

Proposals
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And so we wait. I'm nervous, and really want to see how this turns out, but, Mary, my 25 year old daughter, wants to move on. In just a few minutes a young man's life will be laid open and hung out over a precipice. Mary seems bored. The thought crosses my mind – women really don't get it.

It's Saturday morning, and we are climbing the east side of Pinnacle Mountain in Central Arkansas – the hard side, the one with the boulder field stacked upward at a knee-wrenching slope. Only a few people are on the trail. Just before topping out on the south peak, we approach three young men sitting leisurely on rocks with a humongous video camera pointed in the general direction of the north peak which is about 100 yards away.

Now this is a mystery. They have lugged this big expensive camera up the mountain, but seem to have no interest in the panoramic views from the highest point. The only thing unusual about the north peak, as far as I can tell, is a small splash of yellow, too far away to identify.

Puzzled, I look back at the guys.

“There's about to be a proposal,” one of them tells me.

Let's see. Proposal. Business. Money. I'm still confused.

“A marriage proposal,” he clarifies with a tone probably reserved for those diagnosed with encroaching senility.

“Oh, that's cool. So are those flowers over there?” I point to the yellow splotch on the distant peak.

He confirms that they are.

“Does she know?” I ask.

“We don't think so.”

So it all fits now. The hopeful groom-to-be has chosen a mountain top to pop the question, with fresh air and open sky, in front of God, three buddies and a few intrigued hill climbers. The proceedings will be filmed from a discrete distance using a camera with a powerful zoom lens. Flowers mark the spot. The guy must be a bit of a romantic, perhaps, not unlike myself. I proposed to my wife not far from here in a park overlooking Lake Maumelle on a starry night.

Climbing the last few steps to the top of the south peak, I suggest to Mary we stay and watch. We select a hard rock seat, with a view of the north peak, perched just above the film crew.

I recite for Mary a story she's heard before – the story of proposing to her mother. We can see the lake and so I point to the general location where it happened. Tucked away in a small cove off the lake, too far to see, close enough to feel. I remember the warmth of the moment, but also the tinge of fear that rejection, at least uncertainty, was still a possibility.

“It didn't go exactly as planned,” I tell Mary. “I had no idea roses would wilt in one afternoon if tossed on the dashboard of a pickup truck. There was the lake and the stars were out.... and something dead that smelled to high heaven.”

The bad omens were not working in my favor. But 31 years of near-perfect marriage and three daughters later and now I am sitting next to my youngest on a rock that witnessed it all.

Just as I finish the story I see a slender man in his 40's climb up from behind us. I can overhear most of his conversation with the film crew.

His voice is huffy. “None of you were able to talk him out of it? It's not all that it's cracked up to be.”

He climbs on up to the point where Mary and I are sitting. I can't resist poking at him a bit.

“So you wouldn't get married again?” I ask.

He is surprised by the question, but quickly recovers. “Well, this is the last time.” I'm guessing he's been to the well and drank the water more than once or twice before.

A few people come and go, but nothing is happening on the north peak. It begins to get cold and my daughter Mary is ready to head down. I resist for a few more minutes, but finally concede. Our plan was to hike down the west face – the easier side - and then circle back around the base trail to our car.

As we descend, we should pass the young couple on their climb up. I remind myself not to smile stupidly or issue any words of premature congratulations. Sure enough, just as we reach the saddle that separates the north and south peaks, a young couple crosses the trail in front of us and begin making their way out to the north peak. Mary turns and smiles, but is ready to continue down. Not me.

Even now, there is the possibility of this ending badly. It is not the most radical proposal in the world, but it is being witnessed – and filmed. I think of those videos my son-in-law talked about seeing on You-Tube documenting ways not to propose marriage. “Don't put the ring in a food item” was the advice in one of the clips. The next image shows a x-ray with the ring inside the girl's stomach. Another clip was a broadcast of a professional basketball game. The girl has been lured to center court. The guy shows up, drops to a knee and presents a ring. The girl considers the question for a moment, whispers something to the guy and then runs off the court - alone. The TV announcer is not sympathetic, “Aww, he'll get over it in 10 to 12 years,” he says.

I have already given instructions to my daughters in case something like that happens to them. Have a heart...act surprised, smile sweetly, and tell the guy , without moving your lips, “Yes, we'll talk la-ter.”

I am nervous. Here on Pinnacle Mountain, things could go badly. What if the young man is rejected and decides that life is not worth living? I try to remember my scout training in high mountain rescue techniques. Actually, I never made it out of cub scouts. The dude is SOL.

For their part, the two seem calm and oblivious to our presence and the impending disaster I've created in my mind. They slowly work their way further out onto the rocky ridge, steep cliffs on both sides. We cannot hear anything they say, only a gentle wind through the trees. They walk up to the flowers. No visible reaction. Does she see them? Maybe she thinks the daffodils bloomed early this year. They walk a little further and stop. He takes her in his arms, then gets down on one knee. After a few moments, her hands go up to cover her face. Then she leans over, takes his face in her hands and kisses him. A lovely word - “Yes”. More so when viewed in pantomime.

I breathe easier now, finally convinced the guy will not be jumping off the mountain. Funny. I don't know their name, never heard them speak a word. **Yet**, somehow they put a lift in my step. Maybe it comes from witnessing something positive. Maybe it is that I recognized a kindred spirit in the young man.

Mary and I start our way down the west side of the mountain - the side facing the lake. The water is barely visible through the trees. It is bright daylight but I can almost see the stars.