

“HE DROVE A BIG CAR”

When my husband died, I was forty years old and men still gave me a second look, but age nor looks mattered to me. I never intended to look at another man. I figured I had enough to wait on with four kids to raise and trying to work at the post office. I'd already learned that men were no help at all in raising children, except for their paychecks every week.

My job at the post office kept us fed and clothed during that time, especially with my children helping out. Actually, we did great. We even had enough to go to the beach several years in a row. Of course, we couldn't afford to go to a fancy resort area, but it was fun. It was just an isolated shore beside the Atlantic Ocean that a co-worker had told me about. It had a deserted cabin on it and we didn't have to pay anything for its use. Nobody ever knew we went there. We had a good time, even with our old rolled up mattresses, peanut butter, bologna, and a loaf of bread. I never could get the sand out of those mattresses though. So, I guess it did cost us the price of two more cotton stuffed mattresses.

I always had such a good time with my children. When their daddy was alive, though, we had to tiptoe as we sneaked around after he went to bed. We feared he'd get real mad if he found out some of the things we did.

After he died, we lost the car, so we'd hitch a ride into town with a neighbor and go to the movies, fairs, or carnivals. We made certain we didn't go with the same neighbor, so nobody would think we had money or that I had a boyfriend. Sometimes the boys would go with Cecil Jones, and the girls and I would ride in with Charley Thomas. As far as our neighbors knew, we were going to visit somebody in the hospital, or to the store, or to a night meeting at the church.

I guess I'm telling all this because I see now that sneaking made it possible for someone like me to sneakily sign up for one of those dating services. I hadn't planned to do that, and only God knows why I'd take a chance like that, but I did.

Several of my co-workers had been trying for years to introduce me to somebody they knew. One time, they even tried to fix me up with a blind date. At another time, our preacher said that Sam Beecher had been a widow for a long time, and the preacher thought we'd make a nice couple. I ignored every one of their suggestions as long as I had even one child still home, but when Mindy went away to college, it became a different story.

That empty house, every evening, became a dreaded ordeal, and cooking for just me was too much. I lost weight, cried almost every day, and slept very little. Somebody must have called Troy, my oldest, for he paid me a visit and was shocked.

“Mom, what is wrong with you? You're only fifty years old and dressing like you're ninety. Why don't you find you a nice man and go out to dinner and dancing? You know you like to dance,” he begged.

“Troy, I wouldn’t have another man for any kind of price. So, you can forget that idea. I may join the YMCA if I can get Jean from work to go with me. But, don’t get it in your head that I’m going to find some man. You can forget that idea.”

Troy backed off with his hands in the air. “Okay, okay, I’ll forget about a man.” He left more satisfied though, but I didn’t join the YMCA because Jean had met some man, and they went to the Y together.

Soon Jean was begging me to join a dating service saying, “E-Harmony is the best one. That’s where Zane and I met, and it is working out just fine.”

Three months later, I went to the site and found that all my information would be private, but still, I didn’t answer the questions accurately. According to what I filled out, I was much taller, had long auburn hair, brown eyes, and was a little on the heavy side. I didn’t want to make myself too pretty, nor did I want to be too ugly, for I wanted to see what kind of man they would match me with.

When it came to likes and dislikes, I gave myself two master’s degrees and was a social butterfly constantly going from one disco to another. I laughed as I put in this information.

Then it came to religion and faith, and I was ashamed of all the lies I’d told. Telling myself this was all a joke anyway, and a few more lies wouldn’t make any difference, I added that I didn’t go to any church. However, I did say I had been raised in a very strict church where women were not allowed to cut their hair, or wear make-up, so I just didn’t go. I was trying to make him see that I had principles, but I couldn’t say they were strong since I’d already said I went to discos.

I’ve always been a faithful attendee at church and struggled with what I was about to do. I spent several nights praying that I would be forgiven for straying from the truth, but still put the letter in the mail.

About two weeks later, I received four letters from four different men, but the one I thought I might be interested in said that he wasn’t much to look at but was strong and a good worker. He had been with the same job for thirty years. He was a widower with a house, and he often drove a big car, as if a big car would make a difference. He had two children: one was married, and the other was attending college. He didn’t get to see them very often.

As to education, he said he had several degrees and liked gardening and camping. He also liked to dance, and I seemed to be somebody he would like to meet.

We wrote a couple of letters to each other, and he asked if we could meet. I told him we could meet in the post office parking lot, and then we’d decide whether we wanted to go any other place. I figured it was very public, and if any of my co-workers saw me wave my hand, they’d be there in seconds. We were to meet on Monday, but he didn’t show up.

I had really dolled up on Monday since I knew he was going to be surprised at this skinny five-foot-three, blue-eyed, short-haired blonde when he was expecting a gorgeous, tall, red-headed model. I went home that evening not knowing whether I was happy or sad. Then I forgot all about it.

On Wednesday, Mr. Delbert, my supervisor, called me to the office. *What have I done now*, I thought worriedly.

When I knocked, Mr. Delbert opened the door. "There's someone here to meet you Bonnie," he said and stepped back for me to enter.

Since I was supposed to meet this man outside, I didn't know who this person was. *Probably an insurance salesman*, I thought and smiled at the stranger.

I looked way up to see a bald head with a fringe of brown hair around the sides. He was clean shaven, powerfully built, and had the clearest brown eyes I'd ever seen. His face registered shock, but he put out his hand.

"Ms. Bradford, I'm Hoyt Shockley," he said and smiled, showing pearly white teeth. *Dentures*, was the first thought that skittered through my mind, but I didn't utter this thought. Shock had me staring in wide-eyed disbelief.

Shockley was the name of my 'on-line contact' who was supposed to have shown up on Monday.

My face turned beet red and then paled. I felt unable to stand and grasped the back of a chair. Finally, I took a deep breath and placed my hand in his. A sensation almost like an electric shock ran up my arm. I quickly jerked my hand away.

"You are Bonita Bradford, aren't you?" He stood waiting.

"Yes, I am. Have you come a long way?" I asked, since he had said he lived in Kansas, but his letters were mailed from Ohio. In fact, his address wasn't too far from the college where Mindy had decided to go. Of course, I'd said I lived in Winston- Salem, North Carolina instead of Jonesborough, Tennessee.

We both stood staring until Mr. Delbert came to the rescue. "Bonnie, you can take your lunch hour a little early since Mr. Shockley has come so far."

Mr. Shockley looked stern for a moment, but then a twinkle appeared in his eyes, and he grinned. "I think we may as well see if we like each other, don't you?"

I was still too shocked to think rationally so I stuttered out. "I ... I don't know."

He stood waiting and finally I said, “There’s a family restaurant around the corner. I guess it would be all right to go there. We can walk.”

He looked like he found that remark funny.

“Sure. Walking is fine with me. I suppose your friends can see us every step of the way, can’t they?”

Again, I became very red, but answered abruptly, “Yes, they can.”

After thanking Mr. Delbert, we left to walk down the sidewalk in front of the post office before turning the corner onto Liberty Street which was the back of the post office. I looked up at the windows and saw several faces watching us. Mr. Shockley saw me looking up, and he also lifted his eyes and chuckled.

“I didn’t describe myself as having a criminal record, did I?” he asked.

We had reached the restaurant by then, but I stopped and looked up at him. “Don’t you know how you described yourself?”

He grinned. “My memory seems to be as bad as yours. I know that I said I wasn’t much to look at, and that is true.”

I didn’t know how to answer that, so I didn’t say anything.

He opened the door, and we went into the restaurant. There was an empty booth in the back corner in front of a window. He steered me towards it as he said, “Since you like windows, this should be suitable.”

We sat in total silence until the waiter appeared and had taken our order. I sat looking at him and realized that he wasn’t ugly, even though he was almost bald. He was tall, brawny, and broad shouldered, and those gorgeous eyes made one take a second look.

I know I was staring, but so was he. “Are you really Bonita Bradford,” he asked, looking steadily into my eyes.

I was red again, as I replied, “No. My real name is Rosetta, but I never liked it, and when I was about six, I started answering to Bonnie only. So, since then, I’ve been Bonnie. Are you really Hoyt Shockley?”

“God, that’s an awful name, isn’t it? I don’t know how I came up with a name like Hoyt. My real name is Darren Shockley, which is bad enough.”

I grinned. “It’s a lot better than Hoyt, though. Are you shocked by my size and my hair?”

“No, but you’re certainly not what I expected. Here’s our dinner.”

During dinner we both confessed to the fabrications. He had an engineering degree but did have a small farm, which he ran as well as another side-line, which he did not disclose. He was a widower with two children, one married and living in California and the other, a son attending college in Ohio.

When I revealed that I had a teaching degree as well as a degree in home decorating, he asked why I worked at the post office.

“I was hired while my children were small, and the hours worked out so well, especially after my husband died that I just stayed on.”

By this time, we were comfortable with each other, and he asked if he could drive me home. Since I lived in a nice neighborhood and had people that watched over me like parents would, I thought it would be all right, so I agreed.

We went out and walked back to the post office, and he stopped before hesitantly pointing up the street. “I did tell you that I sometimes drove a big car, didn’t I? That is especially true today, since I had to come out this way.”

A chill ran down my spine as I looked at the shining gun-metal, gray hearse parked at a meter.