

Runaway Bride Races to Courthouse

By Reg P. Wydeven
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Other than when my kids were born, my wedding day was the greatest day of my life. On that day, I officially became the luckiest man alive when the sweetest, most gorgeous woman in the world agreed to share the rest of her life with me. I'll never forget how beautiful she looked in her wedding gown and how much fun we had with all of our friends and family at our reception.

Unfortunately, not all men look back on their wedding day quite as fondly as I do. Take John Mason, for instance. Instead of waking up on the day of his wedding to go golfing with his groomsmen and then scarf down cheeseburgers at McDonalds before the ceremony like I did, he was out searching suburban Atlanta for his missing fiancée, Jennifer Wilbanks.

Mason, along with hundreds of family, friends, volunteers and police scoured the Peach State for Wilbanks, fearing the worst. After three days of searching, Wilbanks finally called Mason from Albuquerque, New Mexico, claiming she was abducted and sexually assaulted.

It turns out that Wilbanks made the whole story up. Having possibly the worst case of cold feet in the history of weddings, Wilbanks, now more commonly known as "the runaway bride", fled to Las Vegas days before her lavish 600-guest nuptials because of "certain fears" controlling her life.

Garnering international headlines, the runaway bride was the topic of water cooler discussions around the globe. The couple appeared on national television together, and even received the ultimate symbol of notoriety – she was immortalized as a bobble head doll.

At one of her hometown Duluth's Gwinnett Gladiators minor league ice hockey games, the first 1,000 fans through the gate received a "Runaway Bride Any Similarity to Actual Persons is Unintended and Purely Coincidental" Bobblehead Doll. The dolls featured a woman with a veil over her head, a sweatshirt that says "I ♥ Duluth," a pair of running shoes labeled "Adios" instead of Adidas and a picture of the state of Georgia on the back. Fans showed up three hours before the puck dropped to get the dolls, which apparently disappeared just as fast as she did.

Wilbanks was eventually sentenced to two years' probation and performed community service that included mowing the lawns of public buildings. Mason welcomed her back and they postponed the wedding, but alas, in May of this year they broke up. For most couples, breaking up means the end, but for this couple, it was just the beginning.

The couple had a very public dispute over items of personal property that Wilbanks claims Mason never returned to her, including a new vacuum cleaner, a ladder, a gold-colored sofa and various wedding shower gifts. Wilbanks recently sued Mason and his company, JCM Consulting, in Gwinnett County Superior Court to return this personal property and for \$500,000 in damages.

The damages Wilbanks seeks include her \$250,000 share of a home that Mason purchased, and later evicted Wilbanks from, using proceeds from a \$500,000 payment he received for selling their sordid tale to an agent. Wilbanks also seeks \$250,000 in punitive damages for Mason's alleged abuse of a power of attorney she granted for him to handle their financial affairs while she was hospitalized and under medication after the ordeal.

Apparently Mason sold the rights to their story too soon – it looks like this saga is far from over.