

## Introduction

The following story is a love story. It will include all of the modern staples: nervous first dates, sweeping romance, utter heartbreak, and of course, it will end with a wedding. It is in fact quite an ordinary love story. Indeed, I'll admit, it is actually only my own ordinary love story.

Why did I take the time, then, to commit a plain story to text? Did my own experiences provide me with some incredible insight that took several thousand words to explain? Unfortunately, that is not the case. I have learned a few things perhaps, but I don't count myself among the wise in this complicated field.

No, the reasons for writing this book are a bit complex and likely quite boring. But in a word, I can say that I've spent a good amount of time examining the lives of completely normal people, and the part of each person's story I'm consistently captivated by is their personal love story. Love is *always* fascinating. Moreover, the love stories of *normal people* are always fascinating -- they are consistently passionate, charming, conflicting, hilarious, and messy. We live in a terrific era when romantic art is exploring the more grounded and realistic aspects of people being drawn to one another. In nearly every relationship there are major struggles, some that couples have a difficult time ever coming back from if they do at all. Few are the stories where a woman meets a man and they enjoy fifty years of conflict-free, unaltered love. Nonetheless, our love

stories retain their intrigue. In my experience, they are always worth telling.

So here is my humble, real-life love story. But my love story will cover all aspects of my romantic life, starting from when I experienced my first crush, and following through to making a lifelong commitment to someone I can say with full confidence I am in love with. Yet before I can even begin with my first crush, I must go back even further and speak about the world I found myself in, which shaped the way I viewed the realm of romance.



## Chapter 2

My first foray into the world of romance was when I was four or five. I fell in love with Princess Odette from *The Swan Princess*, a golden-haired beauty that I watched in awe at my aunt's house.

My second love, however, was a real person. I was in kindergarten, and the girl who drew my considerable interest was a little brunette who wore pigtails and jean skirts with black stockings. Her name was Brittany, and she was your standard kindergarten crush. She had bright eyes and freckles on her cheeks. I imagine she would have had an equally charming personality, had I ever spoken to her.

When I entered school, I was shy around the other kids. It didn't take long for me to realize that the kids at school weren't socialized the same way a Mennonite from the farm was. The other boys wore t-shirts with superheroes on them and basketball shorts; I wore checkered button-up shirts tucked into hand-me-down jeans, and on special days, the cowboy boots that I got when my family went to visit relatives in Mexico. My friends had action figures and watched cable TV. I played "house" with my older sisters, and my primary hobby was following my dad around the farm pretending to help with chores. I was familiar with very few of the things my classmates talked about. I never watched an episode of *Spongebob Squarepants* until I was an adult. Another boy would show me the drawing he created during play time – a page completely covered in circles. "This is Godzilla's nest - she has a

million eggs,” he told me. He was the coolest boy in class. “Holy moly,” I responded, crumpling up the picture of my dog who laid no eggs at all. Godzilla sounded incredible.

Aside from my atypical socialization, I was chubby and didn’t do very well in class. For these reasons, I did not dare approach my love. I was shy and lacked confidence, and although cliques didn’t begin forming until a few years after kindergarten, Brittany had established herself on the upper rings of the social food chain. She had friends that she could have fun and giggle with. I watched with infatuation as she and her friends skipped rope on the blacktop during recess. She was not someone a boy from the boonies would approach. Nor could I have approached her anyways, as pressure among the boys would have been insurmountable. Girls had cooties.

The gender warfare that was waged by the boys was brutal and ruthless, each boy likely attempting to mask a crush of his own with violence and hate. We would build “traps” in the sand pits, digging small holes, placing broken twigs in the bottom, and covering the hole with sticks and grass -- completely undetectable by the untrained eye. If we could only lure a girl over to the sandpits, surely we could bag ourselves a scratched foot or maybe even a twisted ankle. Further, the ultimate crime was a soldier who betrayed his battalion and spoke to one on the other side. “Girl lover!” was the title he would receive. He would be shunned for at least one recess, depending on how popular he was in the first place.

This made not having to talk to Brittany a huge relief. Furthermore, it enabled me to keep a perfect picture of her in my head. She never spoke to me, and therefore she had no flaws. I could use this perfect girl in each of the stories I began formulating in my young brain. I believe that in the absence of video games, action figures, or a television that I had access to, my primary option for entertaining myself were fantasy stories I could write in my mind. I would sit in the pews of church services held in German – my parents’ first language but one I didn’t understand – and imagine bandits bursting through the walls with swords in hand and cigars in mouth. I immediately rose to action, subduing each bandit with the skill of my hand and the sharpness of my wit while every congregant, even my own brave father, cowered under his pew. I then paused my fantasy. I had watched enough movies to know that romance is needed in every story to keep an audience – in this case myself – engaged.

Entering stage right was Brittany, who was being whisked away by the strongest and meanest of bandits. Unfortunately for him, he did not take into account my Spidey-slinging abilities. I swung along the beams on the ceiling and punched the thug in the mouth. He pulled out his scimitar and was able to slash me on the side. Though I was fading fast, I wrestled the thug to the ground until he cried “uncle,” just like I did with my dad. I took Brittany in my arms and flew out of the roof of the church just as the building exploded behind us. She embraced me, but quickly withdrew. “You’re hurt!”

I was rushed to the hospital, but everyone in town donated blood to me because they had heard of my heroism. My friend who was more overweight than I was led the effort; naturally, he had the most blood to spare. When my vision returned to me, I saw at my hospital bed the love of my life, the girl I had just saved.

“Thank you,” she said. “You saved my life.”

“I wasn’t going to let them hurt you,” I said weakly as I wiped away her tears.

Brittany held my hand. She then leaned in closer to me. “You’re so brave,” she said. My chest began to tighten, my heart pounding. What’s this? A... a kiss!

I snapped back to reality, my dad telling me to get on my knees for prayer.

I watched some movies as a child, and I would watch every movie through the lens of myself as the hero and Brittany as the damsel in distress. For this reason, *Sleeping Beauty* was my favorite Disney movie – the princess was like how I had envisioned Brittany. Beautiful, grateful for my heroism, but best of all, silent. Other movies took a bit more creativity and imagination to fit my standards. For instance, Brittany’s portrayal of Mulan in my brain’s retelling was not the strong woman audiences are familiar with, but was rather in desperate need of my version of Captain Shang’s help. Clearly the central theme of this movie was lost on me.

Truly, my romance with Brittany was perfect. It was a low-pressure environment and struck the perfect balance of loathing and attempts of bodily harm with passion, desire, and the inspiration to write Oscar-worthy action-romance films in my head. One Sunday morning, I decided to outwardly declare my love of Brittany, but only to my parents. It was the last time I would do this for 15 years.

When I was young, I was incredibly sensitive and could not stand to be embarrassed. When I dreamed of Brittany, I was a hero. When I entertained the possibility of coming into contact with her in reality, all my flaws would come flooding back to the forefront of my thoughts. I was overweight, I didn't have cool clothes, and I got Cs on my report card even though all my older siblings had achieved nothing but straight As. I had four sisters and no brothers, so I had a tough time fitting in with the other boys. I didn't know things that other boys knew, such as swear words and bad names to call girls, and I wasn't good at sports. My family never had the money or interest to put me into things like house league hockey – a staple for Leamington boys – or piano or swimming lessons. I knew I wasn't a cool kid. Even in the first grade, I knew that Brittany was out of my league. Telling my parents about my love of her was a risk. If it got back to her, I would be forever humiliated.

The conversation started out innocently enough that morning. I jumped on their bed before we got ready for church and delivered the news – I wanted to marry her. “Who's that?” my dad asked.

“Ah, Brittany!” said my mom. “The Fast family down on the seventh, their little girl. Yeah, I know Brittany, really cute. Good choice, Joseph.” She turned to my dad. “She’s the one with the dark hair and freckles, always has her hair in pigtails.” That was my Brittany.

“Oh yeah? Is she real pretty?” my dad asked me. I slowly nodded. I wanted to change the subject. I had said my piece and immediately regretted it. This was getting too personal.

My sisters started filing into the bedroom, which was common for Sunday mornings. I hoped they hadn’t heard anything. Yet if they hadn’t, it didn’t matter.

“Our Joseph has a crush,” my mom began to tell my oldest sisters, who were both preteens getting close to entering high school. *Oh no*, I thought. I buried my head in my mom, hoping that if I pushed hard enough I could disappear or go back in time.

“A crush!” my sister exclaimed. I had my head buried, but I am sure she was rubbing her hands hungrily. This was delicious news for siblings who take joy in nothing but causing each other misery. I pushed my head further into my mom, silently begging for her to not go any further. She laughed and rubbed my back.

“Brittany Fast! You know her, right? – Ow!” I was slamming her with my fists. But it was too late. The damage was done. My three older sisters began in a chorus.

“Brittany, huh? Oooh, Brittany!”

“Brittany and Joe, sitting in a tree!”

“Do you love her Joe? Do you want to  
kiiiiiiissss her?”

“So when is the wedding, Joe? Are we all  
invited?”

I screamed and yelled and pounded my mom. “Joe! It’s okay, everyone has crushes!” she said to me, laughing. I got up and gave chase to my sisters. I swung for each in turn but they were all taller, faster, and stronger than me. “Jeez Joe, I sure hope you don’t do that to Brittany! You’ll get arrested for fighting a girl!”

I ran out to my room and slammed the door behind me. I covered myself in my blankets and cried.

Fortunately, as far as I knew, word never got back to Brittany. My sisters didn’t bother sharing this information with anyone because the crushes of six-year-olds were of little importance to teenagers. They knew that it was a sensitive subject for exactly one person, so they would only bring it up when the situation called for it. They knew it was my weakest point, and they would exploit it expertly. If I was throwing a temper tantrum, just uttering her name was threat enough to send me away. If I was pestering them while they did their homework, they would remind me they held all the power, sometimes even holding the telephone and pretending to dial the first numbers of her house.

However, things changed on Boxing Day while I was in the second grade. We were at our aunt and uncle's house for a Christmas gathering, and we all had cousins to match each of our ages. My older sisters and the corresponding older cousins were holed up in a room upstairs, while we younger cousins pounded on the door, trying to break in and disrupt their happiness – standard fare for most family get-togethers. What else are kids supposed to do during Canadian winters but annoy the older siblings? I led the invading force's charge, pounding and screaming, attempting to use noise as the smoke that would force them out.

“Joe, you better go downstairs or I'll tell everyone about your crush,” my sister said from inside the room. I froze momentarily. I looked at the other boys with me. This was a dangerous proposition, but they needed their leader to be strong. I replied with confidence. “What are you talking about?” My pounding of the bedroom door continued, but now too did the pounding of my heart.

“Okay, but you asked for it!” my sister said while giggling with the older cousins. “Joe likes Brittany,” she said while laughing. I didn't hear much for a response from the older cousins. Perhaps a few giggles, but this information meant little to anyone but me. Still, the blood left my face and I got a hollow feeling in my chest. The information had been heard, and there was nothing I could do to make anyone unhear it. What would all of my cousins think of me? I was weak for liking somebody, yes, but I was also foolish for having a crush on somebody who surely had never had a second

thought about me. I was young and attempting to keep up appearances of dignity. But now all my vulnerability was laid bare.

“What? No I don’t! I HATE her! She’s ugly!”  
My pounding increased.

“All girls are stupid!” my cousin chimed in.  
Thank God.

“Yeah, they’re all stupid and she is even more stupid!” That word was not allowed in our household, but these were wartime measures. Either way, the matter was quickly forgotten and the pounding continued.

It was a close call. Even if my cousins didn’t believe my defence, they never brought it up to me. As a child with so little control in his own life, at least I could control this narrative. I hated Brittany and I was too unflappable, too distinguished to have something as silly as a crush on a girl. I had this one thing, and I would never make the mistake of sharing compromising information again. “Yeah, Brittany is stupid and ugly!”

It was an important lesson and one I would carry with me. I had learned an important lesson at six years old, one that I would better understand as an adult when I read CS Lewis’s *The Four Loves*:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries;

avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness.

Clearly this quote goes far beyond the ramifications of having your kindergarten crush exposed. But having a crush creates the possibility of feelings not being mutual, the possibility of being rejected and not good enough for someone you care about. As a self-conscious farm boy, it was not a risk I was willing to take.

I continued to carry feelings for Brittany in secret. The fictions I authored continued to be crafted, but certainly never published. She would continue to be the princess in every movie I watched, the damsel in every fantasy I created. She watched in awe as I defended the Pride Lands from Scar, and once even fell for me when I was Mighty Joe Young, the giant gorilla, when I saved her from the top of a ferris wheel. I wore my cool, dark jeans that my mom picked up at the thrift store, and begged my mom to buy a t-shirt with Transformers on it so that she might think I was a normal boy. My infatuation with her continued. Other boys began dropping their vendetta against the girls, and some even admitted they liked girls and had girlfriends. But I kept my secrets. I was not cool and did not have much to lose, but what little I did have, I clung to with an iron grip.

In the third grade, our desks were arranged alphabetically and it landed the two of us side by side. I dreamed of talking to her, and sometimes I even got my wish. Sometimes she would ask what I got for question

4. In my bravest moments, I would ask her for a pencil. I was no longer being asked to hate Brittany, but I would never tell her how I felt.



## Chapter 8

I explained to my mom that things had changed, and I really did want a relationship again. I'd entertained the idea of remaining single, but after having a taste of the alternative, I knew I wanted it again for myself, and I told her that at this point I had moved on and was ready. "But now that I'm ready, it feels like there aren't really any more fish in the sea."

"It always seems to work like this, and the harder you try, the longer it takes," my mom told me. She then realized the error of her words and doubled back. "But if it's what you want, you need to put in some work. Girls won't come walking into your room while you play video games, if that's what you're hoping."

"Well, school is picking up now. Maybe one will walk into my room while I write an essay?"

My mom smiled. "I wouldn't worry about it too much. You're young, and things can move very fast once they start going. You don't want to force it and get into something you won't like."

I tried my best to not force it, but patience has never been my strong suit. A fear I had after my breakup was that I would hesitate before becoming vulnerable again, since doing so had resulted in pain. But this fear ended up being groundless. Perhaps doing so once had broken the seal and there was no putting it back after that, because I was much more open and intentional with romance from then on, even at times when I knew deep down that things wouldn't work out

with someone. I even went on a date with a girl which ultimately led to another rejection, but one that had no real impact outside of renewing my desperation.

By winter, however, I decided to put my pursuits on hold. I was a few months into my Master's program and wanted to focus on that. I had a new placement at a recovery centre, and so between that, my assignments, and my ongoing respite work, I knew I would be lacking in free time. I was also feeling less lonely by winter. After the assortment of single friends from the previous summer had disappeared, a few new ones had come to take their place. The closest of these was Henry.

Henry was a fascinating personality. He came from a Mennonite tradition where he dropped out of school to begin working full-time by fourteen. During this time, to cope with mundane factory work, he fell into a lifestyle he described as hard-core partying and binge-drinking. But tragedy struck, and his brother passed away from cancer, forcing him to re-evaluate his life and values, spurring him into a life of faith, service, and social justice. His social energy remained from his partying days and he became friends with everyone he met. So when we eventually met, we instantly connected over our common values and became fast friends. He even invited me to go to New York that winter with him and some friends. I told him I couldn't because of my school schedule, but regretted it when I found out about the company he was keeping: it included an attractive girl with strawberry blonde hair.

“So, about these girls,” I said one night after he had gotten back. We made a habit of meeting at a local pub late at night after I finished my school work to watch sports. “Are you interested in them? Do you *fancy* them?” I took out my phone and showed him the pictures he had posted from New York, one in which he was standing beside the two girls he went with.

“Well I’m not sure her boyfriend would appreciate that,” he said, pointing to the other girl, one with dark hair named Martha.

“Right, right, right. And the other? What’s her deal?”

“Jess?” He looked at the thin girl who had caught my attention. “Well, no, she’s almost like a sister to me, you know? They’re just friends of mine. Jess has been having a rough go of things since she finished high school in the summer, and she really wanted to get out of town for a while.” He took a sip of his Pepsi – he had sworn off alcohol since his brother’s death. “You’d like her. I’ll bring her around sometime.”

*High school*, I thought. That might be stretching it just a bit as I was approaching my mid-twenties. Henry was a few years younger than me, so it made more sense for him, and I had watched enough movies to know that it’s always the *like a sister to me* guy that ends up with the girl. “Yeah, sure,” was my response. “That sounds good.”

Months passed, and I gave little thought to Henry’s high school friend or to relationships at all. I

was again in a rhythm of having my placement during regular work hours with an hour-long commute, as well as a part-time job some evenings and weekends. I was required to write several research papers and essays throughout my semester, so I would often return home from my part-time job late in the evening, only to crack open my laptop and write a few paragraphs. I had little time for anything, and no emotional energy for romance.

“How about a movie at my place tonight?” Henry asked me when we were getting breakfast on a Saturday morning. His insistence and ability to get me out of the house were unmatched.

“Sure, if you’re writing my research paper?”

“Deal! I got a B+ in English when I was twelve, this should be a breeze.” I laughed and told him I’d have more time in the spring.

“I invited Jess tonight, too,” he said, winking and elbowing me in the ribs.

“Oh yeah? Are you setting me up? You’ll have to find someone a little older than her, I’m afraid. Maybe a mom looking for her second marriage?” It was a running joke how young Mennonites got married.

Henry laughed. “No, I’m not setting you up, I promise. But you’d be friends, I know this.”

“Well how can I refuse making a brand new friend?” I said, half-joking. It was true I could use more friends, though I didn’t have half the enthusiasm for making them as Henry did.

“Great!” he said. “Dress to impress,” he added, as I rolled my eyes.

When I arrived, Henry told me he wasn’t sure Jess would be coming that night and I felt a small level of disappointment, then immediately felt a sense of irritation with myself. *I can’t let myself invest in her.* But a short while later she arrived and introduced herself, and I could feel myself quickly getting pulled in. She was slender with fair skin. She had a slight rasp in her voice, and although I had typically been attracted to loud, confident women, Jess had an endearing aura of timidity and humbleness. She wore big, thick glasses that rested on her freckled cheeks. I introduced myself and told her it was my pleasure meeting the one I’d seen in all the New York pictures Henry had shown me.

“No time to talk!” Henry said. “You’re late and we need to get going here,” he barked at Jess. He then looked to me. “She’s working through *Star Wars*, so I told her we could continue here. I assume that’s fine with you?” I had watched *Star Wars* several times. Anyone who took an interest in them was okay in my book. And having watched them before afforded me the opportunity to think about Jess and how she was perceiving the movie and if she didn’t mind the dated special effects and if maybe our wedding could be *Star*

*Wars*-themed. Then, after the movie, I finally got an opportunity to talk with her. It was time to do some investigating.

“So Henry was telling me you finished high school last year?” I was hoping for perhaps an error in his memory.

“Yup – well actually I finished the year before. I went back for a fifth year to get the credits I needed for the program I want to do.” *Okay, this is looking a bit better. One year older than I thought.*

“And which program is that?”

“Nursing,” she responded. *Oh boy. I don’t have a very good record with prospective nurses.*

“Oh, that’s cool. How come?”

“I just like it. I like hospitals and medical science. And I want to help people.” *She likes helping people. Wonderful!* “You’re also in school right now?” she asked.

“Right. Almost done, I’m in my last semester.”

“He’s in his Master’s program,” Henry added, and I shot a glare at him.

“I just finished my applications,” Jess said. “I’m hoping to hear back soon.” She was curling herself into a tight ball on the recliner she was sitting in. “I applied to school around here, but also a few different cities. I

really don't know what to do yet. How did you decide?"  
*Oh no, not again.*

I hesitated a moment before I spoke. This all felt eerily similar, since school had been an issue with my romantic interests several times in the past—being separated by high school once, university another, and being a point of contention in my last relationship. Was I going to lose my chance with her before it even got started? Part of me felt like influencing her to stay home, though I knew that would be entirely selfish and illogical.

"I just couldn't afford anything else," I answered. I thought for a moment and told her the truth. "But I wish I could have. I feel like I missed out on a lot having to stay home. No campus life or anything like that."

She then looked at me thoughtfully before speaking. "I don't really know what I want yet. I'm not sure I could spend that time away from my family." *Don't get your hopes up, young man.* She then looked meaningfully towards me. "Is university, like... is it hard? And how different is it from high school?"

I realized then that she likely came from a tradition similar to Henry's and probably knew very few people who had gone on to post-secondary school. Henry was friends with people from his much more traditional Mennonite church before I knew him, people who had different lifestyles from my own. She was likely one of them, though she herself looked more

similar to my group of friends. *My dad would love her family*, I thought.

“It’s hard sometimes,” I said. “It’s not easy right now for me, I’m pretty busy. It could be a pretty rough couple of years, especially in nursing. But hey, there’s a reason you do it. Can’t be a nurse without it.”

She smiled, and we spoke a bit more about school before she told Henry and me that she had to be going. I told her I did as well. As we walked outside together, I began scraping the snow off my car as a lot had come down during the time that we sat inside, and she started doing the same to her old truck with a piece of cardboard.

“No scraper? Let me help you out there,” I said, walking over to scrape the ice from her windshield.

“I’m going to be a student soon. You know I can’t afford luxuries like ice-scrapers,” she said, smiling widely. “Thanks for the help. It was nice meeting you.”

“It was nice meeting you too,” I said. She climbed into the old truck and it sputtered and wheezed and then drove off into the night.

As the winter months went on I had few interactions with Jess. I was utterly consumed with my school work, attempting to finish my placement at the recovery centre, as well as finish my research work. I had a few free hours here and there, but few opportunities to see her. Sometimes Henry would invite

me over for a movie, and I would turn up in hopes she was also invited. Sometimes she would be, and I would try to squeeze in a few moments of conversation before she left. That winter, Henry told me he would be going to India in the spring to study mission work. It had always been his dream to serve in the same country that Mother Teresa had committed her life to. I knew that by the time he was gone, I would lose that connection to Jess, and so I had to begin making an effort to get to know her better.

On one occasion, Henry and I met up with Jess and her friend Martha. We went to a movie store to pick something out to watch that evening. I suggested *American Sniper*, mentioning that it was an award winner, hoping Jess would be attracted to my fine taste.

“Sorry,” she said with a shy grin. “I’m not watching something that glorifies war and killing.”

I quickly attempted to defend my choice. “This one deals with the complexity of war, I think. I’m not sure it’s glorified...” She just looked at me and raised her eyebrows. Her conviction to social causes was incredibly attractive.

In time, I tried harder and harder to wind up wherever she was, and during the winter months that typically involved watching movies or television in the same room. One Saturday night, Henry and I were watching basketball at our usual pub.

“Jess is asking what we’re up to,” he said, pointing at his phone.

“Can you tell her we’re here? Would she come?” I asked. I still did not want to appear too obvious to Henry, especially as I still suspected he might not be okay with my interest in her. But I certainly didn’t want to discourage her coming.

“Well, I told her, and she says she’s on her way.”

I was flattered when she chose the stool right beside me.

“Are you okay with hanging out here? We can do something else if you want,” I said.

“No, I love watching basketball,” she responded. I thought this was too good to be true, and soon found out it certainly was, as her understanding of the game did not suggest that she watched regularly. Then I wondered, was it possible she was here to spend time with me? I realized that it had been so rare for my romantic interest to show much interest back that I came to not expect it. I had been doing a lot of laboring over the years, trying to get the attention of girls who didn’t always have the same enthusiasm back. Perhaps it was that I enjoyed the thrill of the hunt too much, I reasoned. But I wondered if maybe this could be the one where the feelings were truly mutual. I sat on my stool and looked at her, perched on the edge of the stool with a straight back, watching and pretending to enjoy what she was seeing on the screen. Something stirred within me and I wanted so badly to put my arm around her and feel the softness of the sweater she was wearing

and touch her narrow shoulders. I resisted and wondered what was all in the Sprite I was drinking.

Nonetheless, Jess became the central focus of my emotional energy despite seldom seeing her. As winter was thawing, Henry texted me one night and told me he and some friends had gone for a walk outside and were now looking for a place to warm up.

“Who are you with?” I asked. He listed the friends he was with, and I scanned the list and found the name I was looking for. Jess was with him. “My house is open!” I told him. I was in my pajamas and was planning on going on an all-night writing binge, but could easily make an exception. I quickly tidied the house and put on my best outfit.

As he and the friends arrived, I realized there was a grievous error. He had more than one friend named Jess, which I knew but had not considered, and as the group filed into my house, I realized I had cleaned the house and put on my nice clothes for nothing. We sat in my parents’ living room for a while as I counted down the minutes until it would be socially acceptable to tell them I had to get some sleep.

Soon after, I got Jess’s phone number from Henry and hoped that a direct line to her would enable me to rely on luck less often in order to make contact with her. I texted her sometimes and tried to engage her in conversation, but our conversations never lasted long and never went beyond surface level. I came to realize that although a month or two had passed since meeting

her and setting my sights on her, I didn't know her at all. She was quiet and reserved, and not easy to read. I previously had reasons for suspecting she might be interested in me, but I began to wonder if that was just my hopeful imagination. Yet when she did eventually respond to my messages, she responded with enthusiasm, and I began to wish that if she didn't want me to message her she would make it more obvious. I decided to scrap my hopes of developing a relationship over text, but decided perhaps text could facilitate more real life interactions in which I could get to know her and get a better handle on the situation.

As spring began, that's exactly what I did. I was able to send out invites to her if there were things going on that I thought she might be interested in, though of course never events that might have us in a room alone together. I was never completely sure if she was interested in me romantically during those times, but ultimately what resulted was a pleasant friendship, and I was able to get to know her a little more. Because I offered to pick her up to carpool once, I met her hulking and intimidating father – someone who could scientifically never beget a girl so thin and soft, unless of course you happened to have a crush on her. I was able to introduce her to my respite client Willy, who I had been working with for six years. He has Down syndrome, and is the most positive, jovial character I have ever met, and is also a great flatterer of women. As a result, he is a terrific wingman and he built up Jess's confidence by showering her with compliments about her hair and her clothes, all the while propping up my

qualities as he laughed hysterically at my jokes and antics. I invited Jess to bonfires and movies with friends, and if she happened to sit by me I would be convinced that she was in love with me. Henry, Martha, Jess, and I formed a closer group of four and we went to restaurants and sports games, and had movie nights together. I learned a bit about her family and her interests and was immensely attracted to her when I heard her speaking Low German on the phone with her dad. I had always found bilingualism sexy, , and I imagined her speaking Low German to my impressed dad.

If I learned things about Jess I didn't love, I ignored them or explained them away. On one night, I had invited a group over to have a bonfire, and a rabbit that certainly didn't belong to my family ran across our yard before our dog attacked it. I chased my dog away, and gently carried the rabbit over to the group. Jess asked to hold it and said she could bring it home, where her family had a place for it.

“What are you talking about, Jess?” Henry said incredulously. “You hate animals!”

“Well, I like this one,” she said as she stroked its soft fur while it calmly sat on her lap.

*She hates animals? Who hates animals!* But I reconsidered, hoping that perhaps if this were true, she was caring for this rabbit to impress me. And if that was the case, perhaps she would turn into an animal lover

later on. Jess was so sweet; there was no way that she could live her life as an animal hater.

I learned a small amount about her hobbies and interests. When I invited her to go laser tagging with a group of my friends, she told me she couldn't come out that night as she and her younger brother were on the cusp of beating Super Mario Bros. When we watched a DC superhero movie, she voiced her displeasure at the movie not following the archetype of the comics she had read. She was a bonafide geek, I realized, much like I was. Best of all, she invited me one night to watch a movie with her and Martha at her house. I asked which movie she was watching, and she told me she had started watching *The Lord of the Rings* and was in love with the movies. She asked me if I had watched them and what I thought about them. "I think I've found the one," I texted Tim that night.

I enjoyed hanging out with her. She was becoming more comfortable hanging out with me and also the friends that often accompanied me, and so she was beginning to open up more. But she still carried that ever-present air of mystery and never revealed too much of herself to me. Her meekness was endearing and her warm smile was etched in my memory when I was not with her. I thought that if having Jess as a close friend was the height of my relationship with her, then she would forever be a positive presence in my life. Yet I knew when being honest with myself that our destiny was not to be close friends. My feelings towards her were not those of a friend, and I knew that our relationship would change, one way or another.

“I... just kinda like the way her voice sounds,” I told Henry one day. We were sitting on the patio of a pizza place in Milwaukee. I had just finished school, and Henry and I had decided to take a trip around the Great Lakes to celebrate and to share some quality time together before he left for India.

“Yeah, I think she gets that raspy sound from smoking,” he told me, pulling a slice of pizza from the box in front of us.

“Smoking?! I have never seen her smoke!” I was astounded he would say such a thing.

“Well, she smoked a cigarette in New York,” he said, shrugging.

“How many cigarettes does it take to change your voice?”

“I have no idea. I don’t know, maybe it was just once, but it looked like she knew what she was doing.”

I thought for a moment. “Well, who doesn’t love a bad girl?” I said, smiling. Henry laughed.

“That’s certainly true.” He finished the slice he was working on. “I’m going to run to the bathroom.”

He got up and headed into the building. The sun was setting on the patio, and I was left considering the

ramifications of potentially dating a smoker. My dad had smoked before he dated my mom, but he stopped for her. Should I expect the same from her? Would I be forcing her to change? As I thought about this, my focus shifted to a middle-aged couple who had been eating across from one another when we had first gotten to our table. By now they were sitting next to one another at their table facing the sunset, having a conversation that I couldn't make out. He leaned back in his chair as she assumed a relaxed posture leaning on the table, sipping a glass of wine. I got the sense that this was a date night they were having, away from their children. They really seemed to be indulging in one another's company, seeming to have no other interest or distraction outside of each other. I watched them quietly, feeling that they knew the secret to long-lasting love, and perhaps I could learn it if I only watched them long enough. He spoke at length about something, waving his hands as she watched him wide-eyed, seemingly enthralled by his story. Henry then came back and sat at our table.

“So, I've got these tickets to some fancy dinner fundraiser from Big Brothers,” I said. “They gave me a pair for helping out last year.”

“Right.”

“I just wanted to make absolutely sure. You wouldn't mind if I asked Jess to go with me, right? Or like, what do you think?”

“What do I think? I think you’d better! My two best friends?” Henry was beaming. “Nothing would make me happier.”

I laughed quietly to myself. “Okay. Maybe I will then. Just for you.”

As soon as we arrived home, it was time for Henry to leave for India. He had to be taken to an airport in Toronto, which was a four-hour drive away, and he asked me to drive him there along with Jess and Martha. We arrived at the airport late in the evening and hugged and said goodbye – it would be several months before I saw him again. He was a great friend, and even outside of the connection he had cultivated between Jess and me, I knew I would miss him. Martha and Jess had to work the next morning, so I told them I could drive if they wanted to sit in the back to get some sleep on the ride home.

I started driving, but my eyelids were heavy and I pulled up at the nearest coffee shop. I came out with a giant cup, and when I got inside, Jess was in the passenger seat. She had a kind smile as she curled herself into her seat with a blanket she had brought along. “I’ll help keep you awake, if you want.”

I was flattered. “That’s really nice. Don’t you have to work tomorrow? I’m happy to taxi drive.”

“Sleep is overrated. Here.” She started flipping channels on the radio. “What kind of music do you like?”

“Maybe like, folky music? Do you know The Lumineers?”

“I like them!” She flipped off the radio and took out her phone and started playing their album. “Are you sure this won’t put you to sleep? It’s pretty relaxing.”

“Nah, this is nice.”

“Well I’m happy if you’re happy. So what should we talk about?”

“Hmm. Well Jess, I think you have some explaining to do. Henry told me some pretty compromising information about you.”

She giggled. “Oh boy.”

“What’s this business about you smoking cigarettes in New York?”

She gasped. “It was one time! It was a tough time in my life!”

“Well, then, I guess we’ve found what we’re going to talk about.”

We talked the entire way home that night while Martha slept soundly in the back. Jess told me about the difficult year she had been having, much of it stemming from a toxic relationship she’d been in during the previous year, which resulted in rumours, lies, and a lot of hurt feelings. She told me her trip to New York had been absolutely needed as she was able to get away from all of the negativity that was surrounding her at home. I

told her about my road trip across America that had also come during a difficult time in my life, and how it brought some level of healing. We went on to talk about music and TV shows, and she discussed her love for the movie *Blood Diamond*, as she said it opened her eyes to the violence and cruelty that had been a consistent presence in African history, which she told me was often the result of Western greed. She asked me about what my future plans were now that I was done school, and I told her about a job I had applied to in the city working with homeless men – something I had been hoping to do for the past several years.

“That’s really cool!” she said excitedly as we continued our drive down the dark highway. “I think that’s a great goal to have. What made you want to do that?”

“Well, I guess I’m like you and I want to be able to help people. Or maybe I just want to look like I do,” I said.

“Well, that’s not so bad, I’m actually just doing nursing for the money,” she replied wryly.

“How’s that going? Have you heard back yet?”

“I have. I accepted last week.”

“Well, congratulations!” I waited a moment, but then spoke the question I knew I couldn’t wait any longer to be answered. “So where are you going in the fall then?”

“I’m going to Windsor. I just didn’t want to move away. It costs too much and I just didn’t want to move away from my family.”

I was deeply pleased to hear this news, and proud of myself for not losing sleep over it in the previous months. Maybe things work out better if you let them run their course, I thought. “Staying local isn’t all bad. Plus you get to keep all the friends you worked so hard to make your whole life.” I looked at her with all the sincerity I could muster. “And this way you can still hang out with me!”

“Perfect!” she said with a laugh. “Maybe that’s the whole reason I chose it.” I knew it wasn’t true, but I wished that it was.

“Have you applied for scholarships? I don’t mean to brag, but some call me the Scholarship King. I made it through school by asking people for money.”

“Who *hasn’t* heard of the Scholarship King?” she said sarcastically. “I haven’t applied to anything -- I don’t really know where to look. I have just been working like crazy to try to save enough money.” She looked at me with apprehension. “School is a little overwhelming to me. I don’t have any friends or family that have gone to university. So I’ve just been working twelve or thirteen hours a day to get ready. I haven’t had a social life. I hardly ever go out. I can’t even respond to text messages.” As she said this, she took out her phone and scrolled through a long list of unanswered

text messages. It made me feel better that she seldom texted me.

I laughed, accusing her. “Hey! You weren’t working today!”

She shrugged. “Texting stresses me out.”

“Well, you probably don’t need to be working that much. There are other ways to help pay for school. I don’t know much, but I do know how to get through school without a lot of money.” I looked at her and tried my best to convey that I cared about her concerns. “I guess just feel free to ask if you have any questions.” I then attempted what I considered flirtatious ribbing. “That is, if texting me those questions doesn’t stress you out too much.”

She scoffed at this. “Hey, it’s just that I find talking in real life easier, you know?” She then looked at me warmly. “But I appreciate you saying that. I will be sure to do that.”

We drove the rest of the way with gentle music playing over the rest of our soft, late night conversation. It was well past midnight by the time we arrived at her house, and I looked over at her curled up under her blanket, her arm leaning on the door and resting her head in her hand.

“I really appreciate you staying up with me,” I said as I turned off the ignition. “Not sure what I would’ve done without you.” She smiled back at me without moving, so I continued. “I’m glad I had

someone so smart and interesting to share the drive home with.”

“It was my pleasure,” she said, starting to uncurl her body. “Well, I guess I should wake up Martha now.” We both chuckled, as she was still fast asleep. She roused Martha awake, and the two began walking inside. “Goodnight, Joe,” she said. “Sleep tight.”

“Goodnight, Jess. Sweet dreams.”

In the week that followed, I interviewed and received an offer at the Salvation Army Men’s Homeless Centre. Yet despite accepting an offer for my dream job, it still felt like the second most important thing that was going on in my life that week. I was losing sleep, but it wasn’t replaying my interview in my head, nor picturing my first day of work. I no longer felt any conflict in how I felt towards Jess, and I felt that if I asked her on a date, she would probably say yes. Yet it all somehow felt too quick, or even too good to be true. I felt certain that if I got to know her more, I would discover her flaws and would have to deal with another eventual breakup. Or maybe I would simply discover that she wasn’t perfect like I thought, and everything would be a letdown. Maybe I shouldn’t make a move quite yet.

*This is crazy*, I thought. I knew what I wanted, and I knew this was something I should do. She was an angel. She seemed so reasonable and so relaxed that even if issues arose, they could be worked out. She was thoughtful, intelligent, and had real beliefs. And beyond that, she was beautiful.

I walked into the kitchen where my mom was preparing dinner. “So, Mom, I have these tickets to that fundraising dinner I was talking about.”

“Uh huh,” she said, scurrying around without lifting her glance.

“What do you think I should do with them? Should I ask someone to go with me?”

She stopped working and looked at me sternly. “Oh, Joe. Just ask her to go. I haven’t been talking to you about this because I don’t want you getting all worked up. But you two could be a *good match*.” I was slightly disappointed that my mom had been reading me so well these previous weeks. I thought I had revealed nothing of my feelings for Jess, yet my mom knew the very desires of my heart.

“But what about her age?” I asked, really only hoping for confirmation by that point.

“You know it doesn’t matter. She is mature for her age, and you are immature for yours. In five years, nobody would remember that you are a different age anyways.”

“Right.” I nodded and silently left the room, and my mom resumed her work.

I devised a plan in which I would see her, and hopefully get her alone and ask her to go with me. The event was the next Thursday, and the coming weekend was the only time I might potentially see her. But that

weekend came and there was no sign of her. I worried that I had missed my chance, and because of my hesitation she was now interested in someone else whom she was probably hanging out with all weekend. I had my first day at the shelter that Monday, and I thought maybe I should just forget the whole thing and focus on my job. How would I even see her in person by Thursday? But by Tuesday I had again come to my senses, and realized that I had to act quickly, as it was becoming increasingly inconsiderate to ask someone to make arrangements for a dinner with so little notice. I swallowed my pride and decided I could just text her. I decided it was better that way – I would try to sound casual and ask her to come as a friend. That way, if she told me no, I could play it off as if it wasn't a big deal.

I sat in my car in the parking lot after work and carefully crafted my message. “Hey Jess, I’ve had a question that I wanted to talk to you about, but these last couple of days have been a whirlwind so text is the best I can do. I got two tickets to this fancy fundraising dinner from Big Brothers. I was wondering if you’d like to be my plus one? It’s Thursday night, which I know is short notice, but I think it would be a lot of fun if you were able to make it!” I added a smiley face for good measure.

A peace came over me after I hit send. I put my phone in my pocket and promised myself I wouldn't check for a response until I got home and would try not to think about it during my hour-long commute. I changed my mind fifteen minutes later when I heard my phone buzzing.

“Hey Joe! No worries, text is just fine. Yes, I’d love to!”

## Chapter 9

As the dinner that night was formal, I had no trouble finding my outfit. I owned one dress shirt, one tie and one pair of dress shoes. I looked in the mirror and blew the smoke from my invisible guns. I was apprehensive as I drove to her house, but I wasn’t truly nervous. I had always felt comfortable around Jess, and this felt like an extension of our friendship in some ways.

As I arrived at her house, a woman who was Jess’s exact double, though older, was cleaning out her car. She was thin with gentle features. *If this is Jess in two decades, she’ll look great.* Then I thought about how silly my reaction was. We hadn’t even been on one date, and I was thinking of how she’d look in her forties. “Hey, I’m Joe. I am here to pick up Jess, is she around?”

Her mom smiled cordially. “She’s just finishing getting ready. She’ll be out soon.”

“Are you Joe?” I looked down at a young girl, about six or seven with bright blonde hair.

“I am. And what’s your name?”

“I’m Rachel. Do you want to see Thumper?”

“See who?”

“Jess said she got Thumper from your house. He’s in the back, do you want to see him?”

“Oh, right! The rabbit, I forgot about him. That’s a good name. Let’s go see how he’s doing.” As I walked back and saw the pen that the rabbits were in, Rachel explained that one rabbit’s head had been crushed during the making of the pen.

“Oh, my,” I said. “Well, I guess he’s in bunny heaven now.” I knew Jess had younger siblings from conversations we had had, but I hadn’t met any. I figured that befriending her younger siblings would have to be a priority, but didn’t have a lot of experience with children this age. Luckily, Jess emerged from her house. She was stunning. I had never seen her in formal clothing before, besides in the pictures from New York. She was wearing the same black dress she had worn in those pictures, and she had her long, strawberry-blonde hair in big, loose curls.

“Ready to go?” she asked.

“Ready if you are.”

We drove out to the city, but by the time we arrived we ran into a problem I had failed to consider. The dinner was at a casino, and Jess was not yet the legal

age to enter one. “Well we’re all dressed up now,” I told her. “If they don’t let us in, we can find something else to do on this fine Thursday evening.”

“Sorry about that,” she said, grimacing.

“I hope you’re not apologizing for your age,” I responded. “If anything this is my fault.”

We walked to the casino and explained our situation to the security guard. He said it was fine, and that we just had to go to the front entrance, go through the events corridor, show our tickets to casino personnel there, and then take a right to the dining hall. “Great,” I said. As soon as Jess and I left him, I told her I hadn’t caught a word of that and we would be lost all night.

“It’s fine, I think I know where to go,” she told me with confidence. “Look at me, Joe, *I’m the captain now*,” she added with a poor accent, quoting the movie *Captain Phillips*.

She did guide us there successfully, and showed a lot of confidence I had hitherto not seen from her. She happily let herself be introduced to my old coworkers from Big Brothers Big Sisters, and often led the way as we walked around the fundraising area, taking food from the booths of local restaurants who had prepared the small, elegant dishes for the night. But as the night went on, I sensed that she was wearing out from all the activity. I had learned from having introverted sisters that some people simply run out of social energy after being among people all night.

“You want to go get some air?” I asked.

“That would be nice.”

We walked outside to the Detroit River. We were in downtown Windsor and the city was beautiful at night. Jess asked if I thought it was okay if she took off her heels as we walked to the river. “Of course! Whatever is comfortable,” I told her. We arrived, and leaned up against the railing along the river, looking across to the Detroit skyline. As it was late evening on a weekday, we were essentially alone.

“Thanks for taking charge out there. I’m terrible at these types of things,” I said.

“What do you mean? You were great with introducing me and all, made me a lot more comfortable than I thought I would be.”

“Well, either way, I’m glad you were the captain. Even just because now I can say I helped empower a woman,” I said with a wink.

Jess laughed. “I’ve never heard a guy say he wanted to do that.”

“What? Do you know what year it is?”

Jess laughed again, but her voice had a hint of sadness. “Well, I’ve always felt strongly about that, but I guess most of the guys I’ve known haven’t exactly been progressive.” I decided to say nothing, but instead

nodded in agreement and looked back over the river. It was truly beautiful, and I wanted to cherish the moment.

As we drove home, I rehearsed in my head how I would ask her on a second date. Because I'd been unclear to her about the nature of this one, I knew I now had to make it abundantly clear what my purposes were. I felt bad that I had likely been keeping her in the dark, and hoped she understood that she'd been more than a casual plus-one to me. As we arrived at her house, I told her I would walk her to her door.

"Thanks for inviting me out to this," she said as we arrived at her door. "I had a lot of fun getting dressed up and eating fancy food all night." Her smile melted me.

"I had fun too, I'm glad you were able to make it out on such short notice." She nodded and smiled. Finally, I cleared my throat and spoke. "Hey, um. I was wondering, would you want to do something like this again? Like I mean, just go out again, just the two of us?" I had a difficult time getting the words out. I realized there was a reason I relied on text messages so often.

Jess grinned joyfully. "Yeah, I'd really like that."

Dating Jess was a revelation. On our second date, I planned on taking her to an art fair, but when we arrived it was completely rained out. So she told me she

had a plan, if I was okay following her lead again. I told her nothing would please me more, especially because I really didn't have a contingency plan. She took me to an arcade, and we played games together until late into the night.

The following week, we went to an ice cream parlour, and Jess told me this one was on her. "Hold up, you're going to be a student!" I told her.

"Well you're the one who has to pay off his student loans," she reasoned, as she handed the cashier her money.

Later on, we sat together on the beach and watched the sun go down over the lake. We talked for hours as dusk turned to dark and a warm breeze blew across our faces. Before we got up, I asked Jess if she'd like to be my girlfriend, and she said she would.

"Does that mean we can hold hands on the beach?" I asked. She nodded and took my hand as we walked back to my car. When I dropped her off, I asked her permission to kiss her goodnight, and we shared our first, incredibly awkward kiss. "Sorry, I've never been much good at this."

"Well that's good, now I don't feel intimidated," she said. "It's been a while for me, and I didn't want to feel embarrassed as I got caught back up to speed. We can get better together."

My graduation ceremony came shortly after Jess and I became a couple, and I invited her to attend along

with my mom. After the ceremony, my mom took pictures of me in my graduation gown with my arm around Jess. It was a stark contrast to my undergraduate ceremony. I had someone I liked along with me to celebrate. I felt self-assured and confident as I strutted across the stage.

“How was it sitting with Jess today at the ceremony?” I asked my mom that night when we got home.

“It was great! We talked through the whole thing, and she made it a lot less boring for me. Hardly remembered to take a picture of you walking across the stage.” I laughed, and my mom turned to look at me critically. “She’s a sweet girl, Joe. Try not to mess it up.”

It would have been difficult to mess up, especially during the first months. It was the true honeymoon stage. We never argued and all our plans went seamlessly. Jess warned me that if I got to know her, I would find out how crazy she was. I laughed and told her she was the most sane person I had ever met. She was terrific. She was tender and caring and she liked me. We would sit by each other at the movies and she would squeeze my arm and rest her head on my shoulder.

She surprised me in a lot of ways as a girlfriend. She insisted on paying half for every bill we incurred, even when I tried to take it before she could see it. I was working full time and salaried while living at home, so

my financial situation was perfectly stable and I could handle picking up cheques. But Jess told me it was a point of pride, at least during the summer before school, and so I didn't argue the point. She would thank me for taking her out when I dropped her off after every date. She got along with my group of friends, and later when I introduced her to my family, my gaggle of introverted bookworm sisters loved her. My dad would speak Low German to her and ask her questions about Mexico, where she had gone back to see family every year during her teen years.

During the summer, she told me she was looking to buy a car, as her dad's old truck was falling apart and would not reliably get her to school and back come fall. She asked if I could accompany her to go see a car she was interested in, and after having traumatic flashbacks, I agreed. We drove out to the city, where on the side of a street, she pointed out the car she had seen in pictures. "What do you think? He said it was in great shape on the phone..."

It was a black Honda Civic, nearly two decades old. It had no noticeable rust, but it had dings and dents, suggesting it had taken someone to work and back many times over the years. It had no shiny rims and the tint on the windows was peeling off. It was nearly the same car I had had in high school that lasted well into my years in university, which I replaced only after I drove it into a tree.

"It's beautiful," I told her.

Although she was quiet and often guarded, I loved learning about her. Not only was she a passionate advocate of nonviolence, but she was also sensitive towards the subject of mental health. She told me that she had a friend who had gone through a difficult time and ended up in the hospital, and she had visited her often. After her friend got out, the two met daily and talked. Her loyalty impressed me.

Her parents were born in Mexico, but unlike my parents, they also lived there until they were adults and had only moved to Canada just before getting married. For this reason, they retained parts of Mexican culture, and would throw fiesta-type parties nearly every weekend during the summer, having guests over past midnight while her dad made carne asada on the barbeque and listened to mariachi. I grew respect for the large, quiet man who I soon referred to as The Godfather for his reserved yet measured personality and successful business endeavors.

As that magical summer continued, it was time to plan Jess's birthday. She was turning 19, the age when most Canadians order their first legal drink. I organized a day trip to Pelee Island, just a short ferry trip from our town, an idyllic island known for its winery. We rode our bikes around the island, and then proceeded on to a wine tour and tasting. I have always detested the taste of wine, and I told her I felt I was in an episode of Fear Factor having to drink them. She took my glass and turned up the bottom on all the ones I couldn't finish.

“I’m getting the feeling this isn’t the first time you’ve done this,” I told her.

She laughed. “Like I said, I went through a difficult time before.” She drained a glass of cabernet.

We drove our bikes around the island looking for a secluded spot where we could relax and watch the sun go down before our ferry came back later in the evening. We set our blanket down on a beach and I laid down in exhaustion. Jess sat criss cross beside me, and patted her lap, signalling for me to rest my head in it. I did, and looked up squinting, as her smiling face was the only thing blocking the sun.

“This is the best birthday I’ve ever had,” she said, running her fingers through my hair.

“Well, you must have very low standards.”

“No, I’m serious. You treat me so well; I never dreamed of doing things like this.” We were silent for a while, both taking in the moment. Hot, summer air blew over the water. She wore a subtle perfume and I thought it was pleasant just to be able to be close enough to smell it. She lifted my head from off her lap.

“I want to swim,” she said, starting to stand up.

“Do you have something to change into?”

“We can dry off in the sun.” She ran into the water, still wearing the shorts and tank top she had on. She went waist-deep into the water and splashed

warm water on me. “You won’t make me swim alone, will you?” I ran in after her and dove into the lake, coming up by her side. She took me by my soaked shirt and pulled me up to her warm body, damp from sweat and lake water, and kissed me. I felt the back of her neck, and played with her long hair that was made frizzy by the humid air. I kissed her back. She giggled, and then pointed behind me to the ferry that was sailing towards us in the distance.

“Maybe we should get out now,” she said. “Not sure we can board dripping wet.”

We boarded and went to the top level where we could dry off outside under the fading sun. I sat on a chair near the edge of the boat, completely spent from biking all day. Jess leaned on the railing watching the lake turn different colours as the sun went down. She put her hair in a braid, then put on a cap, lowering the brim over her eyes to block the sun. I watched her silhouette from my seat and knew for the first time that I was in love.

I told her as much in the months that followed. That summer was the best period of time in my life. I had finished school and was working a job I was passionate about. I got to spend my evenings and weekends with a delightful girl who put as much effort into our relationship as I did. We spent late summer nights up with friends, going to the beach and eating on patios. Jess and I even watched my favorite basketball player, LeBron James, win a championship for Cleveland. Some weekends I would set out a blanket

and make a bonfire and sing songs for her while I played the guitar.

On one of those weekends, late in the summer, I told her about my feelings for her, and a few tears rolled down her cheeks as she hugged me and told me she loved me too. In only a few months, we were significantly immersed in one another's lives. I became friends with her younger brother and we played video games together. I went camping with her family at the end of summer and I helped her dad prepare food, standing at his side while he worked the grill. At night I shared a bunk bed with her two younger brothers. She became one with my group of sisters, and they began inviting her out to trips they took with my mom. She and my youngest sister Rebecca clicked and became close friends quickly, bonding over their similar tastes in movies and books, and sharing the same self-deprecating sense of humor. She began to adopt many of my interests, beliefs, and hobbies, and I began to adopt some of hers. She would listen to The Lumineers while I read her old comic books.

It was the summer I always wanted. I was able to fully embrace romance and spend time doing the things I loved with the person I loved. I was initially apprehensive when planning dates that were similar in style to the ones I had planned with Miranda because of the poor end-result of that relationship. Yet as time went on, apprehension turned to delight with every music festival I could enjoy with Jess and every theatre performance she looked forward to. I had met the match I needed. She was moderate and caring, and she either

shared my interests or was open to the interests that she didn't share. Further, she complemented my strong-headedness and stubbornness by being relaxed and selfless, yet never hesitated to share her feelings or concerns when I became too laser-focused on my own interests. I knew that there was potential in our future together.

Challenges began to arise as fall arrived. Jess was in nursing school, and the time she could afford to spend with me became more limited, and sometimes I took it personally, as if the lustre of our relationship was wearing off. We would see each other on weekends, yet when we did I could tell she wanted to be at home with her textbooks. She told me she had never reacted well to stress, and reminded me that I was going to find out that she was crazy now that summer was over and she would be dealing with deadlines and impending test dates. I again told her I didn't believe her, or, moreover, I wouldn't change my mind about her if it was true.

Most of the time, I was able to be a good boyfriend and make her tea or rub her shoulders during her extended study sessions. But this wasn't always true, and our first real arguments began to arise. She would spend her weekends studying, and I would accuse her of not putting enough effort into our relationship and argue that she wasn't prioritizing me. She would tell me that studying during busy times was the only way of alleviating her anxiety, and I would tell her that if she wanted to improve her mental health, she should take proper steps or it would be a long four years. Still, nothing serious ever came of these arguments. We

would apologize to one another by the end of the day and be at peace. There were never any deep-rooted philosophical issues at odds with one another, and I knew that my issues mostly arose from a desire to be wanted and needed, which were my own to deal with and not hers.

In the fall, I took some time off work to meet Henry in India and travel through the country for a few weeks. It was the most time I had spent away from Jess since meeting her, and although I loved my experience in India with Henry, I missed her. I missed seeing her bright face and texting her about the stories I had from the shelter. I was able to connect to the internet some days, and I would send her pictures of the places we were seeing. I told her that I couldn't wait to travel with her some day, and that I bet she'd make a great travel companion. She told me she was jealous and joked that I'd never be allowed to have such an exciting experience without her again.

While Henry and I were sitting on a bunk together on an overnight train, I told him that I was going to marry her. I told him that even though it had been a few short months of getting to know her, I knew we were compatible and that we were a great match. I expected Henry to laugh at me and tell me to give it some time to actually get to know her, but he just told me that he felt the same about us.

“Besides, if you break up, I'll have to take a side and you know I won't be able to do that,” he stated.

I went up to my bunk on the train to get some sleep. I looked out the window and saw the rolling mountains of Northern India, visible in the cloudless night. I reflected on how Jess was truly my best friend. I wanted her to be sitting beside me, appreciating the beautiful landscape. I wanted to be in her presence, even if she was only reading or scrolling on her phone. She was the first one I went to with good news so we could celebrate, or with bad news so she could comfort me. I took out a pad and paper and tried my hand at writing her a poem, thinking that writing it on a night train across the world would add significance, even if I would be seeing her in a week.

By the time we had been dating for a year we had settled into a less dramatic but entirely stable relationship. We still did some exciting things – we spent her Reading Week in Montreal with friends, and even saw The Lumineers together in concert. On my birthday, Jess bought us tickets to a basketball game that got cancelled, and so she told me we were going to get into my car and drive for a long time until we got to some small town where we could spend the day. We drove for three hours and stopped at a port town where we had lunch at a small diner, and then hiked a trail that eventually overlooked Lake Erie. I stood there and I wrapped my arms around her waist as we watched the glimmering lake. For the first time, we talked about what it would look like if we got married. It was the most special birthday of my life.

Aside from this, most weekends were spent hanging out at her house, watching old seasons of *Smallville*, or reading books at the same table she was studying on. We bickered sometimes, but we had a stable foundation. It was needed, because that year things started to change.

Late in the spring, I developed a condition of light-headedness that has truly never ceased since. Whether it was triggered by stress or a physical ailment has never been known. As Jess was involved in the medical field, she encouraged me to seek medical testing, which I did. I tried everything – scans, bloodwork, specialists, therapy, naturopathy, and massage, with appointments multiple times a week. I took the advice of every well-meaning coworker and relative or anyone else who had any ideas. I did deep breathing and meditation and reduced my phone time and my time in my car. Nothing seemed to help, and my frustration grew and Jess often bore the brunt. I had little motivation to leave the house and I was typically miserable. I had a difficult time focusing on things while the edges of my vision faded, and every happy occasion was tainted by the fact that my vision blurred off and on and I felt I could collapse if I only let my muscles relax. I was often worried it was something serious, and Jess was too. Negative test results and the passing of time helped put my worry at ease, but my frustration grew with every month where nothing changed and every would-be special day was ruined by me wanting to retire to my couch early.

Jess was typically sympathetic, but I knew the added stress of having a miserable boyfriend was burdensome. Sometimes she would tell me it might simply be the case that I would have to deal with some level of light-headedness all my life, and that I should learn to cope with it. She would tell me about patients she met at the hospital who had it worse. But she told me she would be with me through it all and understood how difficult it was for me. I would snap at her and tell her I would never give up on my health, and object that I deserved to be happy. Then I would cry and bury my face in her shoulder and apologize, telling her she deserved to have a boyfriend who didn't have these issues and who could just have a normal relationship with her.

Perhaps with these added stressors, and with the rising intensity of her studies, Jess's mental health also began deteriorating. She spent more time crying when overwhelmed by schoolwork. She began worrying more about her accumulating debt, and wondered if she would even be able to handle the twelve-hour shifts that her line of work would require. She had always had a predisposition towards worrying about the needs of others, and the more she learned about disease and life-altering conditions, the more she worried about her loved ones, bordering on paranoia. Our time together was often riddled with arguments about small things, often just the bubbling up of both of our general frustrations.

As we sat together in her room one night, I asked a question that I had been considering. "What's been getting into us? Are we unhealthy for each other, do you

think?” I wasn’t serious in my tone, but I was concerned that our lives were now trending in the opposite direction as the summer previous.

“What do you mean?” she asked with a tone more serious than mine.

“Well, I mean, you sure seemed happier when I first met you. Did I ruin your happiness?”

“Are you kidding me?” She looked offended. “I was a mess when I met you. I was just better at hiding it back then. I didn’t want you to know how crazy I was right away.”

“And now that you know I’m crazy, you’re more open about it?” I joked.

“Yeah.”

“I wasn’t being serious. You’re not crazy.”

“No, I know I am. And yeah, part of me is happy that I know about your problems.”

“Why?”

She faced me and spoke with sadness. “You don’t know what it’s like. I got treated like shit by my past boyfriends. I was in a bad place. I was not helping myself. And then this guy comes along, pretty much perfect, and has interest in me?”

“You’re talking like that’s a bad thing.” I said.

“No, it was great! You were really awesome. But you had a Master’s degree, your sisters had Master’s degrees. You all talked with big words and had these beliefs.” Her eyes began welling up, and she continued. “And I was some stupid teenager who could only get the attention of douche guys. Nobody I knew had been to university, and I was intimidated if I just went to your house.”

“Well I wanted you, so why does all that other stuff matter?”

“It matters, Joe. You dated girls who were prettier than me and more popular. How was I supposed to live up to that? I felt inferior when I went out with you, like you just chose me as your project or something, and how was I supposed to say no to you?”

“Well, jeez, if you wanted to say no, you could have, and you could have gone back to dating whoever you wanted.”

“No, I liked you, and I wanted to date you. You don’t understand.” A few tears started rolling down her cheek.

I was angry that she was ungrateful for my being a good boyfriend, and so I wanted to shout an angry response. But I said nothing, and as I cooled down, I reflected on what she’d said. By bringing up my previous relationship, I was reminded of my same feelings of inferiority and how I felt powerless. I wondered if I had been taking advantage of the power

dynamic in this relationship, as Jess had always agreed to take on more of my life than I had of hers.

“Well, look,” I said, wanting to apologize but not knowing how. “She dumped me, okay? So maybe I’m not really a catch.” She didn’t look up towards me. “Also, you’re way prettier than she is, even if you don’t think it.”

“You don’t have to quote boyband lyrics to me,” she said with a quiet smile.

“No, I’m serious, you are. You would be getting a lot more attention if you went looking for it, you know. You’re hot stuff.” She laughed lightly but didn’t say anything. “So what, now that I’ve got these problems, you like me more?” I asked.

“You know, when I kept meeting my friend after she was out of the hospital, it may not have been as selfless as you think. I met her because she made me feel normal. We could talk about our problems, and I was talking to someone who actually understood me.”

“I see. And now you feel like I understand you more?”

“Well, kind of, I guess. But now I just feel like I can cry in front of you and be myself, and I don’t have to worry as much because your brain isn’t always treating you perfectly, either.” She wiped a tear with her sleeve.

I understood this. And I felt tremendous comfort knowing that Jess was not the type to abandon me if I

couldn't keep it all together for her at all times. She was loyal and she understood someone going through a difficult time.

“Well, if our brains aren't going to be nice to us, I guess we'll have to make up for it with each other.”

I would like to say that's where the healing for both of us began, but I would be naïve to attribute change to one conversation. We began to understand each other on a deeper level, and tried to accommodate one another accordingly. We were still both hurting, but things gradually improved. Jess would be understanding if I didn't want to leave the house on a day where my light-headedness was bad. I would attempt to help her feel more confident and affirm her worth, especially her worth to me in our relationship. As time went on, I became more accustomed to her school schedule and sources of stress, and did my best to alleviate those. So long as I didn't pressure her to make more time for me and I let her study in peace, we both got along better. I helped her study her material and spent time with her that way. Not only was she my best friend, but she was my solace during hard days.

We continued to have a lot of good days together, even if it was different. We were able to go out to concerts and baseball games, and spent a lot of time in cafes, both with our books, having reading dates. We would go out with friends and on double dates. On some nights when I didn't feel well, we would return to one of our houses and relax and watch a movie. On nights

when I felt better, I told Jess that we had to take advantage of it and stay out until the middle of the night, and she happily obliged. We had each other as dates to the countless weddings for our friends who were all getting married. To one of these weddings, Jess wore the same black dress she wore on our first date, and I commented that the feel of the material surprised me. I realized I hadn't touched her in any way during our first date and we laughed about it. As I watched Jess do her cute shimmy on the dance floor, I began wondering what our wedding day might look like.

We started talking about marriage again, mostly in a theoretical and whimsical fashion. There was always some hint of seriousness, but more a sense of inevitability, that marriage would one day be the natural outcome of our close bond. I would suggest that perhaps once she finished school or once I had saved enough to purchase a house then we could tie the knot. She responded by telling me that she knew about my long-term plans of getting close to her so that one day I could murder her in her sleep, and that by talking about marriage I was only showing my hand too obviously.

One night during that winter, we decided to drive around town just to get out of the house for a bit. We drove through the McDonald's drive-thru and got ice cream and sat in my car. As we ate, she held my hand and smiled at me. Her big eyes shone and we sat in silence for a while, licking our cones. I told her that this night was perfect and we should end it off by running away and getting married without telling anyone, and starting a new life together. She giggled and looked at

me and told me she hoped I was being serious because she was in.

“Yeah, well, unfortunately my parents would disown me,” I said.

“Mine too.” She looked down for a moment. “So we’ll have only them come along?”

“You’re being serious?”

“I mean, it doesn’t have to be *today*. But soon! And we should do it that way. Nobody has to know. It’s our day.”

“Do you think we’re ready?” Excitement was beginning to pour through me. I felt I was at a stage where I was ready for marriage, but had implicitly assumed it was still a few years away.

“I mean, what are we waiting for? We can make the money work, and besides, I won’t allow you to leave me at this point, so what difference does it make?” Jess held her palms up, insinuating that I wouldn’t have a choice in the matter. Her feigned force of will was endearing in the face of her usual meekness.

“Right! We’re young and in love, what are we waiting for?” I paused for a moment. “So you, in your mere twenty years of age, want to go and run off and get married? To me?”

“I hope this isn’t you proposing.”

“What, that wasn’t romantic enough?”

“You’ll have to step your game up a touch,” she said, and leaned over and kissed my cheek. “But yeah, why not? Let’s get married.”

## **Chapter 10**

We both talked to our parents about our plans, and to our surprise, they were okay with the idea. My parents’ only request was that we have our wedding officiated by a pastor that they were comfortable with, and Jess’s parents requested that the immediate families be invited to the ceremony. We felt these requests somewhat compromised the nature of our mission, but to earn our parents’ blessings we were happy to accommodate them. I was relieved that Jess’s parents felt okay with her getting married so young and while she was still in school, but then recalled that they themselves were two uneducated Mennonites who had only immigrated to Canada a year prior to getting married. I, on the other hand, was at least working a stable job and would have a fair amount of savings by the time our wedding day rolled around.

We began with some of the basic planning. It was not yet Christmas when we set out with our plan, and we decided we would have our ceremony in the spring so we could be married outdoors. Jess and I ordered a ring online, and I talked to the pastor I grew up with to ask if he would officiate the wedding. Jess and I wanted our marriage to be a surprise, so we made

anyone we told swear an oath of secrecy. We told a select few of our closest friends and they were mostly happy for us, yet a mutual feeling of sadness started to form. We all wanted the opportunity to celebrate together. We initially discussed how having them involved would defeat the purpose of having a small wedding, but also felt that we should just do things the way we wanted, even if that meant compromising our initial motives. We decided that we could have the best of both worlds by having a small, secret wedding ceremony, but then when we returned from our honeymoon, we could throw a party with our friends and family.

My initial priority was to actually propose to Jess. I knew that proposing to someone who had already agreed to marry me had no real purpose, but I felt that doing so was a sort of rite of passage that I needed to go through. Jess likely knew it was coming, so I wanted to make it as stealthy as possible, taking inspiration from Jim from *The Office*, who proposed to Pam in front of a convenience store. I visited Jess while she worked at her dad's Mexican variety store, which I did most nights she worked, and took her for a walk afterwards on the frozen beach – the same beach where I had asked her to be my girlfriend. Despite the significance, the beach was still one in which we had walked countless times, even in the winter. There I got on one knee, and showed her the necklace I bought in place of the ring she already had in her possession. She laughed and told me that she was in too deep now and couldn't say no. She hugged me and put on her necklace.

“Does everything feel different now?” I asked.

“Oh yes, I’m a *fiancée* now,” she responded, emphasizing the French accent.

As the holidays came, I got my sisters together and we told them about our plan, and they were ecstatic. Jess told me later that night that their positive reaction reassured her about our plan, and that she felt better knowing that they weren’t judging her for getting married so young. I spent the following days planning our wedding day, honeymoon, and party. I had done most of the planning up to that point as it was exam season for Jess, and she was happy to hand me the reins.

As the day began to approach, stress and anxiety began to build, but mostly for Jess. I was mostly relaxed about the entire idea. I was two years into my career and quite independent. I was the only child living in my parents’ home, and I knew it was time to move out; plus, the only way for a Mennonite to move out with their parents’ blessing is with a spouse. But Jess was twenty and the oldest child, meaning all of her younger siblings were living at home. She told me she hadn’t been a good enough older sister, and now she was leaving them and wouldn’t be able to watch them grow up. Further, she felt she wasn’t able to process her upcoming marriage with any of her friends since we were keeping it all a secret. I asked her if she wanted to change anything, but she told me it was too late now.

“I don’t want you to fix anything,” she said, “I just want to cry and complain, okay?”

Time moved at a slow pace while we waited for our big day. In the later part of winter, Jess and I travelled with my sisters to Toronto for a short vacation during Jess’s reading week. We had never travelled overnight alone, as doing so would be scandalous for a non-married couple, so we slept in separate rooms while there. We told each other it was the last time we would have to travel like this, and the next time would be our honeymoon. We felt we were just biding our time while we waited. It was an odd feeling. I felt that in many cases, marriage was something that just happens to people if they spend enough time together, and after that time is reached, it just happens organically. Yet perhaps as an outcome of belonging to my culture and having my beliefs, I wanted badly to be married and was becoming impatient. I wanted to live with Jess and see her every day and eat dinner together. I wanted to be able to see her in the morning and discuss our finances, and I wanted to have sex, which we had both committed to saving for after our wedding.

Jess continued to worry about our wedding day and told me she felt maybe she wasn’t ready. One night she even texted me, asking me if our plans really were set in stone. I began to get upset and took her questions personally, and I texted her back telling her that if she didn’t want to marry me then she should just say so. I told her that it must be nice being her, having all the reassurance she could get because I was excited for the wedding and wanted it to happen, meanwhile I was

getting married to someone who seemed to dread the day. I wanted her to feel bad, and told her that sometimes I needed reassurance too. She tried calling me, but I wanted to make a statement and didn't pick up. She texted me and told me she was driving to my house, and I immediately felt stupid for manipulating her and making her feel guilty enough to do so.

She got to my house and came into my room and hugged me, and we sat on my bed.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You know it has nothing to do with you. You've been perfect this whole time."

"No, look, I've been an idiot. I know you're stressed, I picked a bad time to have an argument."

She smiled and got down on one knee. She opened her hand and had a small circle of twine in her hand. "Joe, will you marry me?"

"What do you mean? What's this?"

"Well, like you said, *you* proposed to *me*; I knew you wanted to marry me." She stood up and took my hand. "And I want to marry you too, so now you know."

"You're sweet," I said, and kissed her forehead.

"So what's your answer?" she said.

I put the twine around my finger and inspected it. "I dunno. I was hoping for a bigger rock, to be honest with you."

When our big day finally arrived, we drove out with our respective families to a cottage I'd rented in the small town Jess and I had driven to the spring before. My family piled into my parents' minivan and I sat in the back attached to a small machine that sent small shockwaves into my neck. It was the latest idea for a solution to reduce my light-headedness that I knew wouldn't work, but it helped relax the butterflies. My sister Susanne turned around from the seat in front of me.

"How are you feeling? Nervous?"

"A little," I said, and leaned back in my seat with my eyes closed. "Not too bad. Nothing with Jess has ever made me too nervous. She's not exactly an intimidating presence, believe it or not."

"Do you know how she's doing?"

"Probably not good," I sighed. "She's been pretty nervous this whole time. Doesn't love the idea of leaving her family. I was taking it pretty personally for a while."

"Oh goodness," my sister said. "I was *the worst* on my wedding day. I didn't talk to John for at least three days before. I was so mean to him. He called me and texted me and I just didn't respond."

“Really? Why not? You didn’t feel ready?”

“No, I felt ready. I honestly have no idea. It was just such a big commitment, I guess? I really have no good reason. I was just being irrational.”

“That makes me feel a little better.”

“Jess sounds like she’s doing great. At her age, marrying a dork like you? I’d be running home right now if I were her.”

“Well, that might be the case,” I said.

My mom turned around from shotgun. “And she wasn’t the only one. Kathy nearly had a mental breakdown the day before marrying Ben,” she told me. “I guess all the boys don’t love their mothers like my girls do. My girls wanted to stay living at home.”

“That’s probably it,” I told her.

We arrived at the cottage and the weather was terrible. It was cloudy and there were hurricane winds about. We were the first family to arrive, and I took a walk around the backyard overlooking the lake where we wanted to have our ceremony. My dad suggested we do the ceremony behind a shed overlooking the lake to block the wind, instead of by the arch set up in the garden that was now blowing over. I agreed, and said we could talk to Jess about it. Her family arrived, and Jess walked into the cottage before I could see her so she could change. Consistent with her long-standing

thriftiness, her wedding dress was simply a white summer dress she had bought at the mall. I also had only bought a white shirt and dress pants the previous week. I went down to the lake alone to soak in my final moments as a single man. I waited for some profound realization to come to me, but all I could think about was whether we would be able to hear our pastor speak over the winds. My sister Kathleen came walking around that area with her daughter.

“Are you all ready to go? Should I be leaving you alone right now?”

“No, it’s all good, I was thinking I’d go get changed soon. Mom said you had a mental breakdown before your wedding?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” she said, watching her daughter climb the rocks around the lake.

“Well, I think I’m doing okay then,” I said. “Life isn’t even all that different when you’re married, right? Nothing to worry about.”

“No, it’s much different, believe me,” she responded. “I mean, I was the oldest, the first to leave home, so it might be different for you. It was a huge adjustment.”

“Oh.” I said.

“But it’s amazing. Getting married was awesome, the best thing that ever happened in my life. People always talk about what a challenge marriage

is, and it can be sometimes. You have to consistently work on it. But people never talk about how awesome it is. I was so much happier once I was married.” She smiled reassuringly. “Maybe you should get going though. Let’s get this show on the road.”

I stood at the lake with my pastor, and with our families standing behind the shed facing us, trying to get out of the wind. “You should turn around or something,” my pastor said. “I think she’s coming out of the house now.” I did so, and I could hear our families *ooh* and *ahh*, and I knew Jess had arrived. “Okay, I think you can turn back around now,” he said.

I turned around and saw Jess, her hair in deep curls and wearing bright red lipstick, her hand folded over a bouquet of flowers. I was reminded of our first date and how stunning she had looked then, and how she had only grown in beauty since that day. She smiled when our eyes met, but just then my niece began screaming and crying. She’d expected to help walk Jess down the “aisle” as her flower girl, and thought that it was too late now that we had seen each other. My sister tried to comfort her and tell her she could still walk down with Jess, but my niece just continued to wail. Jess walked up to me on her own, unaccompanied, and as she got to me the wind blew her hair into her face, and as she used a free hand to calm her hair, her skirt began to fly up.

“What a mess, huh?” I said, laughing.

“Who invited the party pooper?” she said, nodding towards my niece bawling behind us.

Our pastor began talking, but it was difficult for Jess and me, who were right in front of him, to hear anything over the raging wind. But he did his best to shout what he had prepared. Soon, however, the wind changed direction and instead of the shed blocking the wind, it began blowing onto us from over the open lake, and Jess’s skirt and hair again battled for her free hand’s attention. Soon her younger sister came and stood behind her, holding the skirt down. My pastor laughed at the absurdity of it all.

“You know what, why don’t we just move onto the vows?” he said. “If your family could come and huddle around, maybe they could hear it all and block the wind some.”

My family all huddled around us and I took out my paper, and said my generic vow that I had written myself the night before. Jess and I prepared more personal vows that we were going to read to one another that night, yet the significance of those standard vows, making a life-long commitment, impacted me in the moment. I felt like a medieval warrior swearing his knighthood, but in this case promising to love and protect and to never love another. Tears began forming and I started choking up, and I had a difficult time getting my words out. Jess then said her vows, perfectly composed. I smiled through tears at the end. “You were stone-cold about all that.” Our families laughed around us.

Finally we kissed and were pronounced husband and wife and we put on our rings. “Now, please,” my pastor joked, “let’s get out of this wind.”

There was an indoor patio with a pool where we ate and drank until it got dark. We took photos with our family members and I broke the news to the general public by posting some of the photos on social media. Our phones blew up with congratulatory messages, most of our friends completely shocked at the news. Jess’s dad, now my father-in-law, continued to grill Mexican steak until late in the evening, and our families, who at this point were familiar with one another, continued to mingle for some time. Finally Jess and I retired to our hotel outside of town beside the airport we’d be flying out of the following day.

We took out the vows we had prepared that night, and it did not take long until we were both in tears. I told her I would love her forever through thick and thin, and especially on days when her brain wasn’t being nice to her. She told me she would grow with me and be comforting when my head was in a fog. I told her that if she went vegetative, I would spoon feed her every day. She told me that if I died before her, she would always visit my grave and bring me gifts. I told her that if she committed a murder, I wouldn’t ask questions and would help her hide the body. She told me that if she was in an alternate universe where she married someone else, she would cheat on him and have sex with me. We cried, then hugged, and then cried some more, and then we went to bed.

Well, we did something else first, but as a rule Mennonites don't like to talk about that.

Jess has always had an adorable habit of vomiting when faced with high levels of either excitement or worry. Getting up at three a.m. to board a plane the day after making a life-long commitment seemed to be enough to trigger that reaction, and within an hour of the flight taking off, she had used both of our vomit bags.

"I'll head to the back and let the flight attendants know," I told her while rubbing her back. I ran to the back and informed them of our unfortunate situation. We were on our way to Vancouver, where we would be beginning a two-week long road trip along the west coast of both Canada and America, eventually ending up in Los Angeles, which after watching *La La Land* we determined was the most romantic place on earth.

The flight attendant arrived with a stack of vomit bags, a pack of chewing gum, a blanket and a can of ginger ale. "Where was your girlfriend sitting?"

"Oh, *my wife*," I said, filled with pride. "She's up here, I can bring it to her. Thanks a lot." I walked up to Jess and set her things down on the tray.

"So now you regret your decision, seeing me be all crazy like this?" she asked me.

I smiled at her and wrapped her in the blanket. “Absolutely. I was only heading back there so I could get away from you, maybe find another woman. But then I was like ‘Damn, I vowed through sickness and health, didn’t I?’” I began rubbing her back again, delighted at the opportunity to take care of her. “So, you know, a promise is a promise.”

When we arrived in Vancouver and picked up the Jeep we would be driving to California, we were sleep-deprived and haggard, especially Jess, after heaving vomit for the previous three hours. However, she caught a second wind as we set out for the day, driving out to the sets where her favorite show *Smallville* was filmed. As she stood in awe in the fields of Kent Farm, she looked at me and told me that despite getting married the day before, this was indeed the best day of her life. I adored her geekiness.

In the following days we slowly made our way south along the coast, taking in the sights of Vancouver and then Victoria, which we agreed was likely the most beautiful city we had ever visited. We took a ferry down and spent a day in Seattle, and then took off for Portland. Each location was a wonderful combination of touring terrific cities, followed by breathtaking mountain ranges and coastal highways. As we departed Portland the sun was setting over the mountains in the west. We pulled over on the remote road we were driving down, and Jess wrapped herself in the blanket we had. We sat on the hood and watched in silence.

“Is this the highlight so far?” I said finally.

“No, still Kent Farm,” she said with a smirk.

The coming days mostly consisted of driving along the coast, occasionally pulling over to eat at a diner or tour especially magnificent sights, such as the redwood forests of Northern California or views along Big Sur. On the way we had a chance to discuss our future together in earnest.

We talked about what we would do with the tiny apartment we would be renting, how we would buy furniture, and what responsibilities we would take on in the home. We talked about our budget and planned our financial goals over the years, like when we could replace her old Honda Civic, and whether we would be able to afford to travel before she graduated. It was the day-to-day minutiae that I loved, and I felt fortunate we had so much time to discuss it. But conversation turned romantic at times, talking about what our first impressions of each other had been when we first started dating, and at what moment we had actually felt we wanted to marry one another. Other times we talked about serious topics and got lost in discussing faith and philosophy, and if Jim Halpert was justified at all for kissing the engaged Pam Beasley. But most often we made jokes and got caught in fits of laughter that lasted for miles. We rented cheap motels to spend our nights in and ordered in pizza. I told Jess again I was happy to have someone so smart and interesting to keep me awake on the road.

We spent a day touring San Francisco, the one city in our trip I had some familiarity with. I took Jess to the tourist spots that Tim had shown me and she couldn't get enough of the fat walruses sitting along a pier. Tim met up with us and took us out for dinner, and there he told us of the plans he had to propose to his girlfriend, also named Jess.

“I knew you would be getting jealous,” I told him as he held my ring, examining it. He told us about the romantic spots he had taken her that we might visit while we were still in the area, including an old-fashioned cinema playing classic movies. We took his advice, and wished him good luck with his proposal. I would be seeing him again soon, as he was serving as my best man in a few weeks at our party.

The following week we spent off the grid, once we exchanged our Jeep for a camper van in Southern California. We had a campsite in the mountains near Malibu, where we spent some time hiking on the beach, and then telling stories around the campfire before going to sleep in the back of the van. Following this, we drove out to a remote cabin in Joshua Tree Park where we lacked Wi-Fi or even phone service, which Jess explained to me would be the perfect place for a serial killer to show up and slit both of our throats. Fortunately, no serial killer appeared in the day we were there, and we were able to spend our nights relaxing in an outdoor, wood-fueled hot-tub beneath the backdrop of countless stars.

Finally, after spending the last days of our trip in downtown Los Angeles, we leaned against the railing of the Santa Monica pier, reflecting on our time.

“No arguments for two weeks,” I said. “Is that our record?”

“Are we not counting that time at the Mexican restaurant?” Jess asked.

“Well, you weren’t arguing with me, you were just grumpy.”

“That wasn’t even real Mexican food,” Jess said, brow furrowed.

“How about at the Observatory? That wasn’t our best day,” I suggested.

“You were pretty light-headed, I’ll give it a pass.”

I laughed. “I’m surprised I didn’t drive you crazy all trip. This much time on the road exhausts just about everyone.”

“Oh yeah, this is the hardest part of marriage, right? The rest is a cake-walk.”

I pulled her closer to me. It was evening, and only the sounds of distant street musicians could be heard over the sound of lapping waves. It was cool, and salty air blew over the Pacific Ocean and through our hair, the smell of salt and fish coming from the ocean, rising and combining with the smell of fried food. I

squeezed her body and kissed the top of her head and she smiled and put her cold hand on my cheek.

“So is *this* the highlight?” I asked her.

“No,” she responded. “Still Kent Farm.”

Upon arriving home, we moved into our first apartment: a small, one-bedroom place on the upper floor of a house. The street we lived on had a negative reputation, and our downstairs neighbors were loud and argued often. During especially colourful arguments I would invite Jess to the bathroom, where the sound came through the clearest.

But the first weeks at our apartment were primarily spent preparing for our party. It was fashioned after the party Bilbo Baggins threw for himself in *The Lord of the Rings*, with good food, good drink, and dancing. Our parents were helpful with the preparations, but there was still a lot to do in a short amount of time. We rented a pavilion near a forest and set up a canopy for the food. We talked to caterers and beer suppliers and my parents had begun their wine-making. We bought decorations and confirmed guests. We hired a DJ and photographer and rented a photobooth.

Finally, the day came and we were ready. We remarked how much less stressful it must be, being able to separate a wedding ceremony from the reception as we had all day to prepare, get dressed, and relax. The weather was fortunately beautiful and the sun was

shining as guests arrived and sat down to cheerful Hobbit music. Jess and I commented that we were able to use up all our bad luck regarding weather on our wedding day. I hung out with my wedding party – Tim, Henry, my childhood friend Mat who I had befriended once again as an adult, and Willy, who had been my respite client for nearly a decade. We had photos taken together with each of us wearing our own low-budget colourful shirts and suspenders, along with our female counterparts. We waited to be introduced to the gathering crowd of family and friends before the food arrived. But several minutes passed and the food was not arriving.

“It’ll be fine,” Jess told me, reading my growing anxiety. “You’re always the one saying that there is nowhere people prefer to be than among friends around a table.” It was my trademark line I used when people complained that food was taking too long to come out at restaurants. Jess was typically the worrier in our relationship, but I was happy she was the one calming me on this occasion.

Of course the food did arrive, and soon after we were introduced to our friends and family as a married couple for the first time. Walking down to our table, hand in hand with Jess and with all of the people I loved, was a special moment I hadn’t anticipated. We had a private ceremony because we wanted it to be intimate and without too much drama. Yet in that moment I was glad to have an opportunity to celebrate with our loved ones.

We ate and drank and laughed around our table. After speeches, Jess and I had our first dance to The Lumineers, forehead to forehead. Yet our performance was soon upstaged by Jess's hulking father who, while typically unemotional and aloof, had tears rolling down his cheeks during the father-daughter dance, thus inducing the same for everyone in the crowd as they danced to a Spanish ballad.

Dancing with the guests followed thereafter and lasted into the far reaches of the night, while guests drank and ate sweets and swarmed to the photo booth. I had an opportunity to thank guests for coming during the night and was caught up in reflecting how beautiful it was that I had this chance to have all the people I was closest to in one place, likely for the only time. The grass outside the pavilion was trampled as guests continued to dance under the stars.

As the night began drawing to a close and guests began filtering out, the DJ called out that she was playing one last song. Jess and I pulled ourselves from the parking lot, bidding good night to our guests, and headed to the dance floor. There we danced to Ed Sheeran, holding one another close in the cool night air, under the stars and on the muddied grass. Beside us were the closest friends we had – the ones who vowed to stay until everyone had gone. Tim danced with his new fiancée, and Henry danced with Martha. Mat danced with his wife, and Willy danced with my younger sister, by now one of Jess's closest friends. I kissed Jess on her cold, damp forehead.

“I think this is the best day of my life,” I said.

“I think this is the best day of my life too,” she responded.

## **Epilogue**

Love requires vulnerability, and for that reason sometimes I fear for the future. True, Jess finding love elsewhere is a possibility, as is the possibility that I could make mistakes and treat her so poorly I drive her away from me. Yet those fears have been minor for me. Jess is loyal, has given me no reasons to distrust her, and we made vows to one another and to God that we would remain faithful. Yet beyond this, it is terrible to live as if your spouse isn't your greatest ally, and so I choose to ignore that possibility most of the time. What I fear to a greater extent is being separated by death or tragedy, and getting trapped in an endless cycle of despair. Yet this possibility I also mostly manage to ignore. We laugh about it and tell ourselves we will die in a plane accident together in each other's arms. Yet we both know the truth, and it is that romance almost always ends in tragedy one way or another. That's why so many stories of romance end with the wedding – nobody wants one to follow through to its true conclusion.

It is cliché to end a story with a wedding, yet that is how this one will end. It is true that our wedding day was only the true beginning of our lives together, and even in the few years since that day I have experienced

and learned more about love than in all my previous years put together. Towards that story, for now I only have a few words.

What has developed since my wedding day is a perfectly stable, plain, sometimes exciting, but mostly boring marriage. There is much less posturing for approval, yet many moments of indulgent affection. Sometimes we get into explosive arguments that I am certain have woken the neighbors. But far more often we spend evenings on the couch watching TV, Jess placing her feet on my lap, suggesting it's been too many hours since they were last massaged.

Our love wasn't the thrilling type that you might see in popular media: two single people who achieved self-actualization and found love during the course of achieving their common goal of... *saving the world together*. Nor were we a couple who knew one another since childhood but only realized we loved each other after she dated a charming yet selfish business magnate from New York City, and realized I was actually the only one always there for her and appreciating her for who she really was.

No, Jess and I were two single, somewhat lonely people who were looking for companionship to fill a void left by previous relationships that were bad enough to be ended, yet obviously decent enough to teach us that romance was worth another try. Could our respective voids have been filled with other people? It is discomfoting to even pose the question, yet perhaps it is true. Jess is a gentle soul in need of reassurance and

loyal affection. I am often insecure and want to feel wanted and valued. Are there others out there who could have met those needs? It seems likely. Yet I couldn't be happier that we found each other when we did and were able to meet those needs. Jess has proven to be a terrific match and my true love.

Writing my own personal love story has afforded me the opportunity to reflect on my journey from first crush to life commitment. There have been lessons along the way. I came to realize the value of vulnerability, the value of a good match, and the danger of waiting too long to approach someone you care about. But this story has never really been about lessons, and I hesitate to ever say I have gleaned special insight into the matter beyond my specific life scenario.

Love has changed me to be sure, though. I think about Jess all the time and consider her wellbeing, whereas before nearly every thought was of myself. I want her to be comfortable and have a stable lifestyle, and although I've always joked that I want to die young, the thought of making Jess a widow drains all the happiness from my soul. Love has also made me selfish in ways. When I was younger I dreamt of living as a relief worker in India or Africa, or living in intentional community with the people of Southern Chicago. I was uninterested and even repulsed by the thought of moving into a suburb. Now my thoughts centre around the safety and happiness of my wife. We both work in helping professions, and it is possible that leaving our comfortable lives is a decision we might make together someday. But sometimes I feel like I would melt the

polar ice cap myself and flood the world if, in exchange, I could keep Jess safe and healthy for a few years.

Still, selfishly, I admit love has made me happy. I wish that my happiness took root in other things, such as my own feelings of self-love or the love of Jesus Christ. Yet in honesty, I know I gather much of my self-worth from being loved. I can stay home alone on Valentine's Day and know that somewhere out there, someone loves me, and that this person will return to me and affirm me as a person and a partner. Further, I know that someone is reliant on my mutual affection and needs me. Having a partner has made way for a general sense of contentment.

We have bad days sometimes, and even once had two consecutive bad days where we did not like each other very much. Sometimes I fear what happens when that extends to a week, or a month, or even in the future, if we have a few bad years. How much will our relationship be complicated if we have children? I really have no good answer for that. For now I take comfort in the good times we are having, and I find comfort when I consider the vows we made to one another that will hopefully be enough for us to stick together.

Still, I think about these things, and the writing of this book has often brought it to the forefront of my mind. Just recently, I woke up late on a Saturday morning and Jess was fast asleep beside me. She is able to scrunch herself into a tiny ball of warmth to a point where she nearly disappears on the bed beside me. I began running my fingers along her back lightly. She is

incredibly peaceful while she sleeps, neither stirring nor making a sound. As my fingers got close to her neck, she shivered and awoke, and turned towards me with a gentle smile. My morbid thoughts resurfaced, and I thought about a time when these mornings wouldn't be the same.

“I sure hope I die before you,” I said, my fingers now playing with her hair.

“No, you can't do that to me,” she said groggily.

“Please. You'd use my funeral to scout out your new prospects.”

Jess laughed, eyes closed and half asleep. “I'll be on the run during your funeral, you know.” She slowly raised her hand and put it on my throat. “It was me who put you there. I was the one planning your murder this whole time and got your life insurance money. You just got played.”