

The Course of True Love

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Short Story

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He swore on his mother's grave, but then he swore on just about everything.

That in itself was not unusual for Jim Farber. Swearing was just like breathing to him. He did it without thinking or consideration of his locale. Anyone who knew him realized this and, after a while, became immune to his different "turns of a phrase." His choice of vocabulary was never anything too wildly profane that it might induce a fainting spell in a more delicate constitution. Still, he was very liberal in how he sprinkled the words throughout his conversation.

I heard about a particular sworn oath of his later on. Amongst his various profanities was the vow that there was no way he was going to let Hiram Foster get away with something like what had occurred one fateful night. Jim's daughter, his "only precious jewel" as he would call her, had just disappeared with that "sumbitch" Hiram, who just happened to be me.

Juleann and I had been courting over his objections for more than a year and decided we wanted to be married no matter what her daddy thought. Monday, we agreed that it would happen on the following Friday night. We packed our bags and planned our escape. This action shouldn't have been a complete surprise to Mr. Farber. On more than one occasion, Juleann had protested her deep affection for me but that never moved his thermometer one degree in my direction. It stayed firmly planted in the freezing zone.

In hindsight, it might not have been the best idea to just present what we had done as a *fait accompli*. I had seen him cleaning his shotgun every time I showed up at the front door. For some daddies, that might have been an act but I was never of the mind to find out Mr. Farber's inclination. Now, he never totally forbid her to see me because he didn't want to alienate Juelann but he never failed to emphasize that, in his mind, we weren't courting. When he allowed me to call, we would sit on the front porch where he would watch us through the parlor window. On

the rare occasion he permitted Juleann to go out with me, we could walk a few blocks to the soda fountain downtown. She was never allowed in my pickup truck and he had spies all around Bamford to report back to him on her activities.

Mrs. Farber, Juleann's mama, had gone to her reward when Juleann was just eight and so she had been his world ever since. I don't know that there would have been a single boy in Bamford that he would have considered good enough for her. In some ways, I respected the way he felt. I was certain that if I were ever to be blessed with a daughter, I would be as fierce in looking out for her as he was. Even though I respected his outlook on the situation, respect is no match for the love of a pair of teenagers.

On that fateful Friday night, my truck was parked on Elm Avenue, just a block from her house. The plan was that she was going to wait until after her daddy went to bed. When she heard the usual house-rattling sounds of his snoring, she would grab her valise and hightail it out the back, cut across the Montgomery's yard and then we'd be off. From there, we would head toward the state line 40 minutes away and blessed matrimony.

I had only been parked there for less than 20 minutes when I saw in my rearview mirror that familiar figure run out of the Montgomery's driveway with a suitcase in her hand. There was nothing I wanted to do more than jump out and hug her so tight that she couldn't catch a breath but I knew time was of the essence.

When she was less than 10 yards away, I started the engine on my trusty '45 Chevy truck and flung the door open. Juleann jumped in as neatly as though she was fixing to drive one of those fancy race cars where the drivers have to run to get to it before the race starts. "Get out of here fast, Hi! I heard his snoring stop when I opened the back door. He may be after us!"

That was all I needed to hear for me to make those tires squeal like pigs on butcherin' day. For a vehicle that had a good ten years on it, that Chevy gave me every ounce of power it had. Lights were popping on from the noise of those tires as I fishtailed out and turned down Beauregard Avenue. I drove like the lights of Mr. Farber's sedan were behind me. Thankfully, they were not.

"Juleann, darlin, I hope you want to go through with this," I said as I kept one eye on the rearview mirror. "I'd sure hate to get shot and have a funeral before I ever had a wedding!"

"Hiram, how can you even think such a thing? I'm here, aren't I? If I didn't want this, I wouldn't be taking my first ride in your truck on the way to my nuptials!"

Lord, she was pretty. I swear the moonlight was dancing around her just to make me even more crazy in love with her. Ever since I first laid eyes on her in Sunday School class when we were little, I knew I had to marry that girl. All through school, I licked any boy that tried to date her even when she pretended that she wasn't all that interested in me. Juleann wasn't just my first love; she was my only love.

Now we were going to do it. I'm not sure we put much thought into the whole process of what it meant to be married. I still lived with my folks along with my four little brothers and sisters and of course, Juleann was still with her daddy. Both of us just graduated high school a few months earlier and on that night, I asked her to be mine forever. I couldn't believe it when she didn't even hesitate for a second. "Do you even have to ask?" she said with that laugh like angel wings.

My job at the feed and grain paid me a decent wage but I had no idea if it would support a wife or not. Love doesn't care about those things. All that mattered was that we were going to get married and let nature run its course. I had \$63 dollars in my pocket and a couple of hundred

in the bank that I saved up over the years. “Our nest egg,” Juleann called it. “We’re going to do just fine, Hi. Just you wait and see.”

“I know we will, darlin’. Nothing can go wrong as long as we’re together.”

We zoomed across the state line and it wasn’t long after that we were pounding on the door of the Justice of the Peace I heard about. I thought it was odd that the lights were already on even though it was pushing midnight and most folks should have been in bed for quite a spell by then. I could hear the sound of the deadbolt being undone and I pulled Juleann closer.

“Uncle Sherman!” Juleann cried when she saw the man standing on the other side of the door. I was more fixated on the shotgun he was cradling in his arms.

“Your daddy called me the moment he found you gone,” he drawled. “He knew he couldn’t catch y’all but he figured you’d be heading this way. I live close enough to here that I could head you off. Mr. Peabody is a lodge brother of mine so he was more than willing to let me in.”

“Please, sir,” I stammered, “I want to do right by Juleann. We have to get married.”

I didn’t stop to think how my words could be interpreted. “You **HAVE** to get married?” he yelled. The barrels swung in my direction and I swear my heart stopped before he could pull the trigger. Juleann leapt in front of me with both arms out. Being shielded by her was not exactly manly but I was more interested in self-preservation than my masculinity.

“Put that gun down, Uncle Sherman!” Juleann snapped. I couldn’t believe it when the gun was lowered and a rather sheepish look came over his face. “You are not going to murder Hi out on this front porch! We don’t *have* to get married! We *want* to get married. I’m 18, a full-grown woman and I can marry whoever I like! Now step aside!”

The tone in her voice was one I had never heard before and I instinctively snapped to attention. If the Good Lord let me survive, I had learned a lesson about Juleann in that moment. She was not to be trifled with. If I wanted to enjoy a long happy marriage, and I did, I needed to remember that. The last thing I wanted was that tone directed at me.

Uncle Sherman looked at the floor of the porch like he had just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. He did as he was ordered, stepped aside, and we progressed into the parlor. Mr. and Mrs. Peabody were clinging to each other probably in anticipation of a shotgun blast that thankfully never occurred. Once they could see that we were proceeding with our wedding, they relaxed and five minutes later we were proclaimed Mr. and Mrs. Hiram Landrieu Foster. I swear when Mr. Peabody made that pronouncement, I saw Uncle Sherman wipe a tear away.

After we exchanged the customary kiss (which wasn't too long as we were respectable Methodists after all), Juleann tossed a smile at Uncle Sherman and then gave the grizzled old man a peck on his cheek. "I'm glad you were here. It was nice to have one of my family with me. Now you can call Daddy and tell him to mind his p's and q's. Otherwise, Hi and I will get in that truck and he'll never see me again or the beautiful grandbabies we'll give him someday."

"Sugar," Uncle Sherman said, "you leave that old buzzard to me. I'll make sure he's prepared for when you come home." His hand slid into his bib overalls and fished around until he pulled out a key that he held out in front of me. "This here is the key to my hunting cabin about 10 miles from here. Juleann knows where. You two have a nice honeymoon there and when you come back, I guarantee he'll be ready. I won't promise he'll be happy to see that fella..."

"My husband! I am Mrs. Hiram Landrieu Foster now," she corrected him.

“Your husband.” The sheepish look was back again.

“Thank you, sir,” I said as I took the key from him. “For everything. You tell Mr. Farber that I’m sorry we did this but we couldn’t think of any other way with his general attitude towards me.”

Mrs. Peabody suddenly produced a bowl from heaven knows where and started pelting us with rice. “Blessings on you lovebirds,” she trilled and I took that as my cue to take Juleann by the elbow and hightail out of there.

Uncle Sherman was as good as his word. We returned to Bamford Sunday afternoon after spending two blissful nights at that shack but Juleann preferred calling it “our honeymoon cottage.” When we pulled into the driveway, Mr. Farber was sitting on the front porch reading the *Gazette*. Despite the authority I now knew Juleann possessed, I think we were both a little scared as we walked up the sidewalk towards the front steps. I was particularly disturbed by the shotgun leaning within his reach. Only when we were standing there did he lower the paper and look at us with more than a firm look in his eyes.

“You two heathens missed church today. I hope you’re not going to make a damn habit of that.”

“Daddy! Language!” Juleann cried. Mr. Farber stood from his rocker and Juleann flung herself into his arms. As he squeezed her, his eyes were boring into me over her shoulder. I can safely state that there was no warmth of affection in those eyes but rather the heat of controlled rage. All I could do was sigh and shrug my shoulders to let him know I was just as powerless as he was when it came to the power of his little girl.