

Aleta Marie Rhodes

by

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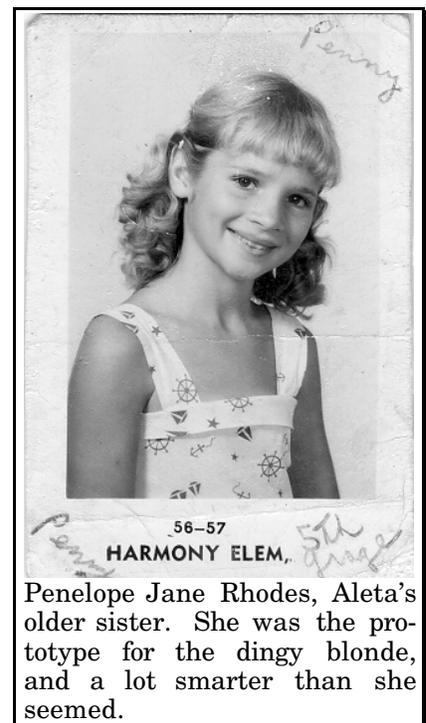
The most serious love of my early life was Aleta Marie Rhodes. I can still remember the first time that I ever saw her. I was on the school bus, returning to the Boldtville School from the Harmony Elementary School. I can't be sure after all of these years but I believe that it was my first day of school in the third grade. My best guess, from memory and from examining old photographs, is that Aleta was one year behind me in school. So, I'm guessing that she must have attended a different school when she was in the first grade. Anyway, when the bus stopped at the Boldtville School, I looked out of the window and there she was, waiting with a bunch of other little kids. It was the beginning of a relationship that was eventually disabled by my parents' growing problems, circumstances that were beyond my control and possibly beyond Aleta's awareness.



Our relationship, in its various phases, lasted from the beginning of the third grade for me through high school and into junior college. I saw her less often after I entered junior college but I still saw her occasionally. Even considering only our time together through high school, that's ten years. My first marriage lasted only 14 years. Thus, the relationship with Aleta wasn't a trifling affair, no matter how you measure such things.

Our romance didn't get physical at first. Peer pressure at that age wouldn't allow much. However, into every life a little change must come. Such change often starts long before it's visible. I remember one day riding the bus back home from the Harmony Elementary School. I suppose that I must have been about 10 years old, maybe in about the 5th grade. I was sitting with Aleta. We'd strategically arranged my jacket in our laps and we were holding hands under the jacket. There's a reason why I remember that particular occurrence of what must have been a regular thing. The reason is that Jerry Watkins got suspicious and suddenly yanked the jacket off of our laps faster than we could turn loose of each other. It was embarrassing but it didn't stop us. We were changing for the better and no amount of peer pressure could stop that. Eventually, of course, our peers came around to our way of thinking.

Another incident that I recall with Aleta happened at about that same time or maybe slightly later. It was during a game of hide-and-seek at her house. One time when Aleta was *it*, Penny (Aleta's older sister) and I scurried into a front bedroom that was pretty much unused. Penny excitedly said "Quick! Hide in here!" and shoved me into a closet. A few seconds later, the door popped open and she shoved Aleta in with me. I think that they must have planned it in advance. Anyway, I grabbed Aleta for a kiss but she held me off and said "Wait a minute!" She reached into the far end of the closet and pulled a chair toward us. I hadn't known that there was a chair in the closet but, in retrospect, I sup-



Penelope Jane Rhodes, Aleta's older sister. She was the prototype for the dingy blonde, and a lot smarter than she seemed.

Aleta Marie Rhodes

pose that it was a part of their plan. She pushed me onto the chair and sat on my lap. What a wonderful idea. I'd never have thought of it myself. Then she gave me the kiss for which I'd been waiting. Few kisses have thrilled me more than those early ones with Aleta.

A later incident that I remember occurred after a party at the Harmony Elementary School. By then, I was in the 6th grade. Aleta's mother gave all of us a ride home that night after the party. There were four of us: me, Aleta, Penny, and a friend of mine named Dean Edward Atkinson. Dean and Penny were spending time together. Aleta and I were doing the same. There'd been a certain amount of preliminary flirting and we were all looking forward to the ride home. We were already settled into the back seat of the car when Mrs. Rhodes got into the front. Aleta was by the left door and I was close beside her, with my arm around her. Penny was by the right door in a similar situation with Dean. I can still remember the startled expression on Mrs. Rhodes' face when she glanced into the back seat as she was opening the front door to get into the driver's seat. I'll give her credit. She didn't say a word. She just got behind the wheel and drove. It was a wonderful ride. Even today, I feel good about it.

I recall another incident with Aleta that, in retrospect, is kind of amusing. I guess that it happened while I was in junior high school. It couldn't have been much later than that because of the deteriorating state of my parents' marriage. Anyhow, the whole collection of my friends had been visiting at my house and we'd run ourselves ragged with various games. Gradually, everybody had drifted home. By the time that it was dark, only Aleta and I remained. For some reason that I've long since forgotten, we climbed up onto the roof and sat on the ridge, gazing off into the distance. As I sat there beside her, we could see through his open window that Burwin, one of my friends who lived next door, had gone into his bedroom and had begun to undress for bed. Aleta was so excited about watching him undress that she was almost bouncing up and down on the roof. She couldn't stop exclaiming under her breath about him undressing right there where she could see it. Maybe she was so excited because she didn't have any brothers and wasn't familiar with such things. Sadly, I didn't take any kind of advantage of the situation. There we were, alone, on the roof, she was excited about a boy undressing, and I didn't even try anything at all. Anyway, during several subsequent visits we sat on the roof waiting. At the time, I thought that she was waiting to see Burwin undress. In retrospect, she was probably waiting for me to take advantage of our situation. A year or so earlier, I might have done something but, by then, the deterioration of my parents' marriage was well advanced. I was getting inhibited.

One year at the county fair, I got up the courage to ask Aleta to ride the Mad Mouse with me. The Mad Mouse was a little roller coaster that used individual, two-seated cars. Aleta said yes. Naturally, I paid for the ride for both of us. However my hopes were exceeded. In spite of what I now view as her subtle encouragement, I was getting bashful about touching Aleta. The man who operated the ride and had the job of buckling us into the car knew exactly what I needed. He made sure that Aleta got into the front position. He guided me into the rear position. There was only one seat back so he instructed her to lean back against me, for her safety. He instructed me to put my arms around her, in front of me, and hang on to her, for her safety. It wasn't the first time in my life that I'd touched her. Even so, it was still pretty close to Heaven. It certainly was a more than adequate reward for a year's worth of saving

my funds for that trip to the county fair.

It's fortunate that I spent so much time with Aleta while I could because, by the time that I was in the eighth grade, at about the age of 13, my parents' marriage was well along in the failure process. That failure process had probably been under way for quite some time but it started to become unavoidably visible. The process lasted throughout my time in high school and junior college. The situation was so brutal that it disabled me from having any useful relationships with females. My relationship with Aleta gradually faded and by the end of high school I'd lost most contact with her. I do recall one date that I had with her at about that time. I don't remember for sure but I think that I was in junior college at the time. I wanted to take her to see the movie *The Graduate*. However, I'd heard that it was a very racy movie so I didn't know if I wanted her to see it with me or not. Silly me, I went to see it myself first and decided that it would be OK to take her to see it with me. I told my mother what I'd done and she seemed amused by my caution and concern. That was probably the last time that Aleta and I ever had any close contact.

It's a sad fact that, throughout our entire relationship, even after I was in junior college and in spite of the physical contact that we'd experienced during our early years together, I was never able to have a physical relationship with Aleta. It wasn't just that I was bashful with her. She was so special to me that I hesitated to touch her but, during the early years, I managed anyway. Later, the situation with my parents became an insurmountable obstacle. I doubt if Aleta ever knew why we lost touch with one another. High on my list of regrets is the sad fact that I didn't continue to pursue the relationship. Looking back on it, she was more likely than any other woman that I've ever known to have made a good, faithful, and compatible wife for me for my entire life. Whether she would actually have married me or not, I don't know. However, I'll always regret my failure to at least ask her. Even today, it's difficult for me to think of her so I try not to think of her more than about once a day. The memory of her has made it very difficult for me to watch those romance movies with the happy endings. Regret is a lonesome thing.

In later years, I tried several times to locate Aleta but I was never able to do so. I don't know why I didn't try harder to get in touch with her after my first divorce but something inhibited me. Maybe I was still bashful with her. I don't know. Whatever the case, losing Aleta was the biggest mistake of my entire life. It's too late now. Sometime in late 2006, a previous mutual acquaintance who'd stayed in contact with Aleta got in touch with me. He told me what had happened to Aleta. On September 29, 2006, on my 60th birthday, she arrived at her home and discovered intruders in her house. One of them shot her in the head and killed her.

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