

JEERS FOR KATIE AND THE RUNAWAY BRIDE BY JULIANNE Malveaux

The Chicago Defender's Roland martin deserves big props for putting a name on an amazing American phenomenon, the missing white woman syndrome. All a white girl has to do is cough too hard and the national media are camped on her doorstep wondering what happened. Don't let her come home from work late. Pale-faced pundits are already asking about all the dangers there are out there for "innocent" white women. To be sure, some of these women – Lacy Peterson, Chandra Levy – were actually innocent and actually missing. But why not look home first, since we know that spouses and boyfriends most likely have the hands through which foul play is delivered.

Even as the media throngs to the front yards of the MWW, dozens if not hundreds of women of color go missing without comment. Is our absence so wished for by white America that when we don't come home it is so unremarkable that there is nothing to say? Or does the media so lack imagination that they need a pale missing girl with long flowing hair to close a news hole, and an Afro just won't do. Believe me, I never want to see a sister go missing, but I know that we do – just check the latest issue of Essence for news on some of the missing sisters. But here's the point. All a white girl has to do is look like she might be missing and suddenly she's a celebrity.

So Jennifer Wilbanks, who needs to be serving time for using up public resources, bolted from her 28 bridesmaid, 600 person wedding, then lied and said a Hispanic man in a white van had abducted her. She shows no contrition for her racism, nor for her use of scarce public services. Instead, she finds herself an agent who sells her story to Judith Regan to the tune of half a million dollars. Then she gives Katie Couric an "exclusive" interview to talk about her plight.

Katie is the white girl's pass, the great American sympathy card. She oozes sympathy like a snake oozes slime, with the wide smile and the perky questions. As she ages, she's been given props, like little glasses to slide up and down her nose to denote her seriousness or lack thereof. I'm not hating on Katie, not really, just observing the apolitical context to her sympathy. Why should she, a seemingly serious newscaster, jump all over the Jennifer Wilbanks story? What is its news value? If she didn't take Wilbanks to task for her random identification of the so-called Hispanic man who abducted her, I'd say Katie's slip (or something) is showing.

Why do I care so much about the missing white woman syndrome? Mostly because words Sojourner Truth uttered more than a century and a half ago still ring true. Ain't I a woman? The media shapes images of white women's vulnerability and sensitivity, but African American women are utterly ignored, whether we are present or absent. This approach is an abomination to egalitarian sensibilities and erosion on our public consciousness.

It reminds me of the way white women were perceived in lynching days. People were obsessed with their "virtue", and indeed, black men were randomly killed simply to protect white women's virtue. Ida B. Wells opined that if white folks had to worry so much about white women's virtue that raised questions about the actuality of that virtue. These days, all these missing white women stories make me wonder if these women are missing or fleeing, and what vicarious energy or pleasure others get from having these tales retold.

Wilbanks got a slap on the wrist – probation and a fine that amounted to a fraction of the money her small Georgia town spent looking for her. And she is getting paid, big time. But she imperiled the well being of men of color with her wacky and random accusations, and she sucked up public energy that might have been sued for something else. She's a brazen runaway; so

brazen that she sold a story that she really ought to stifle. But she is no more brazen than the powers that be at NBC, the folks who decided to lift up the silly missing white woman phenomenon. The Wilbanks story begs the question – what ever happened to the concept of shame. But then Katie Couric is begging that question, too. Is this all the news diva has to talk about?

Markets are crazy. Another 15 minutes of fame white woman put her story on the auction block, and she got about the same half million dollars that Jennifer Wilbanks did. Ashley Smith, the blonde former drug addict who supposedly talked a killer into turning himself in during an Atlanta crime spree, found the market valuing her supposed heroism at the same rate as it valued Wilbank's sick show of petulance. Go figure.

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