

Introduction

Where have all the flowers gone, long time passing?

Where have all the flowers gone, long time ago?

Where have all the flowers gone?

Young girls have picked them everyone.

Oh, when will they ever learn?

Oh, when will they ever learn?¹

—Peter, Paul, and Mary

Hi, my name is Ryan Parker, and this is my story. Well, it's my story, plus a lot of other people's stories. Because the events in my life are so intertwined with those of others, it has to be their story as well. There was no way for me to tell my tale without telling theirs, but I suspect some of them would have preferred for me to remain silent about what happened. In fact, I know they would have.

But that's not going to happen. I have to speak out. I can't keep my life's bizarre events bottled up any longer. If I continued to do so, I wouldn't be true to myself, and I am no longer willing to be voiceless. For quite awhile, I was manipulated into remaining silent by people who said I would be hurting the cause of Christ by coming forward.

Their goal was to intimidate me into remaining quiet, and it worked for a while, but I will never allow their self-serving mean-spiritedness to squelch me again. Of that, I can assure you.

Having said this, I wish my tale was simple and straightforward, but it isn't. It's an enigma wrapped in a conundrum and more bizarre than you can possibly imagine. The aphorism—truth is stranger than fiction—is

spot on accurate, as my tale will attest. It's also more compelling than any TV reality show, which also makes it far more interesting.

After reading what I have to say, your assessment will probably be that I've made quite a few errors in judgment during my lifetime. You may also believe that my discernment was poor, and I deserved everything that happened. Perhaps you are right. This was certainly the way I've felt about myself for many years—but no longer.

Having to deal with my past has caused me significant problems, especially with disillusionment. Nevertheless, I eventually made it through the valley of despair, but it required substantial work. Now that my sense of loss is no longer debilitating, I've finally regained my intestinal fortitude and strength of character. These were characteristics I possessed when I was younger but lost for several years.

Time does seem to heal most wounds, or at least make them easier to deal with, which is probably more accurate. I'm pretty happy now and consider my life to be more fulfilled than not. For years, after what happened, I didn't believe such an outcome was possible. I guess I'm living proof that God does heal negative emotions that have become incapacitating, but regaining my equilibrium has been a struggle, even with His help.

I've brought all of this up because I'm committed to telling you the complete truth—the good, the bad, and the ugly. I'm doing this, despite how difficult it may be or how pathetic it will make me look. I've come to believe that such honesty is the only way I can regain the strength of purpose I once possessed. It was actually a characteristic I was known for.

My commitment is to put everything on the table. By doing so, I'm making a conscious choice to expose events that others would prefer to remain hidden in the darkness. It's the reason why some of my former friends tried to bully me into remaining silent. I've learned to live with

their hostile castigation, which I no longer find as intimidating as I once did.

I can tell you with complete certainty that what occurred continues to be life altering. Although it doesn't cause me the level of trouble it once did, it still impacts my life. My failures no longer have dominion over my soul, but I'm not the same person I once was. That's not even an option.

After what happened, there was no way for me to regain my lost sense of innocence. Not that this is necessarily a bad thing; it isn't. I've certainly learned from what I've been through. It's what the Scriptures refer to as "the despair of life." I'm glad to have passed through the valley, which was difficult to navigate at the time.

I'm telling my story to warn others about the perils of making the same mistakes I've made. My tale is filled with the consequences of making poor decisions, as well as the penalty for accepting the leadership of those who maintained they had my best interests at heart, while never doing anything that wasn't self-serving.

I believed their deceptions and embraced their lies wholeheartedly—without even a smidgen of doubt. That's how deceived I was. Doing so cost me a great deal. In some ways, I'm still paying a huge price for my lack of discernment.

While events were unfolding, all I wanted to do was the right thing. My motives were pure, as were those of most of my friends, but there is a wide gap between our desired outcome and what actually occurred.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not whining—quite the contrary. I'm responsible and accountable for it—for my part at least. After years to reflect, how could I not be?

Some choose to remain stuck in the past, embracing a lifestyle of arrested development, spewing acrimony and bitterness to all who will listen. Not wanting to be like this—a joy sponge others want to avoid—I

chose to take the road less traveled by accepting responsibility, rather than blaming others. This required me to embrace some unpleasant truths about myself, and the role I played in my own demise.

Some aspects of what happened still haunts me—not like at first, of course—when my soul was being ripped apart, but I continue to struggle at times. I have difficulty trusting others—taking what people say at face value. Regardless, it's been a long time since debilitating emotions have dominated my life. For that, I am grateful.

When my story began, back in the 1960s, my purpose was to seek God's will in everything I did. Because this was my heart's desire, I convinced myself I was actually following His leading.

This wasn't difficult for me. Everybody I knew—all of my close friends—felt the same way. Our goal was to change the world for Christ. I'm not exaggerating; this was our purpose, and we convinced ourselves we were destined to accomplish our task.

Our grand vision was all that mattered. Since our motives were pure, our dogmatic beliefs were so persuasive we knew we would be successful. Being young and energetic, the greater the challenge, the better we liked it. In our fervor, we believed we could do anything. The more grandiose the goal, the greater the effort we put forth. We were determined, and we considered ourselves to be invincible—practically immortal.

Such is the blessing and the curse of youth.

Our enthusiasm and zeal for life were infectious. As a result, others, especially young people, followed our lead. In our camaraderie, to say we were consumed by self-deception would be an understatement. We were on fire for the Lord, but our vision took a path Almighty God could not honor; and He would never bless. The reasons were simple. We were disconnected from His Reality and from His Truth.

We didn't realize this, of course, not when we needed to anyway. Like my friends, I was too caught up with our lofty, kingdom-building

ambitions to contemplate anything else—especially any downside to what we were doing.

I think it would be accurate to say I was arrogantly self-deceived. This is the worst kind of deception. It makes a person unwilling to entertain the notion that he or she could possibly be wrong, which is exactly what I thought, dismissing potential problems capriciously. None of my friends' entertained reservations about our grandiose purposes either.

Nothing could stop or impede us from moving steadily forward. It never occurred to us that we were behaving like lemmings, racing full speed toward a cliff, ensuring our inevitable destruction.

* * *

These life-altering events began a long time ago, during one of the most turbulent times in American history. Although my saga is just one of many, it's significant because it has been replicated often. Each time, it produces a pattern of carnage that shatters the lives of those who participate. If at all possible, learn from what happened to me. It's a pitfall you definitely want to avoid.

Spiritual deception routinely occurs among the young, the naïve, the disconnected, and the scripturally illiterate. Just about every generation produces many people like me, including the current one.

You may want to challenge or debate my assessment, but I think that, after reading my story, you will change your mind. I certainly hope so. This is the reason why I've chosen to become so vulnerable.

Upon reflection, I can actually pinpoint the exact day this story began. It was the day the North Vietnamese launched their Tet offensive—January 30, 1968. Because the penumbra of the war was all around us, overshadowing everything we did—just like other kids my age—the war also became an integral part of my story.

1

My First Coast-to-Coast Flight

*All the leaves are brown
and the sky is gray.
I've been for a walk
on a winter's day.*

*I'd be safe and warm
if I was in L.A.
California Dreamin'
on such a winter's day.²*
—The Mamas & Papas

In Georgia, the winter of 1968 had been brutal—one of the coldest in decades. I heard on the radio the other day that we are in for a new Ice Age. As cold as it was, I believed the prediction. Preferring warmth, I just hoped the glaciers wouldn't arrive during my lifetime.

When Valerie, my wife of two years, dropped me off at Hartsfield International Airport in Atlanta for my early-morning flight on January 30th, I felt the stinging wind cut through my lightweight wool coat. It was like I wasn't wearing anything warmer than a T-shirt. The chill was so penetrating Val didn't even get out of the car to kiss me goodbye, which didn't bother me in the slightest. Instead, she chose to embrace me, while enjoying the warmth of our Chevy Impala. Smart girl.

Grabbing my suitcase, as the wind continued to cut through me, I felt the coldness down to my bones. This made me pick up speed. By the time I reached the terminal, I was practically sprinting to get inside—

just like everybody else.

Although I had flown a couple of times before, when I was a teenager, this was my first coast-to-coast trip. As you can imagine, I was very excited about making the journey.

Flying to Los Angeles, along with a helicopter ride to San Bernardino, followed by a long drive escalating up the mountainside to Lake Arrowhead, was a gruesome ordeal, and it was very expensive. The price to fly was more than two monthly house payments, which made the decision to make the trip a significant one. Nevertheless, both Val and I thought it was worth the financial sacrifice and the unscheduled time off from work.

It wasn't like we were broke—not like most of our friends were anyway. Since my dad had recently died, leaving me with \$50,000 cash, as part of my inheritance, Val and I definitely weren't penniless. This was quite a bit of money in those days. It actually had the purchasing power that \$325,000 currently has. It was a lot of money for a couple in their mid-twenties.

Wanting to be wise with the funds, we used \$30,000 to purchase a house valued at \$45,000, leaving us with significant discretionary income and a manageable mortgage. My dad's wise planning had set us up for life, and I was very grateful for his generosity. So was Val, although she never got to know him very well before his passing.

I'm a high school social studies teacher, by the way, teaching comparative government between the United States and the Soviet Union. I also teach a class in Russian history, which I have always found to be more interesting than American, British or French history—once you learn to pronounce Russian names, that is. I've been teaching for a couple of years. I enjoy it, sort of, but it isn't what I intended to do with my life.

In fact, I never wanted to teach at all. It was my back-up plan—

nothing more.

To make the trip, I was forced to take three personal days from school, wrapped around a weekend. It was a quick turnaround, but having used all of my absences due to a bout with strep throat earlier in the school year, I couldn't afford to miss another day off from work. I had a good teaching job, paying \$6,900 a year—up from \$6,300 the previous year.

My California adventure was certain to be grueling, but being young and energetic, I was eager to participate in the conclave with my ex-Crusade friends—the ministry friends I had worked with several years earlier. It was being held at a mansion adjacent to Lake Arrowhead—high in the San Bernardino Mountains. After leaving Crusade because of an unfortunate rift between our faction of the ministry and its founder, nearly everybody in our crowd felt spiritually adrift. We needed a vision, as well as new direction for our lives. The Lake Arrowhead weekend, featuring messages from ex-staff members, including my spiritual mentor, Jonathan Turlock, was billed to be just what we needed. I was really looking forward to hearing what he had to say.

When I arrived in the late afternoon and saw the attendees, it seemed like a “Whose Who” from the ministry of Believer's Crusade. Nearly everybody of stature was present, other than the ministry's founder. To be invited was quite an honor, especially because of my age. At twenty-four, I was the youngest person by close to a decade. Nevertheless, I was the only one who considered my youth to be important; nobody else gave it a second thought.

What was significant was our need to find a new sense of purpose. Our original goal became irrelevant the day we left Crusade. This was true for all of us, and it was obvious. It seemed to be the topic of conversation in nearly every discussion.

I felt particularly aimless. No longer having an altruistic goal for my life, I was floundering. I wanted to make history—not teach it. Val was

genuinely concerned about me, but she felt equally adrift, which is why she encouraged me to make the trip. Being as goal oriented as I was, we both needed new direction to replace the one we discarded.

* * *

I grew up in Midlothian, Texas, by the way—just south of Dallas—the only child in a strong Christian family. My dad, being a prominent banker and a Southern Baptist deacon, wanted the best education possible for me, so he sent me to Baylor University in Waco.

It was the only school to which I made application. To attend any other university was never a consideration—not as long as he was the head of the house and footing the bills. Because it was his alma mater, Baylor was the school I was expected to attend from the time I was a little boy.

This didn't bother me though, nor did I consider submitting to his decision to be an imposition—at least not after I made my first visit to the campus as a junior in high school. Baylor was a great school, had a beautiful campus—situated adjacent to the Brazos River—solid academics, small town values, and a wonderful reputation. By going to Baylor, my dad also believed I wouldn't stray too far from the paths of righteousness, which proved to be a fairly accurate assessment.

None of this is what sold me on attending Baylor, though. Although I kept it to myself, for obvious reasons, what I liked best about the university were the coeds. Baylor had the prettiest girls in Texas, including the girls on the campuses at Southern Methodist, the University of Texas, and Texas Christian. From the moment I saw my first group of girls walking toward the cafeteria on my initial visit, I was a Baylor Bear through and through. I couldn't wait to matriculate.

Nearly as important, Baylor was part of the Southwest Conference,

where the best football in America was played—with a respectful nod to Southern Cal, the Crimson Tide, Nebraska, and Notre Dame. Although our conference was dominated by Texas and Arkansas, it was exciting to be at the heart of an all-American tradition.

I loved everything about the Southwest Conference, except for the Texas A&M Aggies of course. They are the most obnoxious football fans west of the Mississippi. Constantly spewing their “twelfth man” nonsense, they repulsed normal football fans from schools like mine. It seemed like every Aggie was a George Patton wannabee, especially when the movie came out heralding the general’s World War II heroics a few years later. My dad, having served in the 3rd Army during World War II—Patton’s Army—was no fan of “Old Blood & Guts”—nor were any of his soldier buddies. That the Aggies adopted the Patton mystique was really irritating, especially to my father.

From my first day at Baylor, I felt right at home. During my junior year, pursuing a dual major in political science and European history, I traveled to Oxford, Mississippi for a basketball tournament with my best friend, Meyer Jones. Having just finished midterms, we both needed a break, which we thought the tournament would provide. Desiring nothing more than a mindless diversion from our academics, I gained a lot more from the trip than I expected.

This was where I met my future wife, Valerie Jean Garrett.

Despite being around beautiful young women at Baylor constantly, the instant I saw Val, I knew she was the girl for me. I was awestruck—completely smitten. She was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen, which is saying something, coming from Texas. Having spent three years at Baylor, I had become quite a connoisseur at appraising the beauty of coeds—just like every other guy at the university.

Val had auburn hair that was thick and so dark it could accurately be described as raven. The shade was completely natural—without

highlights—which was very popular during that period. Even better, she wore it long, which beautifully accentuated her nearly perfect figure. Just over 5’5”, her eyes were emerald green and her complexion was flawless, which was also rare in those days. An avid tennis player, her legs were well tanned and athletic—perfectly proportioned to her thin waist and modest breasts. If I were to use one word to describe my first impression of Val, that word would have been mesmerizing.

That she was wearing an engagement ring gave me momentary pause, but I was already committed to pursuing this beautiful young lady. When I first spotted her, I was walking with Meyer. We were headed to downtown Oxford to get a bite to eat before the next basketball game, but I never made it to the hamburger joint—not once I saw Val. I actually forgot about being hungry, which was rare for me—just like it would be for any twenty-year-old guy.

The moment my eyes met hers, I actually stopped dead in my tracks, oblivious to how foolish this must have made me appear. My abrupt halt surprised Meyer, who was clueless about what had just transpired. My behavior didn’t surprise Val though. Having spotted me, she knew exactly what was going through my mind.

Smiling coquettishly in response to my vaudevillian gawk, it was obvious she was flattered. I hoped she was also pleased. Because she didn’t turn her head away from me dismissively, my concern about her diamond ring dissipated somewhat, but I was worried she might already be taken. I actually said an inaudible prayer, asking God to make her available—a prayer I was certain He would honor.

Casting caution to the wind, I turned to Meyer and told him to walk ahead, assuring him I would catch up soon. This confused him at first, but then he spotted Val. When he did, he understood what had happened instantly. Good wingmen always do, and Meyer was one of the best. Without saying another word, he simply walked off, sporting

a knowing, semi-lewd smirk, which I hoped didn't offend the beautiful Ole Miss coed.

Seizing the moment, I walked up to her and introduced myself. As I did, the wind rustled for just an instant, and I caught her scent, which was enchanting. I was enthralled—no question about it—and I hoped she might be too.

I think she liked my self-confidence and that I knew exactly what I wanted from the moment I met her—never deviating from my initial interest one iota. Most girls like guys who are like this, and I suspected Val was one of them.

After our first introduction, we walked to a nearby park bench to talk. Once we sat down, she told me quite a bit about herself. I cherished every word she said and dedicated each fact to memory. I didn't expect her to be as open as she was, but I certainly liked her transparency. It meant she trusted me intuitively—a feeling I fully reciprocated.

She was a junior at Ole Miss, where her beauty was actually commonplace. In nearly every other setting in America, she would have stood out from all of her peers, including Baylor, but not at Ole Miss, where an unattractive woman was the exception rather than the rule.

Having watched Bert Parks host the Miss America Pageant for years, I was amazed that nearly every year one of the finalists seemed to come from Ole Miss. Now, having been on the Oxford campus for just one day, I finally understood the reason why.

Val came from Livingston, Alabama, where her father had been in the timber business before dying from a work-related accident. Val was in the sixth grade at the time. After his death, hard times fell upon the family. Val had wanted to go to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, but her grades weren't quite good enough. At Ole Miss, however, where the academic standards were substantially lower, she was accepted easily and became an academic standout.

After telling me numerous stories about her life, while also asking questions about mine, she finally held up her left hand and said, “I suppose you’ve noticed this?”

“As big as it is, it would be hard to miss,” I answered playfully.

Laughing at my response, she became serious a moment later. Looking at me, she announced, “It’s what you think it is. I’m engaged.”

“Okay,” I replied, anxious for her to continue.

Sighing, she looked off for quite a while, as the lull of our conversation intensified my apprehension. Finally, after what seemed like an hour but was actually less than a minute, she looked at me straight in the eye and said, “His name is Charles Roderick Appleyard III, but everybody calls him Charlie. We’ve been engaged for a little more than a year. This is his final semester of law school. Because he’s graduating, everybody expects us to get married very soon.”

“Before you graduate?” I asked.

“Marrying well is the degree most girls at Ole Miss want,” she responded matter-of-factly, as if she had answered my question. I’m not certain why, but this surprised me.

Then, she sighed, and her shoulders slumped—either from relief at having been straightforward or from resignation to her fate. I couldn’t tell which. Perhaps there was an entirely different explanation. Not knowing how to respond, I simply kept my mouth shut and waited patiently for her to continue.

After a long pause, she did. Fixing her gaze squarely on me, with obvious sadness in her eyes, she said, “Given my situation, marrying Charlie is a good decision.”

Measuring my response, I finally asked; “But is marrying him what you want for your life?”

She didn’t answer. Instead, she winced—just a little—stiffening as she did. Turning her head away from me again, she looked off toward

the west. I assumed she was thinking about how to respond, but she never did. She became emotional instead. A moment later, a solitary tear rolled down her face, followed by another a few seconds later. Better than any words ever could, her tears answered my question.

Although I had been with her for just a few minutes, I felt like I had known her my entire life. People who have had the experience of falling in love instantly understand what this means. Those who haven't never could.

Acting impulsively, I drew her to me and held her tight. When I did, she didn't resist my embrace. Instead, she welcomed it. With her pent-up emotions finally getting the best of her, she cried on my shoulder, holding me very close, tightening her grip, bonding us together.

After crying for quite some time, dampening the right shoulder of my IZOD, she took a Kleenex from her purse, blew her nose, and dried her eyes. Although she had cried copiously, this didn't diminish her beauty—not one bit. In fact, when she pulled a few inches away from me and looked up, her smile was sultry, stirring me. Refusing to act impulsively, despite wanting to kiss her, I simply returned her smile and waited for what would come next.

I didn't have to wait long.

She informed me she had a date with Charlie that evening, but she intended to break it to spend some more time with me, if that was what I wanted.

Her response was both surprising and flattering. It certainly was what I wanted, and I told her so.

Smiling coquettishly, while taking my hand, she said, "Come with me."

Leading me deeper into the park, she stepping behind a tree. Then, she let go of my hand and put both of her arms around my neck. Drawing me near, she kissed me. It was a kiss like nothing I had ever experienced.

All young guys consider themselves to be experienced. That's a given, but I wasn't—not really. So, when she kissed me like she did, it scared me a little, but it also drew me in. I liked it. I liked it a lot, and I wanted more of it—a lot more.

2

A Tear in Her Eye

*I took my troubles down to Madame Ruth,
You know that gypsy with the gold-capped tooth.
She's got a pad down at 34th and Vine,
Sellin' little bottles of Love Potion Number Nine.
I told her that I was a flop with chicks,
I'd been this way since 1956.
She looked at my palm and she made a magic sign,
She said, "What you need is Love Potion Number Nine."³*

—The Searchers

Profoundly impacted by my short Saturday afternoon meeting with Val, I forgot all about the basketball tournament. I didn't watch another game. This not only surprised my friend Meyer, but it also irritated him. He was forced to sit by himself, surrounded by people he neither knew nor liked, but I didn't care. Basketball no longer seemed important. Nothing mattered other than my desire to see Val again.

Besides, Meyer had a steady girlfriend at Baylor—a gorgeous coed with long blonde hair and a figure to die for, named Diane Thornton—a girl he intended to marry. Obviously, I didn't have a girlfriend. I knew he wouldn't remain cross with me for long, which he didn't. Guys are rarely petty about things like this—not like girls can be.

I finally had lunch, after my initial encounter with Val, but I don't even remember what I ate. All I could think about was her kiss. I was not only surprised it happened, but I was even more surprised by how deeply it impacted me. Its intensity and passion rattled me in a way I

never could have anticipated.

I wasn't emotionally prepared for what happened—that's for sure—especially since it happened so soon after we met. I wondered, "Could anybody be prepared for something like this?" It felt like I had been struck by lightning. Nothing as powerful as this had ever happened to me, but I certainly wasn't complaining—not in the least.

With just one kiss, I was hooked. My platonic, high-mindedness turned into carnal desire in less than a New York second. Instantly, I was consumed by my desire for her.

Val realized this would happen, obviously, but I certainly didn't. The incident also forced me to admit the depth of my naïveté in the ways of the world. Most twenty-year-old guys are rookies where women are concerned, despite boasting about their romantic conquests, but I was more naïve than I thought.

This was particularly true back in the mid-sixties—just before the era of "free love" swept the nation. Although I would never have willingly admitted to being as naïve as I was, Val's kiss demonstrated this to me in spades, but I wanted more of it. I felt certain I was about to advance from playing ball in the farm system to becoming a major leaguer. It was a transition I was anxious to make—just like nearly every other guy my age.

As I reflected about the passion that transpired between us, which intensified every time I thought about it—stirring me in unfamiliar ways—my speculation was that she kissed me like she did because she felt trapped. She didn't really want the confines that awaited her as a married woman. Obviously, she had misgivings about becoming Mrs. Charles Roderick Appleyard III. Otherwise, she would never have been so open and honest with me; nor would she have kissed me as passionately as she did in the first place. She probably wouldn't have even spoken to me.

My conclusion was that she wanted to be rescued from marrying her

fiancée. At least, I hoped that was what she wanted. If this was her goal, I was just the man for the job.

I conjectured that by accepting Appleyard's proposal, she was trading her happiness and personal fulfillment for a lifetime of security and entitled leisure. The role she was destined to play would make her an appendage of his forever. She would have to find value in being arm candy, which would make her a non-person her entire life.

Despite the downside to such a barter, this was a deal most coeds at Ole Miss would eagerly make. Because of her financial situation and limited prospects, Val must have thought she had hit the jackpot—a conclusion regularly confirmed by her Chi Omega sorority sisters. As the time for her anticipated nuptials shortened, obviously she had become hesitant about what awaited her. At least, this was my assumption.

If she had been at peace with her decision, she would never have given me the time of day, let alone kissed me the way she did. My theory was that she wanted more from life than to be confined by the trappings of an attorney's wife, living out her days in meaningless ignominy in Meridian, Mississippi, getting pedicures and playing bridge, while gossiping with her girlfriends, having babies, and getting fat.

I wondered what she must have been thinking when she first spotted me, as I walked by, sporting my Texas-sized smile? To her, it must have felt like I was a lifebuoy, being thrown her way, as she sank deeper into her sea of despair.

I could have been mistaken about my speculations, obviously, but it was the only explanation that made sense. It didn't seem possible that she lacked the character necessary to refrain from getting involved with another man, while being betrothed to Appleyard. That she possibly lacked core integrity wasn't a consideration—not in my mind anyway. I wouldn't allow myself to entertain such a thought. Nor did I consider the possibility that I might be doing something wrong. This thought never

entered my mind—nor would it for many years.

I've always heard that love clouds your judgment, which those who are engulfed in it refuse to acknowledge. I was already in love, so the thoughts that raced through my mind that afternoon were about making plans for the future—not about any downside to what had happened or potentially might happen.

* * *

When we parted, Val asked me to contact her two hours later, which I did, right after I finished eating. She asked if I would be willing to spend the remainder of my time in Oxford with her, which was precisely what I had prayed she would suggest. I jumped at the opportunity—pleased she was willing to cancel a date with her fiancée to spend additional time with me. Breaking her date also indicated her interest in me was as intense as mine was in her.

That our relationship was impulsive was obvious, but this enhanced its excitement in spades. When we initially encountered one another, which I considered to be by Divine appointment, Val certainly wasn't looking for an alternative relationship to replace her engagement. Nevertheless, I showed up, unraveling her tenuous commitment to marry Appleyard. It also meant our second meeting would be more important than our first.

We intended to have dinner together at some out-of-the-way place, when we reconvened at 7 p.m. When she walked up to greet me at the scheduled time, I couldn't believe how beautiful she looked. She actually radiated, or perhaps it was the penumbra from the glow on my face that illuminated her. I couldn't be certain which it was, but her radiance was real.

Val informed me that Charles balked when she broke their date.

Despite this, she carefully pointed out that, with his bar exam looming shortly after graduation, he needed the time to study. Admitting the wisdom of her reasoning helped assuage his ruffled feathers. Once placated, he returned to his books, while Val returned to me—exactly as she had planned.

When she told me this, I'm the one who radiated, and it showed. I was so happy to spend time with her that it never occurred to me that she had manipulated and deceived her fiancée to make it happen. Instead, I chose to focus exclusively on the positive aspects of our relationship.

It wasn't that Val and I were just attracted to each other physically, which was obvious. We had much more in common than chemistry. Not only did we genuinely like each other, but our value systems were also nearly identical. This included our desire to make our lives count for the Lord by serving Him. That she was a believer pleased me, but to be honest, I was so enamored with her I would have pursued the relationship, regardless of what she believed.

Her motives were entirely different. Since her fiancée consistently ridiculed her beliefs, often mocking her faith, she had developed strong misgivings about spending the rest of her life with Charlie. When she confided this to me, I understood completely, knowing that relationships rarely work when the man and woman are unequally yoked. Marrying a scoffer would have torn Val's heart apart, producing a profound sense of despair and hopelessness—feelings she was already beginning to experience.

Perhaps the difference between Charlie and me was so obvious she could see it instantly. That she was pulling away from him emotionally seemed perfectly reasonable to me, but it may not have been that clear to him. Love seems to provide different conclusions for different people—often profound ones.

It seemed equally obvious that Val was unwilling to get involved with

another scoffer—someone who didn't share her born-again worldview. That we maintained the same spiritual commitment connected us to one another at a deep level, almost instantly.

As I saw it, being a Christian was my ace of trumps. Because my faith was solid, thanks to my upbringing and my commitment to Believer's Crusade, she viewed me as the type of man she needed to marry. Having no reservations or misgivings about my value system, my spiritual commitment, or my direction in life, she knew she could be herself and not be mocked for it.

Because we embraced each other's values, it was also much easier for me to be myself. We didn't have to play games, which was refreshing for both of us.

To Val, despite Charles's pedigree and financial prospects, I appeared to be a more suitable marriage partner. Such thinking is always important to college girls by the time they reach their junior year—if not earlier. Guys rarely think this way. All they think about is you-know-what, but girls aren't like that.

It seems to me that guys promise love to get sex, while girls provided sex to get love. At least, that's the way I saw things back then, when the world was much simpler.

At dinner, we discussed topics ranging from politics to child rearing. Coming from Alabama, her family loved Governor George Wallace, whose segregationist politics seemed bizarre to me, but I certainly didn't express my viewpoint. I refused to be quarrelsome. Being so wasn't even a consideration, regardless of what she believed.

When we finished, I paid the bill, leaving a generous tip. Since it was still early, Val suggested we take a ride in her 1964 royal blue Chevy Impala SS convertible—with bone leather interior—one of the most beautiful cars General Motors ever produced. Despite living on a tight budget, her paternal grandmother had given Val the car the year before,

shortly before the woman died. It was a stunning vehicle.

Leaving the restaurant, Val headed out of Oxford, traveling north toward Lake Sardis. Once we were out in the country, she put the top down and turned up the radio, which was just the way I liked it. I can still remember the songs that played—*I Feel Fine*, by the Beatles; *You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling*, by the Righteous Brothers; and *Love Potion Number Nine*, by The Searchers. It was a wonderful drive. Already wrapped up in each other emotionally, connecting deeply, it appeared that neither of us had a care in the world.

These were the salad days of our youth—days that seemed like they would never end, but always do, often abruptly.

Pulling up to an abandoned dock overlooking the lake, the view was spectacular. With just a quarter moon, the stars were bright and the spring air still had a hint of coolness to it that made the evening very pleasant.

When Val turned the engine off, she looked at me. Seeing that her hands were trembling, I realized she was nervous; so was I. Despite this, I took charge immediately.

Since Impala's didn't have bucket seats, I clasped her right hand firmly and pulled her toward me—gently but confidently. There was neither hesitation nor resistance on her part. Instead, she scooted toward me eagerly, making her skirt rise up well above her knees. Seeing her beautiful legs inflamed my passion.

An instant later, we were locked in an embrace that was intense—filled with desire. For years, I had heard people talk about “having chemistry.” I thought I knew what that meant, but obviously I had no idea. I didn't have a clue. Nobody ever does until it becomes their own experience.

We remained at the lake, wrapped up in each other's arms for several hours. It was a time I will cherish and never forget. We didn't go all

the way, but we came closer than I had ever come before. Despite my training from Believer's Crusade, along with all the admonitions I had been given by my parents and Bible teachers, none of it was as powerful as what transpired between Val and me in the front seat of her Impala that evening.

But, I'll go no further. I prefer to be discrete than gratuitous. Suffice it to say our connection intensified appreciably. By the time she dropped me off, there was nothing in the world that mattered to me, except for Val, and I had only known her for ten hours.

The following day, I only saw her briefly before Meyer and I headed back to Waco. She kissed me lightly on the lips. When she did, she put her hand on my cheek tenderly. Turning away quickly, she walked off, but I spotted a tear in her eye. I may have had one in mine as well. Less than a minute later, Meyer put the car in drive, and we headed west toward the Lone Star State.

3

Because She Was Engaged

*Sways with a wiggle, with a wiggle when she walks,
Sways with a wiggle when she walks.
Sways with a wiggle, with a wiggle when she walks,
Sways with a wiggle when she walks.*

*What is love—five feet of heaven in a ponytail,
The cutest ponytail that swings with a wiggle when she walks.
What is love—five feet of heaven and the bluest eyes,
And what a pretty smile that shows you a dimple when she talks.⁴*

—The Playmates

By the time we returned to Baylor, even Meyer knew I was head-over-heels in love. For me, it happened the second Val and I met, or to be more precise, the moment the gentle breeze carried her scent to me.

Being enamored was one thing. This happens frequently in college, but what I felt went much deeper than a passing fancy. Intuitively, I understood this. By the time Meyer and I passed over the Mississippi River, I made an internal decision to marry Valerie Jean Garrett.

Like everything else that happened during the course of the previous twenty-four hours, feeling this way and making such a life-altering decision was new ground for me. I had never entertained similar thoughts before—not about any girl. Once the idea solidified in my mind though, it wouldn't budge.

If guys know what they want, they can be totally committed. I had witnessed it before, but when I did, it always seemed bewildering. Now

that it had happened to me, I understood the dynamics completely—like a blind man who gains his sight and sees a rainbow for the first time.

Having made my decision, I became fixated on it—never deviating one iota. Until something like this happens to you, it may seem a little crazy, but when it does, your eyes become opened and your perception changes immediately. Instantly, it seems like the most natural thing in the world. You actually feel sorry for people who have never had the experience. At least, that's the way I felt about it.

Women seem to understand these things better than men. It's why they are constantly looking for guys who are capable of experiencing deep love, while rarely finding them. Girls intuitively know this kind of guy makes the best marriage partner—just as long as the man's feelings aren't based on possessiveness or jealousy. When that happens, the girl needs to run. Relationships based on dysfunctional needs and cravings never work. Unfortunately, most girls end up learning this lesson the hard way—guys too.

Then, there's another type—the guy who doesn't know what he wants. Either that, or he doesn't care enough about a girl to move forward. What he wants is the benefit of an exclusive relationship without the responsibility that comes with it. In a relationship like this, all hell can break loose—and routinely does. When a girl falls for a wishy-washy guy, she comes to regret it.

I certainly wasn't ambivalent about Val, nor was I jealous or possessive.

Realizing she was engaged, I also knew the importance of letting her handle her situation with Appleyard . . . without any pressure from me. It wasn't that I was the epitome of maturity about this; I wasn't. The truth is, it caused me anxiety regularly, but I also knew that any pressure I might exert would become counter-productive, producing an outcome I certainly didn't want.

I knew what I wanted and hoped Val would come to the same

conclusion, which I felt certain she would, in time. Because of our circumstances, I was just a little ahead of her; that's all. Nevertheless, my steadfastness was unwavering. She recognized this, and I think she liked it. I was careful not to overplay my hand though, fearful of scaring her off.

Once Val became part of my life, she never left my thoughts or my heart for an instant. Nor did I budge in my desire to marry her—not once. Being ambivalent was never a consideration, and I let her know this in numerous non-verbal ways. I didn't even have to try and be like this. It was just the way I was. I couldn't help myself.

Because I was so solid, she knew she could count on me, and that's precisely the way I wanted her to think. In some ways, I guess I really was like my dad, who was equally immovable about what he wanted—like his insistence that I attend Baylor.

* * *

When I returned to class on Monday, following my trip to Ole Miss, although I was fatigued, I was able to focus on my studies without becoming distracted by all of the pretty coeds—something that had never happened before.

Interestingly, because I became disinterested in Baylor's coeds, several became more interested in me. I'm not sure why, but this dynamic seems to occur frequently. If you're not in a relationship, you rarely meet someone who interests you. When you become romantically involved, however, other potential suitors just seem to pop out of the woodwork. For whatever reason, life seems to work this way.

Knowing that I wanted Val and nobody else, I regarded myself as taken and acted accordingly. It wasn't difficult. I just stopped paying attention to other girls, which was obvious.

Although not initiated by me, word of my Ole Miss romance got around. A couple of girls considered bringing me back into the fold to be a challenge. Being taken made me more attractive. Go figure. Despite their efforts, they were wasting their time, which they eventually realized. Finally, admitting failure, they abandoned their fruitless mission.

Things were different for Val. She couldn't simply make a decision to be with me, like I had made about her. Because she was engaged, she had to deal with Charlie in her own time and in her own way. To avoid even the semblance of pressure, I never brought up his name, nor did we speak about him in our daily telephone conversations, which became a sizable financial expense, by the way. Back then, you paid for long distance by the minute, and we spoke for hours at a time.

Regardless, Charlie's presence was always there—a constant reminder that my life was on hold until Val's situation resolved.

We got to know each other on the phone quite well, but it wasn't the same as being together. Because we had only known each other for a short period and had been separated for so long, I wondered if her fervor would wane. Obviously, I was concerned about this. The thought that our romance might fizzle and die was terrifying, but there was nothing I could do about it—not being six hundred miles away.

Despite my intentions, our future was out of my control, except for praying about it, which I did consistently. Only time would tell whether or not the outcome would prove to be lasting. There was nothing in the world I could do to guarantee the outcome, which was difficult for me to accept.

* * *

As winter faded, bringing the rolling hills of Central Texas to life with colorful bluebonnets and numerous other wild flowers, I made plans

to visit Val. Canceling my long-standing commitment to spend spring break with friends in Port Lavaca, Texas, I chose to travel to Pascagoula, Mississippi, instead. This was where Val was spending the week with four of her sorority sisters—girls who were also her closest friends.

Never having been to this part of the Gulf of Mexico, I was surprised by how beautiful it was. It wasn't Texas, of course, but it wasn't bad.

Regardless, no geographical consideration was of the slightest importance. I would have enjoyed spring break in Fargo, North Dakota, if Val had been there.

When I arrived at the spacious house in Pascagoula, which her Chi Omega sisters had rented for the week, I stretched from my long trip, after getting out of the car. As I was doing so, Val walked out of the house to greet me. When I saw her, she was sporting a broad smile, which I returned. Anticipating my arrival, she looked even lovelier than the day I first met her, if that was possible.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed she wasn't wearing her engagement ring, which might indicate her betrothal had ended. I certainly didn't say anything about it, which would have spoiled the moment we had both anticipated for so long—but I did wonder.

I also noticed her sorority sisters had come to the window to take a good look at the guy from Texas who had stolen Val's heart. She had informed me that several of them thought she was a fool to even consider breaking off her engagement with Charlie. Because he was sharp, handsome, from Mississippi, and about to finish law school, they reasoned he was a far more suitable candidate for marriage than any charmer from Central Texas who was majoring in history.

On paper, their assessment seemed on target, even to me, but I suspected marriage to Charlie was no longer something Val considered to be an option. At least, I hoped that was how she felt. That she considered me to be a better candidate was affirming and extremely gratifying, as

you can imagine.

Because Val felt this way, some of her girlfriends were perplexed. Others were irritated. Nevertheless, while our future remained uncertain, I was cautiously optimistic. I realized this was the most important trip I would ever make, which meant the first impression I made on these young ladies was crucial.

This was clearly evident that afternoon. The girls at the window scrutinized every move I made, especially when Val greeted me. Walking up, she kissed me warmly, which was more like embracing an old friend. Her kiss was without the slightest hint of passion. Nevertheless, she moved into me unhesitatingly, in a tender and accepting way.

Knowing her sorority sisters were watching every move we made, Val was careful to refrain from any display of affection they might consider to be inappropriate. She knew that if she breached protocol, even slightly, she would be judged mercilessly by her friends. Girls can be like that, especially university Greeks, who are often a heartless lot.

Even though they were her sorority sisters and her closest confidants, they could become ruthless in their criticism and condemnation. Having been forewarned, I responded to Val's kiss appropriately—never broaching the line of unacceptable familiarity.

Like all guys, I didn't have a problem with public displays of affection, but girls are different. Being proper is a big deal to them, as most guys come to learn the hard way. Val was so concerned about our initial meeting she gave me specific, detailed instructions about how I was to behave and how I was to dress.

She told me what I was to wear, which I found comical, but I followed her detailed instructions to the letter. I was to wear Weejuns, Gold Cup socks, pressed khaki slacks, and a starched buttoned-down light blue Gant shirt, with the cuffs turned back twice. She insisted that I be clean-shaven, with my hair having been cut no more ten days prior to the trip.

I was instructed to not even bring a pair of cut-off jeans, despite the warm weather, which seemed a little over the top to me—but I followed her directives scrupulously.

To Val, it didn't matter that I was tired, after having driven six hundred miles. I had to look the part of someone who was a model for *Life* magazine. When I pulled up to the rental house, I had to present myself precisely the way she had instructed, without deviation. I was to look perfect—not for her but for her sorority sisters—who would dissect me in every way imaginable, pouncing on any flaw I might manifest.

Instead of allowing her daunting instructions to be intimidating, I accepted the challenge and played the role masterfully. I was a Baylor Bear, after all, and certainly no slouch—not by any Ole Miss standard.

After our brief embrace, Val took my hand and led me inside. While walking up the front steps of the house, I could hear her sorority sisters scampering and giggling, as they raced from the upstairs window to greet me. When one of them opened the front door, their welcome was one of the warmest I ever received, despite several of them being dead-set against Val pursuing our relationship. Girls can be funny about things like this.

After being introduced to each one, we had a late lunch, with me being the center of attention. I would have loved this, if I hadn't been so hungry. Between bites, I did my best to be gracious, charming, and entertaining. It wasn't a difficult assignment. Who wouldn't enjoy being the center of attention, surrounded by five beautiful young ladies?

Shortly after the meal began, my wariness about these bubbly young ladies evaporated. I laughed heartily at each of their jokes and stories, enjoying myself immensely. Several giggled throughout the meal, which made it a delightfully unforgettable experience.

What was difficult was finishing my sandwich. They were so intrigued by who I was and what I had to say, they wouldn't allow me to eat. They

asked me one question after the other—questions like—what does your father do? What are your plans after graduation? What about other girls? Have I ever been in a serious relationship? Would I consider moving to Mississippi after graduation?

The questions came a mile a minute. Val's friend, Bitsy Burkett, who had dated Charlie briefly before he and Val became an item, seemed to be the most curious.

Their inquisition went on and on, but I had been forewarned this would happen. Val informed me it was a "rite of passage" for prospective beaux at Ole Miss. She expected me to be up to the task, which I certainly was—despite being tired from the long trip. Truthfully, not only did lunch end up being great, but the entire afternoon was also fabulous. I thoroughly enjoyed myself, but what I really wanted was to be alone with Val. I'm sure this was her desire as well.