

AND THEN CAME LOVE.

She found his online journal during a cold blustery day in October and cried. It wasn't that it was him. She didn't even really know who *he* was. It was the words that were written, inner desires for the Father, expressing a reflection of her own heart in a way she hadn't known possible. He posted at random times. Late at night. Early in the morning. His heart echoed through the typing, a small expression of his desires and dreams...a vision of the future he had only started to grasp.

Their first interaction was through the written word. When you write someone you can read it and re-read it. You can see what you said and what you didn't. You can be safe. It was a casual recognition. In a world of online flurries, it was but one drifting throughout cyberspace that January, but as time passed a small flurry turned into several. As the interaction grew, their hearts continued to connect. Not with each other directly, but with the new thoughts and ideas they experienced from sharing with each other.

As time passed the words became more consistent. The acknowledgments became questions. The answers became encouragement...and wisdom came to knock on her heart. This was new territory for her. She didn't know him, other than what other people told her. She had seen him in passing. He seemed safe. Godly.

The letters continued, all of them being examined with care before they were sent so there might not be foolish interpretation. She felt herself return to a single question. Was this a path of wisdom? It wasn't that the letters were wrong. They weren't. They were focused on the center of her life, focused on obeying the Father's will. Walking the path of faith and discovering the hope of eternity. But they were still letters written to him. Letters to a male. Personal words. Personal communication. Was this guarding her heart? Was this allowing him to guard his? Her prayers began to pour forth. She attempted to walk in all things with obedience. The future was uncertain. Her honor for her earthly and heavenly father was not. The path was uncertain. Her footsteps of obedience, once the path was known, were not. Her prayers asked for purpose, answers...but especially a heart of joyful obedience.

His path was one of blind faith. He had problems and knew it. Girls were about as far from his mind as possible. His focus was to place the Father at the center, knowing through experience what happened when life wasn't built on that foundation. Her casual words became a new aspect. A new perspective on the desire that burned in him. An encouragement. Words spoken from a place of experience, not a place of wishing. They were welcomed, but carefully welcomed. The last thing he wanted was another heartache on his behalf, an open wound caused by not guarding and honoring those around him. When he wrote he tried to keep his words centered on the Rock that he had seen demonstrated. Christ.

Each began looking forward to the written word. Each became more careful. To think upon it outside the moment of writing became common. Him, not wanting to lead her into something he possibly couldn't and shouldn't be. Her not wanting to lead him, or be led into anything that wasn't the Father's will. The letters echoed their journey and experiences. Both seeking the Father's face. Both encouraging the other to keep Christ the center. Sometimes weeks went by without a word being written. Sometimes hundreds of words were passed in a matter of hours.

He was praying in earnest. It had been six months since he had even entertained thoughts of a relationship. Friends were joyfully getting married. Some of them much younger. Doubt pressed in. Fear. Dare he even ask God? The time - would it be made known? The one - would she appear? Had she appeared? The answer was sudden. Immediate. Dramatic. All would be revealed by October. Seek Yahweh's face. Seek Yahweh's will. He was satisfied. What was another six months?

The next day he realized that the six months would be long. Hard. He had just experienced six months of healing. Of grace. Six months where it was unnatural to consider the possibility of a relationship. The time of testing had arrived. Would he remain seeking only Yahweh's face? Only Yahweh's will? As the grace lifted suddenly he prayed for the strength needed for the upcoming months.

The wedding was fast approaching. A glorious and joyful occasion. She was busy planning the event that would change her sister's life forever. She wanted wisdom. She wanted her Heavenly Father's will – and it wasn't being made clear. She notified everyone of her absence from the online world. A time to plan for the wedding...a time to consider the wisdom of her past letters to him.

The wedding was beyond joy. A sweet goodbye. Her sister's dreams answered by a faithful God through a faithful man. She rejoiced.

He welcomed her back when she returned to the online world. An acknowledgment. She answered briefly, with courtesy. Time passed and their words slowed.

The day was blue and white. Puffy clouds traveled slowly across the warm sky. It was after church and he was invited to his friend's house. There were several people there, not unusual for this particular friend. His heart raced when he heard she was there, and not only that she was there, but that everyone had arrived to celebrate her birthday. He had known it was her birthday, sending her the first long letter in several months to wish her a happy day the night before. He hadn't known he would see her face to face – ever. The depth of the letters, combined with the sudden knowledge that she was in the house left him surprised and confused. Should he talk to her? Would that lead her on? He avoided her. Seeing her in passing, but not seeking her out. Not approaching her. He was shocked at his own nervousness and restless heartbeat. He hadn't experienced something so unnerving around girls before.

And then she was next to him. Greeting him. Thanking him for his encouraging letter. Laughing. He relaxed...slowly. The day continued as the other people swirled them into the events. Their quick conversation ended. His ride left suddenly that evening, trying to outrun a storm. He didn't say goodbye.

Her birthday party was unique. He had arrived unexpected. She wanted to visit, to talk to him face to face - on the same level as their written words - but she was nervous. As the day passed she avoided eye contact, pretending to be involved in other things. The minutes continued. Steeling her nerves, she realized what it would be like if it truly happened that a word didn't pass.

The conversation was short and sweet. She hoped that perhaps it could continue when fewer people were around, as they both returned to the demands of those around.

Then he was gone.

Her sadness and disappointment overwhelmed her – confused her. Was she looking to humans, placing expectations on them for assurance? Was she seeking for a man to fill a void in her heart? She struggled, trying to give her expectations and desires over to the Father. The pain was still there, underneath it all, even as she prayed herself into a fitful sleep.

The birthday girl was with a friend a few days later. It was Thursday and they were enjoying the sights of beautiful city fountains. The friend invited her to the evening Bible study. She was gradually swayed into spending the rest of the evening with mostly strangers.

He walked into the door. Noisy. Dirty. And nearly froze. For the second time in a week she was there. He greeted her, his loud acknowledgment hiding his speeding heart. The night was spent with hardly any other communication. The evening neared a close. He hadn't said anything but a passing word to her directly. How could he have shared so much through letters and not even have the ability to speak to her in person? He was confused; attributing it to his earnest desire not to lead anyone on, his new habit of avoiding those whose hearts might be drawn to him. But she was walking out the door. It wasn't wrong to say goodbye, was it? He made it out to her friend's car. Small questions led to the goodbye. Would she come again sometime? She thought she might.

Her ride home was a silent one. The evening had more impact than just seeing him once again. This group of strangers had a radical desire for the Father, which ignited in her heart a passionate time of spiritual awakening. As her heart burned to seek the Heart of her Heavenly Father she began to spend late evening hours under the stars and the moon, pacing empty streets and parking lots.

Her steps and choices drew her close to the Father and as her past was revealed and healed – their letters grew. Both of them seeking the Father's heart and seeking to obey. She, praying for the ability and will to honor her parents in everything, including joining them in a distant mission field. He commanded to seek Yahweh's will with open hands. Their hearts were on the same journey, and therefore eager to understand a different view of their same path.

Having met him face to face, she laughingly joked in an unusually long letter that such long letters would be easier talked about in person. He was surprised. Was she being led on? He wrote her in detail, asking even more about her father and how personal contact and relationships should be honored in her family. His past had been a past of several girls that were close friends, often conversing without any need of parental approval. Would personal conversation, face to face, lead her on? Was that a foreign idea to her? Was that really an option for her? She answered in detail, sharing past experiences, wisdom and history. Her dad had given her the blessing for friendly conversation in groups, a practical safeguard for guarding the love her heart had to give.

The Bible study was every other week. It seemed to him that it should be every week.

The friends of the Bible study had decided to go out for barbecue on Saturday and maybe a baseball game. He looked forward to it, knowing that pure baseball was boring. The barbecue was yet another awkward moment for him, the conversation of the friends around the table seeming stale – yet he lacked the ability to draw her into words. Lacked a starting

place. They were cordial and talked of little things. Small talk. Talk that wasn't his heart or desire.

Or hers.

His annual July Colorado trip came. He checked his letter box. She had written. In her quest to be obedient, the Father had asked her to stop writing. Perhaps the moment became clear as he sat back in the chair, feeling the full impact of her words. He had to trust them. The Father's will was good and she had certainly heard from the Father. His mind raced, and tried to make sense of the sudden emptiness he felt. Had he not been trying to avoid leading her on? Had he not been approaching the Father with open hands, denying any thoughts of attraction? It seemed that his heart was demonstrating otherwise. His attraction was more than the quest for a like spirit on the same journey. It was different. As he realized it, he consciously chose to praise the Father. God was good, using this to reveal the true nature of a heart with expectations. But that choice didn't immediately lighten the load. His heart was heavy, even as he lay next to the first campfire in cool Colorado night air. Prayer and journaling lifted the burden slowly, as deep into the night he tried to seek only the Father's will for his life. Painfully trying to lay down the newly realized attraction.

She hadn't thought it would be a big deal – but her act of obedience forced her into confusion. As she stopped writing, thoughts of him seemed to come forth more than ever. The struggle to guard her heart didn't get easier – it went from near victory to daily battling and seeking the Father's heart. She began to wonder, praying for a clear path of certainty... Did he even feel anything close to what she was suddenly struggling with? Certainly not. Surely she was playing the fool. He was concerned with the Father, not with her. Even as she wondered about his thoughts, she prayed against her mind drifting to such ideas. Such thoughts were dangerous. They left her heart open.

As time passed both experienced confusion. A deepening attraction, seemingly made stronger by separation. He continually found himself thinking and praying for her – only to stop himself and pray for open hands. Trusting that only the Father's will be done in the Father's timing. She found herself coming up with reasons why she shouldn't be thinking of him, why she shouldn't be continually praying for him.

It came about that the Bible study would be held at her family's house. He was volunteered to teach. The thought was somewhat frightening for him. He had something to share. The Father had been doing a great work in his heart. But to enter the home of someone he hadn't met and share his testimony – both with those older and within hearing of *her* father and mother – the thought was offered up in prayer.

As she listened to him speak - her heart was impacted. She lay in bed that night, overwhelmed, yet again. Was it just coincidence that the path the Father had her walking and discovering seemed to be the very same one the Father had him on?

The next August night was gorgeous. Stunning. An apricot moon was slowly drifting across the sky, casting shadows. She was on a stranger's driveway. She had accepted their offer for a bed this night of the conference but couldn't sleep.

She was filled with certainty. She had been searching and desiring the clear will of the Father concerning him. Desperate, struggling to live life with wisdom and thinking the battle was being lost. But under these stars she had sudden certainty – and peace. Her heart was calm, and she couldn't explain it. But she knew.

He was the one.

The peace wouldn't leave her heart - yet she didn't trust herself. Was this just her own wishful thinking or the voice of the Father? How could she, a mere human, discern such things? She closed her eyes, a cool breeze playing with her hair and prayed...if this was His voice - His will - would He confirm it in her parents hearts? In his parents hearts? And especially in his heart? Letting out her breath, she opened her hands. They were empty. All was in the Father's hands now. She need only still her heart and wait. Her shadow slowly grew longer as she continued to pray into the night.

He knew before the time came that she would be missing some of the Bible studies. California was calling her name for three weeks. As she left, he used it as an opportunity to continue to seek the Father's will with open hands. He tried to stop thinking about the strange nervousness he felt around her. To stop the countless minutes his mind would start to drift towards what she might be doing or what she might think about anything. He offered it up continually in prayer. Sometimes praying in earnest, late into the night. More often than not, muttering 'open hands' under his breath throughout the day - turning his mind from thoughts of her.

Her time in California was a resolution to seek the Father's heart in all things. Times of prayer alone, journaling and praise awakened a wellspring of peace and blessing. She sought God - and God answered the cry that her heart had for intimacy with her Creator.

One evening an update arrived. She had left new thoughts on her internet journal while in California. It was long. He read it as his friends, upstairs, wondered where he was. He almost regretted reading it...almost. Open hands were so hard when the attraction was so strong. Her way with words amazed him. He felt as if he were there, feeling the same things she was. Praying for the same burdens. Asking God the same questions. One of his friends read it, laughing, agreeing it was a powerful read. He didn't even try to explain in words how powerful it was to his heart. His frustrated sigh and the throwing of his body into the couch communicated to his friend enough of his struggles.

He heard the news late Wednesday night. She had been returning home to Kansas with her sister and brother-in-law. Their car was hijacked. They had been held at gunpoint. The new burden for her...for prayer...was a tidal wave. It drew him into deeper confusion, as he attempted to balance his time in true prayer while trying to refrain his heart from worrying or wondering in a way that left it unguarded anymore than it already was. He listened to a phone message from her father. Would it be possible that he could go out and get the three of them? He was grateful that her mother had already left. He would have gone, but it wouldn't have made guarding his heart any easier.

When she heard he almost came - she was terrified about what her reaction might have been. She was already tired and emotional from the experience - and with her repeated need to give up her attraction to the Father she truly didn't know what her reaction would be to seeing him.

He spent the next several days hearing second hand news, but not fully knowing how she was. It was torture.

A birthday party brought them together again. He was excited. Nervous. She was weary. Struggling to smile. They tried to act normal, as though talking with each other was the farthest thing from their minds. Only when the party was almost over, under the shelter

of a giant oak, did they begin to talk in earnest. She was struggling – trusting in God’s goodness despite feeling a deep loss for the stolen personal items. He shared encouragement. Christ the center. What the enemy had stolen, paid back more than full. Her heart smiled silently, thanking the Father for this man – his heart.

That evening they were both invited to see a movie in their friend’s basement. He decided to skip out on other engagements when he learned she would be going. After a generous portion of Breyer’s ice cream and a movie, thoughts turned to discussion. The question of the evening? The new *Pride and Prejudice* or the old. She was quiet, afraid to reveal the whirlwind of thoughts that the evening had stirred in her mind.

She left that night in a composed panic. She knew he had decided to come once he knew she would be there. Was he attracted to her? The possibility, despite the peace several weeks earlier, scared her. It was a risk. A jump into the unknown. The mere prospect risked heartache, and with the coming missionary field it *couldn't* be risked. She resolved to cut off all contact – even the every other week Bible study.

Her parents noticed her agitation when she got home. She shared her heart and her resolve, and expected their blessing. Their response shocked her. They challenged her to not run away. They didn’t feel that she was walking in foolishness and encouraged her to trust that the Father would reveal His plan to him. They urged her to continue as normal - to continue to expect the Father’s blessing. As they spoke, her heart stopped. The suddenness of their prompting reminded her of the August evening and her prayers that His will would be confirmed in her parents hearts. Here her parents were at peace, challenging her to continue the path she was on, despite her fear of the unknown. Resolve entered her heart as she faced the fear, her parents blessing her for it.

As she accepted the possibility and turned her attraction into specific intercession for his heart and his future – she tried to find the balance of timing, faith, and not having expectations. She was, after all, leaving the country in a few months. She tried not to imagine a relationship at all, but when she did, she imagined it years down the road. Her heart gradually grasped a form of freedom, no longer fighting the attraction that was taking place. The internal struggle slowly faded from denial into acceptance, and from acceptance into intercession and faith for the Father’s timing and future.

The battle certainly wasn’t over as often doubt entered her heart. Could not her and her parents be completely wrong, especially considering the future plans to leave the country? And what about their differences? Where not other girls much more qualified to walk beside him? Yet even the moments of darkest doubt were overcome. Peace flowed into her heart. Surely these things were not beyond the Father’s reach. Surely he would glorify Himself, even if it were through years of continued silence and waiting. His Word was clear.

Wait. Have faith.

It had been nearly six months – and he had held onto the word with faith. As his attraction grew and October came closer, he realized that if something drastic didn’t change he would know the answer when October came. He felt as if he already knew, but tried to stop thinking about it to walk in obedience. He refused, time after time, to acknowledge his attraction or make plans in his mind until October arrived.

As her parents watched the friendship, they continued to earnestly pray - praying that his heart would be turned fully towards her. As the time to depart grew closer, they did

not know if he was truly attracted to their daughter – but wanted to discover the truth before much longer. Doing so would help put their daughter’s mind at ease, and make certain the need for her to join them in leaving the country. The tickets needed to be ordered by the end of September.

All of a sudden, doubt entered her mind. The peace she had felt about leaving the country vanished. What did this mean? Was this the Father leading her heart or just her own desire to stay? Her parents refrained from buying the tickets during the last week of September, feeling something big was waiting to happen.

His parents had been encouraging him through it all. He had opened up to them fully when he realized the depth of his attraction. They had prayed repeatedly for discernment, sharing wisdom for seeking the Father’s will in obedience and for walking out relationships with others – including her.

As October neared he tried to ignore the approaching time. He grew detached from others. His friends, whom he had asked to pray for him through the six months, were eager. They asked him if he had any idea the path he would take. He refused to answer – knowing that to stop waiting on the Father now wouldn’t be walking in obedience. God knew the timing. God knew the path. He did not.

Wednesday, the bonfire went late. He arrived home and checked his email. Her father had sent one – could he meet the next day to talk? His son (her brother) wanted to look into some skill sets for running a business - perhaps he could help? The schedule was arranged. They would meet for lunch.

Her dad approached her. Did she trust him? Would she be at peace with any decision he made concerning her potential relationship with this man? Yes, she trusted him. And though her heart trembled, she trusted that her Heavenly Father would make His will and timing clear in the heart of her earthly father. The email quickly followed, asking for a lunch meeting. As the potential jump into the unknown drew closer the tension returned to her heart. She found herself wanting to trust – yet nervous. Afraid of her expectations and emotions. Afraid of her own inadequacy...of possible disappointment. She lifted her eyes to Yahweh; she *would* quiet her heart before Him. She *would* wait on His perfect faithfulness. Surely He was all she needed; she would not let her peace depend on the heart of one man. She fasted the day of the lunch meeting, praying earnestly for a clear revelation of obedience.

The lunch was great. Her father wasn’t one to talk about light subjects. They explored topic after topic, his brother and her brother listening. He didn’t know her father had been praying. He didn’t even know that she shared the attraction he had been suppressing in prayer. But as her father continued to ask, to discover, to seek...he began to wonder. The questions were unusual. What do you look for in a future spouse? What are your dreams? Vision? How is the business going? It seemed to be a regular background check; not that he had a problem with it. To him surface conversations were a waste of time. As questions were asked he heard himself share with her father Yahweh’s word concerning October. Even as he shared he was surprised he had. Regardless, as the conversation turned to other things, wisdom was passed from her father to him and he was encouraged in the faith and in his work. Would her father meet with him again? Maybe for breakfast? He had always been one to try to build relationships with those he respected and those who encouraged. Her father said yes. Monday was set.

As he opened his van door to leave, his heart stopped. Monday? He looked at the little white calendar on his phone. Monday was October 1st. He freaked out. He didn't have an answer. He didn't expect one by the first of October. He expected the Father to reveal it around the 31st. Did her father seem to be testing the waters? Did she possibly share an interest and her father was checking into it? His brother laughed, thinking that it was a safe guess. If her father was so blunt with others around, how blunt would he be on Monday?

The Saturday before October 1st she prayed most of the morning. She finally made the final decision. She would leave the country with her family. She settled on the decision because it was the one that required the most sacrifice. She felt she was to choose the hard thing, and expect the Father's blessing. She told her parents to buy the tickets. She didn't know they were holding off until after the Monday morning meeting.

He talked to his parents as soon as he could, asking for their wisdom. His parents patiently talked through the details with him, applying practical wisdom and blessing for whatever the Father had in store for the upcoming morning. As the morning meeting drew near he stayed up most of the night. Praying. Thinking. Talking. His heart knew the answer, but he couldn't believe it had arrived so quickly. (Or had it?) Perhaps it would be a normal breakfast. But knowing what he did about her father he couldn't let himself think the conversation would not drift towards the attraction of the last several months. Would such an admittance of the attraction to her father not be the start of a dream coming true?

He drove into town, prayers on his lips. He had settled upon the full truth – not yet knowing the Father's complete will – but trusting that what had been walked out was obedience. He would share his testimony. His journey. His attraction.

Her father asked him what was on his mind. He started gingerly. It was enough. Her father opened up, telling the other side of the journey. Her prayers. Her openness. Her attraction.

He was amazed.

As the conversation continued, story after story confirming to him the reality of what was happening, he felt hope rising. Time was short. Their family needed to purchase tickets that day. Was this the path? Come so quickly and so suddenly? He knew it was – but he had to continue in wisdom. Before full commitment he wanted his parents blessing.

She heard her father walk into the house and busied herself with other things. Questions teemed in her mind. All morning she had tried to still them by singing. Her heart trembled like a leaf, yet she prayed for the strength to stand courageous. Her father called her upstairs in a sober tone. As she slowly walked up each stair, she pleaded that she might accept the outcome – His will – with complete joy. As her father recounted all that had passed that morning, she was overwhelmed.

Suddenly she felt like a little child. That *he* – this amazing man – who had so won her love and respect – would desire for her to walk beside him on this journey? As the impact of her father's words sank in, she began to accept the reality that was before her.

By Tuesday she had accepted it completely. This was the answer. This was the path. He was the one. After twenty years of waiting and praying, here was the Father's answer. After twenty years of opening her hands...here was the open door. A door that opened wide into a world that far surpassed her sweetest dreams. She drifted throughout the day, tears and laughter mingled with praise to the Father for His perfect faithfulness.

Wednesday he drove up to her house. She was alone, pacing in prayer...waiting on him. His heart was calm, full faith that whatever happened this *would* happen...but he was still nervous. Both fully realized that they were the two destined for each other...and that this would be the first time they could look into each others eyes knowing that fully.

His heart raced as he rang the doorbell.

She opened it, keeping the dog from running out.

“Jonathan, I’m so nervous...”

“Me to...”

They entered the car, stealing glances as he began to drive. His mind raced, knowing the truth of what was happening but unable to express it. Over the last few days the Father had confirmed time after time –this was the path. She was the one he was to honor fully.

The one he was to serve. To pursue.

He looked over and caught her eye...

“Are you ready to begin a journey together?”

She nervously laughed and looked down briefly.

She looked back up into his eyes.

“Yes”

They rode in silence. Years of heartache, desire, prayers, and promises racing through their hearts and memories. The Father saw it all and was faithful. Faithful to fulfill – and surpass – their deepest dreams. Faithful to bless them. Faithful to make His will known as they sought His face in all things.

They felt as if they were in a glorious dream written by God Himself.

And such feelings cannot be conformed to the language of the mind.

Jonathan Caleb Heston and Chloe Elizabeth Maddux were engaged nine days later.

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