed either, but it was repairable. He hitched a ride into Atlanta with a friendly and sympathetic motorist. A few days later we hired a wrecker and had the car pulled up the mountain and taken for repairs.

The day before the wedding my intended arrived bringing the wedding cake from Atlanta. He was driving a brand new rented Plymouth Fury with every conceivable gadget and gizmo. On the drive home from the evening rehearsal the car stalled in the middle of the road. Wouldn't move an inch. Too many bells and whistles had exhausted the battery.

For our quick honeymoon trip to Gatlinburg we borrowed my father's car.

That was only the beginning of our misadventures. After we had parked my dad's car and spent our first glorious newlywedded night at the Sidney James Motel (no longer in existence. I believe the cost was just over \$10) we discovered my husband's grandmother, who had come from Alabama to attend our wedding, had left her winter coat in the back seat of the car. To this day no one has been able to tell me just how it came to be there.

We were due back at our respective newspaper jobs in *two* days. There was no mercy given to two mostly broke kids trying to start two new careers *and* a new marriage.

We drove my dad's car back to return it, and to pick up our wedding gifts which we had left on the family farm. They were under wraps in the farm's master bedroom along with my sister, who since our wedding had developed a case of mumps, a malady neither of us had ever experienced. The gifts would have to wait until her recovery.

Back home in our tiny one-bedroom apartment on Briarcliff Road in Atlanta, we had neither washer nor dryer in the unit. We trudged a couple of blocks to a coin-operated laundry to wash our essentials. One cold afternoon we left the clothes in the dryer while we ran a few

errands. When we returned, no clothes. What could any thief possibly want with damp underwear?

Months and years later, long after car undercarriage was successfully repaired and missing clothing replaced, we would laugh about our misadventures during that long December. Did they cement our marriage and prepare us for the twists and turns of decades together when my husband faced many health challenges? Did they give us a framework for coping with the ordeals waiting in our future?

I believe they did. We lasted 54 years, until I lost him in 2020.

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