

Chapter 24

Let Me Tell You Of The Pretty Girl

Riding In The Front Seat

So that was the Holladay girl of whom a would-be matchmaker was quick to apprise me. I can see her now as she and her mother walked to seats near the front in the little frame building of the South Park Church of Christ in Beaumont, Texas. Both she and her mother were of such simple beauty and pleasing countenance as to catch the eye of all. I would need no matchmaker to point her out!

Was I interested? Cool it. Don't get excited! Two mountainous barriers separated her and me. First, she gave me no notice for she was already dating a handsome young executive of the telephone company where she was payroll clerk. Second, I was devastatingly timid. My painful lack of social confidence and my immaturity in developing relationships had made a 25-year old bachelor of me. "Faint heart ne'er won fair lady."

After graduating from Abilene Christian College in 1941, I taught school one year, began preaching around Portales, New Mexico and at Sundown, Texas, and returned for the spring semester of college in 1944. The semester completed, I had immediate plans to go northwest to Utah with a group, but one unexpected telephone call spun me to the opposite direction to Beaumont to become an assistant preacher. Serving a different congregation there was another bachelor with whom I began to associate. We commiserated but gave each other little confidence. After a few months, however, it became evident that the Holladay girl and her fiancée had broken up. My friend and I decided to make a daring move. We double-dated – he with Elma Lea Holladay and I with another girl. We went in my 1938 Ford. It was fun! Let's do it again!

After the next midweek service, I approached Elma Lea and explained, "Luryl and I want you to double-date with us again Friday evening, -- but this time I want you to ride in the front seat." She giggled, and agreed.

Yes, you are ahead of my story. She has been riding in the front seat ever since that date fifty-four years ago! More than a year later, on October 8, 1945, that seating arrangement became permanent, by the grace of God.

No, it was not love at first sight for either of us, but as we began dating, our common interests and somewhat similar upbringing made us comfortable with being together. She, too, grew up under the hardships of the Great Depression. Elma, her mother, was from the Big Thicket of southeast Texas of a strong heritage in the Church of Christ which she instilled in her only child. Her father, Watt, from Alabama, was a good and loving man who had made no commitment to religion. Having only minimal education, they gave Elma Lea no encouragement to go to college. She remembers a happy childhood growing up in the oil field town of Daisetta, 35 miles from Beaumont and 50 miles from Houston. In high school she was sought out by the popular boys. Finishing high school, she moved to a job in Beaumont, and soon her father found a job in the old Spindletop oil field, and the family was reunited in Beaumont.

In our developing relationship while dating, I began to feel her strengths filling areas of my weakness. She was outgoing and confident, a leader by nature, and socially mature without sophistication to stifle her spontaneity and buoyancy of spirit. These qualities, along with her communicative skills and expressive affection for others, were lacking in me. In her personality I began to feel a complementing of my person. Maybe love has a selfish aspect, for we are drawn to the person who compensates for our inadequacies.

It was fun being with a girl of such exuberant happiness. Even though many of our dates were to my preaching appointments, that was fine with her for she loved going to

services. In fact, she liked preachers, having dated preachers before. We never went to a movie during our year of courtship!

My lack of social confidence was so deep that I think I could never have come to love a woman who was not attractive. This girl had beauty to spare. When she entered a room, everyone noticed! She received the special deference that people unconsciously give to those with physical charm. And she thrived on it! This twenty year-old, slim and shapely girl entering my life was 5' 5", had high cheeks with wide-set blue eyes and light brown hair. Whether they were untouched or crimson, her thin lips were tantalizing. The pleasantness of her countenance was enhanced by a fair and flawless complexion which radiated when she conversed with animation – a special glow which, unfortunately, was never photogenic. Clothing of delicate pastels of beige, peach, or pink accented her complexion and femininity. When she looked at a person individually and smiled, her love and acceptance were felt, and her transparency made her easily approachable. Her unaffected beauty even without makeup was striking, and in her "Sunday best" it was exquisite. Sometimes she wore a flower, such as a red hibiscus, in her hair. At other times her hair was pulled closely around a "rat" so that the pure features of her face were highlighted. Often she wore broad-brimmed hats which accented her classic profile. Some said she looked like Greer Garson, a movie star of that time. As you would expect, the attention given her boosted my self-esteem. Too, I could see that her delightful beauty emerged from inward spirituality and intelligence.

After several dates, we were returning to her home from one of my appointments. Impulsively, feeling that the time was propitious, swerving to the curb and stopping the car, I reached around her to pull her close, and gave her our first kiss. But in that motion, I toppled her broad-brimmed hat off into the back of the car! She giggled, but that should have been an omen to her forewarning of my lifelong inclination for bumbling

romantic gestures. The kiss was memorable, and she continued riding in the front seat!

Although Elma Lea was not quite as prudish and rigid as I was, she was clean and wholesome. We both detested profane and vulgar speech. In fun she could be impishly flirtatious and would sometimes respond in coquettish "baby talk" which, to me at least, was most charming.

As the several months passed, I grew to love her deeply. Her acceptance of me was a bit more cautious. I could appreciate her wanting to be sure. To this day, however, she has had no way of comprehending the change she was making in my life. As I felt her growing love for me, a sense of indescribable peace calmed my being. I suppose it was like the peace that passes understanding of which Paul wrote. Though there were the urgent fleshly passions, they became secondary to the sense of loving and being loved. All seemed right in my world with her in the front seat.

Because of conscience, neither of us would allow ourselves to violate the sexual sanctity that belongs to marriage. More than that, we counted it as part of the delightful romance of love to be wholly fulfilled with each other as a holy bond. Premarital expression would have destroyed an essential part of the true love story by allowing sexual urges to rule over love.

Soon after our marriage we began our thirteen-year stay in South Louisiana. There the young bride truly became "the preacher's wife." Then, and thereafter, she rode in the front seat with me, not just as a passenger. We shared the driving. Throughout our years we worked as a pair and shared decision making.

Church activity became our life. She soon found her place teaching classes on Sunday and Wednesday evening, and then the ladies' Bible class. She has made countless calls with me in homes and hospitals. She has organized and led activities and has been involved in countless showers. She has prepared and helped serve enough food to feed the troops. Most visiting preachers stayed in our home. Elma Lea liked this role except

when people began to expect her to perform duties because she was the preacher's wife. She resented those who would take advantage of her in that respect.

Leading with her heart, she was sometimes hurt by less thoughtful people. Criticisms, which come inevitably, cut her deeply. I think she has always felt the stings inflicted on me more than I did. While sitting through forty years of my lackluster pulpit efforts, she has always been my kindest critic. Even in my most glaring displays of stupidity, she has always been gracious and forbearing.

Some of you may be surprised at my referring to her as *Elma Lea*. She received the *Elma* from her mother but never really liked the name. About twenty years ago, after her mother had come to live with us, two *Elmas* in one house seemed to be too many! So she asked everyone just to call her *Lea*. Surprisingly, all friends and family, and even her mother in her eighties, dropped the first name immediately.

Although Lea had done little cooking when we married, she learned from her mother whose country cooking was unexcelled. Soon, however, Lea could give her competition in cooking Southern, country, and Cajun kinds of dishes. We always shared housework even as we shared in church work. From our first days together until now, I have prepared breakfast each morning.

Because she has liked to sleep later, she has not always indicated that I was doing her a big favor in awakening her for breakfast! I have admired her for her spotless housekeeping and for always being fresh and clean in body and dress. Though she had to operate frugally, she always managed to keep the house tastefully decorated and to choose clothing that accented her beauty. Even with no formal training, her artistic creativity was evident in color coordination, flower arranging, china painting, and free-hand sketching, but her delightful femininity excluded all things inventive, mechanical, and athletic. In the singing in our smaller congregations, Lea's rich voice could be distinguished in the crowd. The song leaders leaned

on her to help start and carry on the singing. She sang at funerals and weddings. On trips with our children we enjoyed long sessions of singing as we traveled.

After a few years together, we made the big decision to start our family. But it was not that simple. Years passed with no prospect. When we had about given up hope after five years, on our first vacation to the Rockies, Lea seemed to have caught a virus – one which lasted a full, miserable nine months. But as she held Sol Watson for the first time, all the misery was forgotten.

Plans for another child went even worse. Years passed and hope died, but in the tenth year after Sol's birth, after a full term of unrelieved misery, Mira Lea turned it all into joy.

How blessed our children have been to have Lea for a mother. They received her full devotion. She was the ever-present communicator and nurturer developing confidence and responsibility in them in a happy, loving home. She is rewarded in seeing their exemplary lives and beautiful families.

See what I mean about my bumbling efforts to be romantic! I intended this to be a romantic tribute to Lea but have made it an analysis in retrospect! Her forbearance with my less emotional nature has not been without my appreciation all along. While her right-brain and my left-brain temperaments have generally complemented each other, there have been inevitable gaps allowing for insensitivity. I know I have allowed routine of life to dull our journey together at times. Probably many, many more times than I have realized, my selfish or insensitive words or lack of emotional support have grieved her. Yes, we have spoken harshly to one another at times. In those instances we deprived ourselves of happy moments, but at no time did we doubt our love for one another. There were no wrecks, but only bumps and potholes, on our road of marriage. At all times I was happy that she was riding in the front seat with me. There would have been no happiness for me otherwise.

One of the distresses felt in our marriage was the frugality bound on her by my minimal income. In church life, most of our associates had much better incomes than we, and that put a limitation on full social participation with them. We were never in want, but it would have been nice for me to have been able to treat Lea to a few luxuries like freedom to eat out and to buy new clothes, and less limited trips to the hairdressers and department stores. Literally, she was able to ride in the front seat in only one new car, a 1947 Plymouth.

Except for the few years that Lea served as a church secretary, she was the true homemaker, as the children and I liked for her to be. I count it as a singular blessing that most every day of our married life I ate three meals with her and was at home at bedtime each night. In that role she was truly my partner. Although she never prepared a sermon or wrote an essay for me, I give her equal credit for whatever good or ill may accrue from those I formulated. I am honored that her name is joined with mine on the title page of the many thousands of books we have published.

Like Paul learning to accept his "thorn in the flesh," Lea has dealt with persistent headaches with patience and stamina. Then, while Mira was still an infant, a truly disturbing and enduring problem intruded. Like some diabolical power intent on suspending both mental and physical function, periods of depression would render her listless, introverted, and disconnected. Doctors knew little about bi-polar disorder then and had practically nothing with which to treat it. Acquaintances offered ill-advised opinions. Longer periods of relative relief have allowed more stability of mood in spite of the ever-present lurking of inexplicable, abrupt bi-polar mood swings. Depression affects the organic functions of the body. Consequently, she has suffered from various other disorders which has demanded constant supervision of doctors. With admirable courage and determination, she has kept her sweet, loving spirit, has learned to bear patiently with pain while still

reaching for the joys of family and friends, and has continued in worthwhile activities.

The relentless encroachment of time has taken its toll from both of us. The sensuous embrace has given way to our clinging to each other to steady our faltering walk as we go about. Yet that is an affirmation of love, and no touch from her hand goes unnoticed. Lea is now very weak and feeble. It pains me to see her difficulty with such simple things as in buttoning a blouse with her arthritic, trembling fingers or as holding a spoon steadily enough to eat with it. But beneath this overlay of the bodily effects of time and disease, I can still see the shapely, energetic, and buoyant love of my life riding in the front seat at the various milestones of life.

On the farm in my youth, we had a pair of mules – Ol' Pete and Ol' Kate. They were a team, working together. Kate was more spirited, and resisted being bridled. But Pete was compliant. As you bridled and began harnessing him, Kate would come and stand beside him waiting to be harnessed also. After working long hours together and being turned out to pasture, they would graze side by side. Then they would stand contentedly side by side facing in opposite directions dreamily fanning the flies from each other.

That sort of pictures our married life, with us now being in the latter mode! (Now, is that romantic – or what! See what I mean?)

Thank you for listening. I wanted you to know more about this pretty girl who has changed and filled my life. Has my depiction been more idyllic than real? Have facts been distorted and embellished by nostalgic enhancement and tricks of memory? Be that as it may. The marvel is that my memories are of a life of happiness and fulfillment enabled by Lea's lasting love rather than of bitterness and regrets over incompatibility, jealousy, heartaches, and rejections.

Other than for Lea's health problems, our life in retirement has been peaceful, happy, and rewarding. With enduring love we try to enjoy each fleeting day. If the Lord

wills, on October 8 we shall have been married fifty-three years and on November 22 Lea will be 75, and two days later I will reach fourscore.

Although we are not eager to leave this life, the imminent transition holds little fear for us. Without morbidity we are opting for the simplicity of cremation with our cremains being buried with the least of ceremony close to others of my family at Rochester, Texas.

When we put off this mortal vesture, we shall be clothed with immortality which I think will be immediate. Flesh and blood do not inherit the world of the spirit. Not much is told us about heavenly relationships except that there will be no marriage. Will we recognize each other without fleshly identification? Will we still love each other? Will we remember our life on earth? I cannot know, but I can trust.

When you cross over, look me up. There beside me, I think you will find that pretty girl still riding in the front seat! []