

THE TRUE STORY  
of a **SHE**, a **HE**, and **HOW THEY BOTH**  
**GOT TOO WORKED UP** about **WE**



**ALTARED**

CLAIRe & ELI

THE TRUE STORY  
of a SHE, a HE, and HOW THEY BOTH  
GOT TOO WORKED UP about WE



# ALTARED

CLAIRe & ELI



WATERBROOK  
P R E S S

**ALTARED**

PUBLISHED BY WATERBROOK PRESS  
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200  
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

*Italics in Scripture quotations reflect the author's added emphasis.*

Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

ISBN 978-0-307-73073-2  
ISBN 978-0-307-73074-9 (electronic)

Copyright © 2012 by TYFTW  
Illustrations © 2012 by Bruce Freeby

Cover design by Kelly Howard

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published in the United States by WaterBrook Multnomah, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House Inc., New York.

WATERBROOK and its deer colophon are registered trademarks of Random House Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
[to come]

Printed in the United States of America  
2012—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

**SPECIAL SALES**

Most WaterBrook Multnomah books are available at special quantity discounts when purchased in bulk by corporations, organizations, and special-interest groups. Custom imprinting or excerpting can also be done to fit special needs. For information, please e-mail [SpecialMarkets@WaterBrookMultnomah.com](mailto:SpecialMarkets@WaterBrookMultnomah.com) or call 1-800-603-7051.



# CONTENTS

Preface . . . . . I

1	Purple Days. . . . .	7
2	Love Thy Neighbor. . . . .	31
3	The Train Rumbles Through . . . . .	55
4	Tattered Ledgers . . . . .	62
5	Self-Denial and the Tyranny of <i>Mine</i> . . . . .	78
6	Those Who Have Flung Themselves . . . . .	100
7	Focus Off the Family? . . . . .	115
8	The Lost Chapter. . . . .	133
9	Tips from Tolstoy. . . . .	143
10	What Would It Mean? . . . . .	151
II	Beach Balls and Sex Talks . . . . .	167
I2	Loneliness, the Ache . . . . .	181
I3	Solitude, the Posture . . . . .	198
	A Conclusion. . . . .	219
	Appendix A: Questions and Answers . . . . .	225
	Appendix B: Love . . . . .	232
	Discussion Questions . . . . .	238
	Acknowledgments . . . . .	239
	Notes . . . . .	240

# PREFACE



One didn't have to look far to find a marriage book in my parents' house. Neat little tomes of marital wisdom in glossy paperback could be found stacked on shelves or strewn across tables. Usually they included beaming smiles, shining eyes, straight teeth, and two fit bodies, often sweatered, clasping each other.

There were nouns like *fulfillment*, *intimacy*, or *satisfaction*, phrases like *finding the marriage you've dreamed of* or *the marriage you've always wanted*, written in cursive, set next to dew-dropped fruit or feet poking out of clean white sheets in sunlit rooms.

In theory, these books belonged to my parents. In practice, I read them. And they turned over in our home in roughly six- to twelve-month cycles. My family would pick a new set of relational tips and terms, flowing down from my parents' marriage, talk earnestly about them at the dinner table, put them into use for a season, and then gradually move on.

Most of the books were helpful, I think. And yet as months and years rolled by, I began to feel a certain unease with each new title. I couldn't name it, but something was missing. Not that there was something *wrong*, per se, but rather that things felt partial, like I had heard only one side of a multisided topic.

The feeling was like a drop of dye in a glass of water, fanning out in wings of color. I jostled the glass, held it up to the light, and examined it. What was it? A hunch, not quite distinguishable, let alone something I could put a name to.

The dye spread. The more I peered at it, the more it stood out. There was *something* there, but what?

There was marriage and my adult life. There were all the tips I had read in my parents' books, all the marriage sermons I had heard from the pulpit, all my eagerness to fall in love, and all the relational quirks in my evangelical communities. In my upbringing I had learned an awful lot about marriage—both its blessings and challenges—and yet still something was lacking.

As I peered into the glass, the feeling thickened into other topics and into a range of questions about love, self-denial, obedience, loneliness, solitude, and forgiveness.

They weren't questions I asked for the sake of asking. The questions were personal. I wanted to know because I needed to know, because I *had* to know. I wanted to know for the sake of Claire and also for myself.

I can't say our story is one I'm exactly proud of, although I can't help being fond of it. The story, which is true, works something like a photo negative to the other pages here, a set of inverted colors prior to full-colored illumination.

The boy-meets-girl stuff happened long before the rest of this book came about, and perhaps could be read as our first attempt to make sense of that certain tension in our lives, the conflict between the story we'd been told since childhood and the reality in which our relationship was growing. (Our pseudonyms, by the way, help this happen.) Interwoven with the story is what came after the exploration of the issues we grappled with. It's sort of like boy-meets-girl-and-then-they-have-questions.

Claire will tell most of the story, but I'll chime in here and there. Keep an eye on the boy/girl figures at the beginning of each chapter to clue you in as to who is talking. (And if you can help it, we recommend not skipping the analytical bits to only read the parts about two people strolling around New York. It's all mixed together for a reason.)

The goal here isn't a simplistic yes or no to marriage overall, which would be both unhelpful and a bad idea. The goal is to ask if we missed something in our evangelical assumptions about marriage. What did marriage mean for discipleship? What did discipleship mean for marriage? If Christ's love was the way others would know we are His (see John 13:35), what kind of love was it?

This book is the beginning of an answer. It is about growing up in a web of hyper-romance and sermons nudging us down the aisle. It is about how, as we get older, we rigidly define the qualities we're seeking in a "soul mate" as we look past our neighbors, our brothers and sisters, and the least of these. It is about the observation that Christians don't approach romantic relationships all that differently from the way other folks do.

It is about our growing understanding that God's plan includes more than hearts and flowers and a happy ending with rice flying in the air above a tuxedo and a white dress.

This is not a book about marriage or singleness; this is a book about love.



It began with a piece of fan mail.

An editor at a magazine I wrote for forwarded me this e-mail.

*Hello!*

*Does anyone have contact info for Claire? I was just rereading her excellent piece, and wanted to contact her about it.*

*Thanks,*

*Eli*

JD Candidate

The University of Chicago Law School

October always renews a sense of novelty to New York. Summer's heat evaporates into the chilly autumn air. The spectral reds and oranges of Central Park trim Fifth Avenue with elegance. And the relief of a new start is seen in the sunburnt faces of the city dwellers. October means change.

And yet the transformation of thousands of city trees cannot compare to the turning point this brief e-mail signaled. Sitting in my fourth floor cubicle in a publishing house in the West Village of Manhattan, I was far more delighted by the e-mail than good sense should have allowed me to be. I wasn't accustomed to fan mail, especially from someone with such an attractive e-mail signature. So with unchecked enthusiasm, I e-mailed this Eli JD Candidate back.

He responded exactly thirty-three minutes later.

Eli liked my article, but that actually wasn't his main reason for writing. He reached out to me because my byline, by then outdated, told him I was at *The New York Times*, and he wanted coverage for a website he had launched with friends. I was a little disappointed by his motives, and yet I still sensed a stroke of providence was at play.

But that was typical. I was always reading into things. Coincidences, those sneaky gleams that outline a shadow, often gave shape to my hopes.

I was a catcher of coincidences, always reaching out for wisps of the unexpected and turning them over for hidden meaning. When none was revealed, I released them to the wind, only to catch another, never realizing that all I was grabbing were the beams of light that always swirled around me, forming every moment.

Eli's e-mail was just another coincidence that I clasped to my chest. But unlike others, this beam didn't flit away when the sky moved. It steadied itself, homing in on a hope that was growing increasingly tender.

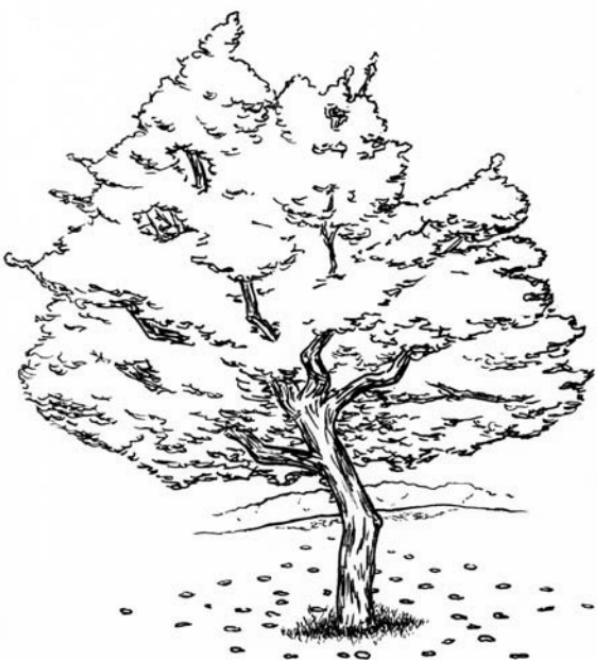
Call it love or call it silliness, but Eli's happenstance e-mail got me daydreaming. Later that night, standing under the tin ceilings of my apartment, preparing dinner, I began to color in the sketch of Eli that had formed in my mind that afternoon.

Then my roommates came home one by one. With inexplicable excitement, I told them all about this new website I had discovered. They were mildly interested, until they finally asked the question I was fishing for: "How did you hear about it?"

With an incriminating smirk, I told them about Eli's e-mail.

"A boy!" There were giddy screams of delight. I proceeded to gush about this dashing young man about whom I knew absolutely nothing. It wasn't long before my best friend said what I had been thinking: "Claire, I just feel something. I think he's the one!"

Their enthusiasm only fueled the fire. I tried to talk sense into myself—and them—but failed. For the past year I had been single, and I was tired of it. I was poised and ready for the gentleman who would cure my plight. I had prayed desperately that God would deliver my husband to me, and surely each day brought me closer to that, so didn't it make sense that this e-mailer could very well be him? Yes, it was ridiculous, but it made sense to me. I was a believer in coincidences, and Eli was perfect. With one exception. He was in Chicago. I was in New York.



## PURPLE DAYS



Alas...men talk about finding the perfect person in order to love him. Christianity speaks about being the perfect person who limitlessly loves the person he sees.

—Søren Kierkegaard

**Mar•riage - hap•py** \’mar-ij-’hap-e\ adj 1: Having an inordinate preoccupation with marital pursuits, sometimes at the cost of other Christian priorities, commonly seen in evangelicals. 2: A giddiness stemming from all things related to marriage.

Giddy screams of delight? Seriously?

As tempting as it is to tease Claire about her reaction to my e-mail, I was worse. When I first e-mailed her with my website scheme, I knew nothing about this writer from New York, but the idea intrigued me. After only a couple e-mails, I had located her blog, was smitten with her writing, and was certain of our future together. For some time I had been looking for The One, and so the absence of any actual knowledge about Claire didn't bother me much. I knew everything I needed to know, which was that Claire was the answer to my search, my perfect match in some cosmic plan!

Yeah, crazy, I know. I was marriage-happy, just like Claire. And in Evangelical America, where we grew up, we weren't the only ones. We were submerged in the evangelical enthusiasm for marriage, which itself was steeped in a culture that esteemed both individualism and romance.<sup>1</sup> Marriage was the norm, an inherent good, a biblical duty to observe. Singleness, meanwhile, was a concept batted at like a pesky fly, a vague afterthought, an exception, a gray smudge in the margin of the story God had written for each of us.

But was God as worked up about marriage as we were?

The question sounded crazy when I first asked it, but the more I thought about it, the more it troubled me. I didn't think marriage wasn't a beautiful part of life. It *is* beautiful, a good gift designed by God. But I wondered if I had made too much of it, taken a good gift, and let it become too important in my heart?

As I began to sift through my influences and memories, I found marriage-happiness in a variety of forms, a sort of recurring tunnel vision with marriage at the other end. The problem wasn't marriage; the problem was how I related to it, and perhaps how Christian culture related to it more generally. Had we made too much of marriage?

## DIFFERENT FORMS, DIFFERENT SHAPES

Marriage-happiness took different shapes for Claire and me, but our fervor was about the same. Claire's churches focused on purity of the heart, courtship, and gender roles, as you'll see later, whereas my churches emphasized the culture wars and sex. Two branches of the same tree, you might say. In that regard, our experiences were different, and the gap is a helpful reminder of the diversity within the church. You can't write a sentence about "the Church" and expect it to describe half the congrega-

tional experience. Denominations vary, and so do individual churches within denominations. Every faith community has its quirks.

But while the marriage quirks in my communities may not have been the same as yours, I wonder if the effect was roughly the same. Signs of marriage-y-ness could be found everywhere.

### DATING ENTHUSIAST

In high school I participated in the typical hustle of congregational romance: the ups and downs of who liked whom; who broke up with whom; who got engaged (and later married, cheated upon, or divorced); and all the gossipy chatter that followed. Youth group was like the hallway of the local high school but with a bit less swearing.

In high school, the arrival of even a mildly social brown-eyed beauty was enough to cause a great frenzy. Like most teenagers, my friends and I were into love, and by that, we meant dating. Naturally, this caused headaches for our youth leaders, usually because it kept us from talking or thinking about more serious things. One leader of mine even resorted to a strict “no purple” rule on trips in an effort to institute order. The rule meant this: boys were blue, girls were pink, and due to all the chaos caused by love-induced squabbles, no mixing was allowed. Even if you were really, *really* in love, there would be no new relationships. Dating later was fine, but not on the trip. No purple was allowed, period.

As one might expect, this led to some remarkable workarounds—creative and daring—and a gentle drift toward deceit. Sermons on the difference between the “letter” and the “spirit” of the law often followed our trips, and we were always surprised by the difference.

Basically, things started out a bit marriage-happy because like most teenagers, I was relationship-happy. Finding a fifteen-year-old sweetheart

was severely important, and few truths could inspire me the way she could, even though it was far from clear what I'd do once I found her.

### SPOUSE ON THE RÉSUMÉ

Things also seemed marriage-happy in the church because I saw few single leaders, and this is a consistent fact in all the churches I've attended.

I've heard at least a few explanations for this. One friend said she thinks churches prefer to get two ministers for the price of one. I've also heard a married pastor has experience a single pastor lacks. Some churches even *require* their pastors to have a wife. Whatever the cause, I've seen no more than two or three singles in professional or upper lay leadership in all my years in the church.

Apparently, I'm not the only one to notice this. Recently *The New York Times* profiled a qualified single pastor struggling to find a job after seminary. The reason? He didn't have a wife. In the piece, Al Mohler, the president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said, "If [young pastors] remain single, they need to understand that there's going to be a significant limitation on their ability to serve as a pastor."<sup>2</sup>

While I had personally never heard anything as straightforward as Mohler's view, the quote summed up a certain mood I had sensed. Serious spiritual adults in our communities were married, while single people were often seen as anomalies. The predominance of married clergy was an expression of that sentiment.

### MIXED ABOUT MIXERS

As I entered my late teens and early twenties, I couldn't help but see the congregational landscape ahead: college groups looked healthy and alive, while singles groups looked, uh, not so healthy. In the worst examples,

singles groups were uneasy networks of adults left in some kind of limbo that always involved “mixers.” It was like singles groups operated on the assumption that there was a fork in the road between marriage and singleness, and ministry was an attempt to remedy the path not taken. Entire ministries, it seemed, were designed to get people married. No doubt some of this had to do with what singles themselves wanted, but still, where was the vision of the broader Christian life? The urgency and purpose toward God, one’s neighbor, and the body of Christ.

I don’t need to talk in the abstract to illustrate my point. Consider the website of a well-known Christian ministry. The stated goal of the website—the ministry’s formal attempt to reach out to singles—was “to cast a vibrant vision for the single years,” and to help prepare readers for “the challenges and responsibilities of the [season] to come.”<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, even in “a vision of the single years,” most of the tips and suggestions came back around to marriage.

Much of the content on the site is pretty obviously marriage-happy, with little balance to be found. In a particularly strong example, one of the primary editors penned a book called *Get Married*, which was written “to encourage men and empower women as you work toward your ultimate goal: a God-glorifying marriage.”<sup>4</sup> In a similar blog post on the site, the same author provided the following advice about singleness: “To the women, I say stop glorifying the single years as a super-holy season of just you and Jesus. Yes, being single does provide you the chance to be uniquely intimate with Jesus. Enjoy that. But don’t advertise it.”<sup>5</sup>

Not all of the content on the site was quite this vivid, but most of it corresponded to my experience. On this site and in an array of singles ministries I encountered, the common goal was to rescue singles with the life preserver of marriage.

Of course, not all ministries functioned like this, nor did all Christians view singles as capsized. In the best versions I saw, singles groups

were healthy and functional communities, sometimes even flourishing in Christlikeness. But even when the groups functioned well, I didn't see congregations taking them seriously. Singles were looked at with pity, or curiosity, but rarely with admiration. There was always a sense of otherness.

I'm hardly the first to notice this. In his thorough book *God, Marriage, and Family*, Andreas Köstenberger writes that "post-adolescent singles are probably the most overlooked social group in the contemporary Western church."<sup>6</sup> When a person remains single into his or her late twenties or thirties, "many people begin to try to diagnose the problem (be it sexual orientation, physical appearance, intellectual ability, social ineptitude, unduly high standards or other factors) that has trapped the single person...."<sup>7</sup> Undoubtedly, such attempts are offered with the best of intentions, but the underlying message is a powerful one: if a person wants to participate meaningfully in a congregation as an adult—especially as a leader—he or she probably ought to get married.

## SEX-Y

Sex, of course, is another way I found traces of marriage-happiness. Obviously, for a teenage boy, sex is a *huge* deal: you guard your eyes, guard your heart, guard the heart of any girl you like, all while living as a hostage to your hormones.

Sex was an area that required guidelines and warnings, and so we talked about it a lot. And the more we talked about sex, the more we talked about marriage. Marriage was prescribed as the remedy for lust and was therefore a Really Big Deal. Marriage would be the end of all my awkward teenage sexual woes, and that created some serious expectations for marriage. I'll talk more about this in chapter 11.

## WONDERS FOR ATTENDANCE

Marriage programming was another big thing in my communities. A majority of the adults I knew were preparing to date, get engaged, marry, or rekindle the flame, and there were pastors and classes for all stages. I didn't see much marriage advice in the Bible—or at least I didn't see verses answering the questions we were asking—but that didn't slow the classes, engagement courses, and the like. Whenever a text could be nudged toward marriage, it was. At our church, there was at least one series on sex or marriage every year, and the series did wonders for attendance.

Indeed, here's a fact that suggests a sizeable demand for marriage teaching. Even Tim Keller, the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, who provides excellent warnings about the danger of an overexalted view of romance, is most popular when preaching on marriage. According to the church's website, Keller's three top-downloaded sermons of all time are, in order: "Marriage"; "Cultivating a Healthy Marriage, Part 1—Lecture"; and "Cultivating a Healthy Marriage" (Parts 1 and 2). It's not until we get to number nine that we find "Practical Grace; How the Gospel Transforms Character."<sup>8</sup>

The point is anecdotal, of course, but an observer may ask: Do our congregations show more demand for teachings about marriage than grace? And if we do, what does that say about us?

## TEXTUALITY

As I circled back to the Bible, I didn't find nearly as much unqualified support for marriage as I might have thought. I saw some helpful metaphors and passages regarding husbands and wives, but in general, those passages floated in a sea of references about love more generally,

about loving our neighbors and growing into the love that Christ called us to.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, Christ said little about marriage and a lot about love. *Love* appeared to be the imperative *before* marriage. Christ's teaching about love certainly applied to marriage, but it was also about so much more. And in my communities, we focused a lot on the marriage part, but less on the other stuff.

As I thought about this, it seemed like maybe my evangelical understanding of marriage had grown larger than what could be found in the Bible. Jesus, of course, does affirm marriage in Matthew 19:5—the two “shall become one flesh”—and yet he also tells us provocatively that there will be no marriage in heaven (see Matthew 22:23–33). Jesus supports and reinforces divorce rules (see Matthew 5:31–32)—implying marriage is worthy of both fierce commitment and defense—and yet tells a story in which a man misses the great banquet because he is too busy with marriage (see Luke 14:12–24). Likewise, Paul charges husbands with the responsibility of loving their wives as Christ loved the church (see Ephesians 5:25–33), but he also warns us that the interests of a married man or woman can be divided (see 1 Corinthians 7:33–34). A husband or wife is anxious to please not only God but his or her spouse, a “worldly thing” according to Paul, whereas the unmarried person is “anxious about the things of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:32–34).

Additionally, most of the main figures in the New Testament didn't marry. Jesus didn't, nor did John the Baptist and perhaps quite a few of the other disciples (at least as far as we know—although some did marry). Paul vocally advocated for singleness and was single for most of if not his entire ministry. Counting heads doesn't prove anything, of course, but here were facts I had rarely heard. Contrary to what I expected, few spouses were even mentioned at length in the New Testament, and there were few if any discussions of romantic love overall.

As I saw these pro and con marriage passages together, it seemed like the Bible was offering a slightly different perspective on marriage—or at least a more nuanced one—than what I had heard. There were beautiful marriage verses to be considered (see Genesis 2:18–24; Ephesians 5:21–33; and Hebrews 13:4, among others), and I could usually recite them by memory, but there were also verses that were somewhat less rosy (see Matthew 19:10–12; 22:23–33; Luke 14:12–24; 18:26–30; and all of 1 Corinthians 7, among others). I had no interest in overemphasizing one set of verses at the expense of the other, but I felt like I had rarely given the second set—the less-marriage-friendly verses—more than a passing glance.

### TICKING OFF THE OL' CHECKLIST

Another way I saw marriage-happiness in my life was the way I understood love. And back then, when I used the word *love*, I really meant romance.

This is what “love” meant for me: I was on the lookout for a person from whom I would find fulfillment. And I thought fulfillment would arrive in terms of attraction, emotional connection, and long-term compatibility, among other criteria, including but not limited to: green eyes, a shapely face, talent, and a sparkling personality. She would need to like music, but not the wrong type; be smart, but not the wrong type of smart, and so forth. Love meant finding someone with the right attributes and ticking off the ol’ checklist.

This was not the same as Christ’s love. Christ’s love had little to do with my checklist and seemed to focus more on the poor, the weak, and the people least likely to be wanted. Christ didn’t say spouse checklists were wrong, but He did love a lot of people who wouldn’t have satisfied mine.

On one side, then, I had romance; on the other, the love of Christ. The two weren't exclusive, of course. There was no dichotomy, and I didn't have to choose one or the other. But they *were* different. And I almost always prioritized romance. I poured incredible effort into finding The One, and indeed, even my notion of Christian marriage owed more to romance as an influence than it did to Christ's example of love. I might have said otherwise in a pious moment, but if I looked at my actual life, I couldn't deny it. Before I had thought about *what it meant to love my neighbor*, I had thought extensively about *whom I would choose to love*.

## TO THE BARRICADES!

Marriage-happiness also expressed itself by way of the culture wars. Focus on the Family was a significant presence on the airwaves in my town while I was growing up—I still know many plots from *Adventures in Odyssey*—and so I naturally identified the idea of Christianity with healthy families. My childhood church wasn't all that political, but we were careful observers of politics when it came to the family. Family and the institution of marriage were being broken down by society, and we were its defenders.

This isn't anything to complain about! Christians should clearly want to strengthen a structure that provides stability and critical support to so many people (and there are biblical reasons, too). But at the same time, before others knew us by our love (whether in our little town or as Christians in America), people knew us first as defenders of the family. Our reputation as defenders of the family was greater than our reputation as people who knew and practiced love.

Was this the way it was supposed to be?





The fluorescent lights were blurring my eyes. It had been an exhausting day in the office, and I still had a mound of work to finish. I stared at my computer, trying to persevere. Things were not looking good. In fact, everything was getting hazy. I turned my attention to a long-overdue e-mail from my boss and shuffled my mouse in circles. Anything but the work at hand.

Then a chat from Eli appeared.

Eli? That stranger from Chicago who had e-mailed me a few weeks ago? That's the one—except my brain registered it like this: *Eli! Brilliant! Dashing!* There was no excuse for my hyperbole, but sometimes hopes are not to be reasoned with. Within a few short weeks, Eli and I had not so subtly transitioned from random e-mails to rather in-depth online conversations. A question of mine led to a question from him. Our names glowed on each other's screens with increased frequency. Our conversations were clumsy, but *something* was afoot, and both of us knew it.

That evening, as I sat alone in the office, Eli's interruption was most welcome. Suddenly, I was stress-free and in high spirits, even grateful for my cubicle, which had provided the occasion for another conversation. We talked and teased. Banter came easily. But there was still that nagging e-mail from my boss, so I forced myself to say good-bye and get back to the grind.

An hour later, a new e-mail landed in my inbox. The subject read: "Songs for Claire to Work By." *You've got to be kidding me*, I thought. I was way too easy to woo. Turning up my speakers and clicking on the first song, I started swooning, big time.

It had only been a few weeks after the serendipitous fan mail, but a

trace of amour had slipped between the lines of our dialogue. There was something—a connection—that we could feel across the bandwidth. In just a few weeks, there was new whimsy and intimacy in our interactions, and that something felt like romance. The Internet not only sustained our virtual crushes but propelled them further, resulting in more sharing of songs, more chatting at work, and an exchange of increasingly personal e-mails.

Inevitably, things continued to gain momentum after that cubicle-swooning evening. Eli sent not just songs he loved, but songs he wrote. I sent him not just interesting articles but my own poems. We talked about books and discovered we were both mesmerized by the same authors. We talked about music and realized we had similar libraries. We talked about theology and Halloween costumes and the weather. Across the wavelengths, we toppled into each other, sharing our lives.

Then abruptly, everything changed.

In the middle of one of our chats one morning, Eli announced a topic change:

Eli: TOPIC CHANGE.

Me: Whoa! Give me a sec to adjust here.

Eli: So I've got nothing lined up for sure yet, but I'm considering dropping by NYC next weekend. Any chance you might be around and/or up to grab a cup of coffee?

Coffee was a sweet idea, but Eli quickly raised the ante. The next day, in an e-mail that announced he had bought his plane ticket, he asked: “Any chance I could persuade you to clear some space in the ol’ calendar for dinner on Thursday night?”

Um, yes.

I had a date with Eli.

Peace muttering thoughts, and do not grudge to keep  
Within the walls of your own breast:  
Who cannot on his own bed sweetly sleep,  
Can on another's hardly rest.

—George Herbert, “Content”



## PURPLE DAYS (CONTINUED)



“Leave, Cleave, and Conceive.” That was our motto. We almost put it on T-shirts.

Marriage was our trademark, our gimmick, our punch line. When you came to the college group at our church, you knew you were going to hear about husbands and wives. Marriage came up in pitches to attend events. (“You know Steve and Laura, who are now happily married, met on Fall Retreat. You should come!”) It came up in our sermons. (“God loves marriage! Let’s look at Genesis 2 again.”) It came up between the chips and carrots at social events. (“So why not Mark? He loves God.”)

The topic of marriage was unavoidable. Not only did our theology often find its way back around to it, but so did our humor, our dating, and our small group studies. Marriage was a veritable theme in our collegiate lives.

## FORGONE FLIRTATIONS

My own preoccupation with marital bliss started way before college, though, and carried on even after I left the dorms. In high school, I journaled frequently about my desire for a romantic, spiritual, child-rearing partner, and I often pined for the day I coddled my own snoozing children on my shoulder.

Like many of my Christian girlfriends, I prepared myself for marriage by striving to maintain a pristine heart. Unlike Eli’s experiences, in my little corner of evangelical subculture, purity was scaled back to the

sublest matters of the heart. Purity was not exclusively about sex, but rather, came so far *before* sex that flirting was often the great evil. Kissing, attention, misdirected thoughts: these were menaces to innocence. And so the whole great mass of men was sieved out through the risk they posed to our pre-married hearts. Boys weren't friends; they were Husbands or Purity Threats.

For instance, when I was a sophomore in high school, I recall going to an event at another high school where I slow danced with a guy friend—he placed his hands on my hips!—and afterward my conscience felt tattered and confused. I went home and cried out in my journal: “Have I been corrupted?”

Feelings like this were a normal part of growing up, and without question, I am grateful for the wisdom others imparted to me. I’m sure they saved me much heartache and foolishness. But a rather large side effect of framing good behavior in such a way was an out-of-proportion expectation for marriage. Because the idea behind purity was to give a whole heart to a future husband, purity led to a pretty radical expansion of marital hopes. Whatever I missed out on for purity’s sake, I would find in marriage. The bliss I would share with a husband would be worth every instance of flirtation forgone. And naturally, even though it was good advice to avoid frivolous relationships, the immediate result was much higher spousal expectations.

Somehow, my desire to be a woman of God translated mainly into being a wife. I was never the girl who played dress-up with a wedding gown or had every detail of her wedding planned, and yet still the expectations were quite high. Though there were obviously exceptions, walking with Christ often felt like being slowly escorted to the altar.

The reasons for this are not totally a mystery. I read Elizabeth Prentiss’s *Stepping Heavenward* and a biography of Susanna Wesley—mother of John and Charles Wesley and seventeen other children—in

addition to other biographies and, of course, novels by Jane Austen, Martha Finley, and the Brontë sisters. Most of my literary appetite at the time was for stories about eighteenth- or nineteenth-century women for whom marriage was a primary preoccupation, regardless of religion or circumstances, because, well, they were eighteenth- or nineteenth-century women with few other avenues open to them. But their message didn't feel outdated to me because it was reiterated in my own life by pastors, teachers, and friends. And though in retrospect I see how grossly I misread many of these books, seeing neon lights behind every marriage reference, the fact that I interpreted everything with such a bias is telling.

Even as I moved out of high school and into college, where those old books felt dusty and distant in light of my new literary cravings—O'Connor, Morrison, Faulkner, and Robinson—I still felt fairly close to the mantra that wifehood and motherhood were a woman's highest calling. It was present in Bible studies, in sermons, in one-on-one's with my mentors. And it came from my mouth as much as from anyone else's. In essence, a vision of what it looked like to seek God had been funneled into one particular context—marriage—and I never stopped to consider that there might be any other way. Certainly I knew that following Christ required transformation on every level—not just regarding men—but those other areas seemed to be matters of secondary concern. And so as wifehood continued to dominate my vision of a Christian woman, I floundered in trying to find a holistic view of discipleship on my own.

## THE MARRIAGE DOME

For me, the confusion of roughly equating marriage to discipleship burdened me with a sense of marital obligation that played itself out dramatically in my dating life. Despite the eye-opening experiences of college, my convictions still clung to me. The upside was that I had little interest in

dating, which seemed like a silly, possibly dangerous waste of time. The downside was when I did date, it was a cataclysmic spiritual crisis.

For example, I came very close to marrying a man I did not want to marry because I thought it was my duty. My boyfriend and I weren't ring shopping, but in our conversations, it was pretty clear that marriage was the expected outcome of our relationship. Normally, this would be fine because marriage *is* the general outcome of a serious relationship, but the trouble was that I felt sinful because I didn't have a great desire to be his wife. I thought I could bring myself around to it when I agreed to date him, but I couldn't. I was sure something was wrong with me. After all, marriage was one of God's favorite things, and it wasn't only supposed to be about warm and fuzzy feelings. Marriage was about finding someone with whom you could glorify God. So I prayed that God would give me the desire to marry my boyfriend. Rather than praying, "*Lord, is marriage what You want for me?*" Or even "*Lord, I want to obey. What are You asking of me?*" I prayed, "*God, make me love this man You have put in my life.*" Not getting married wasn't even on my radar. It wasn't a matter of faith but of logic. God wanted marriage for me and had put this candidate in my life. Therefore, marrying him was inevitable. There was almost a pristine absurdity to my agonized prayer, but it all made sense in the Marriage Dome. And all that agonizing happened in the first month of the relationship, a relationship that lasted maybe, oh, three months.

## MATCHING SOCKS AND BOW TIES

Was I the only marriage-happy one? When I started to ask the question not so long ago, the floodgates opened. I was shocked to learn how widespread the phenomenon was. Any time it came up, I heard single men and women bemoan in unison, regardless of what kind of church or school they attended.

Consider this story a woman in the United Kingdom sent us:

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single woman in possession of a good Bible software program, must be in want of a husband.

At least, that's how it seemed when I first began my American seminary experience. Coming from a small church in Britain, where the single men were generally over sixty and wore matching socks and bow ties, I hadn't experienced too much of the pressure to find myself a husband. That changed when I came to America.

Perhaps I noticed the changed ethos when I looked out at the Christian school's courtyard and realized that the flower beds spelled out "I do." Maybe it was when meeting the endless stream of teenage boys who held Greek textbooks in one hand and a wife in the other. It could have been when a friend and I were being rebuked for our lack of faith by daring to start a sentence with "If I marry..." or when we overheard a young man state that, "There's just something weird about men over thirty that are single... it's just wrong!" It was certainly confirmed with the e-mail from leaders within my church that, as a single woman, I may want to attend an event because, "there are guys there that are really godly."

All of this was informally observed; no one officially said that marriage was God's best for me. Yet, it was evident in the fact that the vast majority of young people believed this to be true and lived lives that pursued this goal, albeit often dressed up in spiritual words and sincere hearts.

Although, on reflection, sometimes they weren't dressed up in spiritual words at all...

"Women like you," said a Christian student to me, "you

know, Christian women close to thirty who are single, are either that way because they had been hurt and are too scared to try relationships again and are like, bitter. Or they're always looking for Prince Charming to sweep them off their feet and are just being picky."

All in all, it was quite a relief to return home.

Whether from flower beds, the pulpit, youth groups, or singles' groups, many Christians have received the impression that marriage is a major centerpiece of the Christian life. And until one obtains that centerpiece, it is often implied, one might run the risk of not being a fully functioning member of the community.

Lauren Winner knows what we're talking about. In *Real Sex*, she says, "For many of my own single years, I cringed when Christians talked about marriage. I was sick of hearing about nuptial bliss, sick of the feeling as if I wasn't participating in authentic Christian life because I wasn't married, sick of feeling inferior to everyone who happened to be a wife."<sup>10</sup>

Christine Colón and Bonnie Field, authors of *Singled Out*, had similar experiences: "In the evangelical world, we kept running into the familiar refrain of 'wait,' or even worse, advice from experts telling us that we weren't fully adults until we married, that we couldn't fully participate in the church until we were married, that we couldn't develop fully as Christians until we were married, or that we were sinful for not fulfilling our God-given duties as wives and mothers."<sup>11</sup>

Debra Farrington, author of *One Like Jesus: Conversations on the Single Life*, told *Christianity Today* that "Churches have unconsciously bought into the belief that being single is being miserable. They might pat singles' heads and say it's okay, but they don't really believe that."<sup>12</sup>

And listen to what Mary Jo Weaver says in her article, "Single Blessedness."

Single people are treated as people with a “problem” by the churches that are, for the most part, highly oriented to families.... If churches do recognize single people at all, they tend to organize events for them in order that they can meet and marry and therefore fit into the life of the church.<sup>13</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum there are those like Debbie Maken, author of *Getting Serious About Getting Married: Rethinking the Gift of Singleness*, who don’t bemoan the plight of singles but rather are frustrated by the fact that there even are single Christians in the church. Maken is not only an advocate of marriage but she actually takes a firm stance *against singleness*. In *Getting Serious About Getting Married*, a book endorsed by figures as prominent as Albert Mohler, Maken goes so far as to say marriage is a biblical mandate and thus understanding singleness as a good thing is “unbiblical.”<sup>14</sup> Others may not be writing books, but I wonder how many men and women unconsciously operate on Maken’s thesis that there is something biblically wrong with the single life.

Now, to be clear, esteeming marriage in Christian circles is by no means a bad thing, and we should clearly cherish the gift from God that it is (see Hebrews 13:4), but when marriage is lifted far above singleness, problems quickly arise. For example, numbers. Statistics suggest that many singles have left the church or are in the process of leaving. As Barry Danylak observes in his excellent book *Redeeming Singleness*, “A recent study by George Barna suggests [unmarried adults] are significantly underrepresented in every facet of church life.” Danylak analyzes the data:

While on a typical week slightly more than half of married Americans attend a church service, only about one of every three single (adult) Americans attends. Presence at a service is much more likely among widowed singles than among divorced or

never-married adults. Though 23 percent of married adults additionally attend Sunday school class, only 15 percent of single adults attend. Although singles might have more discretionary leisure time for church-related activities, fewer than one in five regularly volunteer at church, attend a Sunday school class, or participate in a small group. On the other hand, singles are 50 percent more likely to volunteer their services to a nonprofit charitable group during a typical week than to offer themselves to the ministry of their church.<sup>15</sup>

For anyone who grew up in a marriage-happy community, this probably doesn't come as a surprise.

To make a long story short, marriage-happiness could be found on all sides. In the church, marriage was the finale of a purity race well run. It was the line across the room that curiously partitioned congregations. In the society around us, divorce rates were shockingly high, and weddings were a \$70 billion industry. How was I not to be confused?

## CAUSE AND EFFECT

Eli and I were sweating under the neon lights of marriage-happiness. The problem was not marriage. It was the way we viewed it and perhaps the way our communities viewed it as well. We could only see a bright, shiny marquee rather than the vast landscape around it.

It's hard to explain exactly how we got here, and one can imagine at least a few good reasons. You could say that Christians exalted marriage because we lived in a culture that exalted romance, and therefore "Christian marriage" was a way to redirect a prevailing value. Nearly everyone in our society—Christian or not—wanted a meaningful relationship. Perhaps we had tried to channel that interest into a more Christian form.

Or perhaps marriage-happiness is our attempt to rescue relationships from divorce. People were giving up on marriage sooner than ever, and many were even questioning the validity of marriage as an institution. And the damage caused by broken families is staggering.

Or maybe marriage-happiness is about sexuality, i.e., people are sleeping around a lot more, and so we nudge them to get married. Studies suggest Christians aren't all that different when it comes to sexual ethics, and so perhaps a marriage focus is applied as a remedy (e.g., "Take marriage seriously!" or "Get married before temptation overtakes you!"). Or perhaps you could make a similar point about selfishness: singles are told to get married to avoid selfishness, another huge problem in our society.

Or maybe marriage-happiness is about text. Maybe marriage-happiness isn't the result of cultural pressures but rather is rooted biblically in two passages: Genesis 1–2 and Ephesians 5. If a person takes a strong view of these verses, and many do, then perhaps these passages alone are all the explanation needed for the way things are.

In all likelihood, each rationale probably plays a part, and yet it's impossible to trace our marriage-happiness back to a single, clear explanation. Marriage-happiness has roots in each, and probably includes other explanations as well. And really, *why* marriage-happiness exists is beside the point in this book; the point is to think about what it might cost us.

A certain brother asked an old man saying, “Tell me, Father, wherefore is it that the monks travail in discipline and yet receive not such grace as the ancient Fathers had?” And the old man said to him, “Then love was so great that each man set his neighbour on high: but now hath love grown cold and the whole world is set in malice.”

—*The Desert Fathers*



WATERBROOK MULTNOMAH  
PUBLISHING GROUP

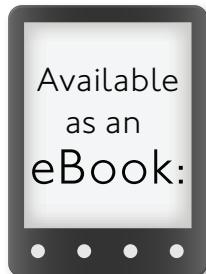
A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.

## Want to keep reading? You've got options:

Purchase a copy direct from the publisher or from your favorite retailer:

[BUY NOW](#)

Download a copy for your eReader and keep reading right away:



[amazon kindle](#)

[Google books](#)

[iBooks](#)

[nook](#)  
by Barnes & Noble

[And More...](#)