

Clicking on a Miracle

By

Salli

Copyright © 2009

INTRODUCTION

Nothing captures the heart like a tale of romance! You know...like when two star crossed lovers meet after suffering tremendous sorrow, but ultimately finding joy in each other's arms? Childhood stories *always* end 'happily ever after'. It would be unfair if they didn't! Take Cinderella when she meets the handsome Prince, who arrives just in time to dispel the longings of her aching heart. And don't forget Prince Charming who magically appears to gently kiss the ruby lips of Snow White, waking her to a new life of inexpressible bliss.

If it makes sense that make-believe characters have *their* dreams come true, don't real-life people deserve the same? Well, hang on to your hopes because you're about to read an account which proves that dreams *do* come true for regular folks; and when it's clear that heaven plays a hand in the romance, it makes the story even better!

Now here, my Friends, is the true-life account of how fairytale romance happened for us!

CHAPTER ONE

I steered my rattle-trap of a car slowly up the quarter-mile drive to our shabby farmhouse. Navigating the potholes on the rutted gravel lane slowed my pace, but I didn't care; I was in no hurry to get home.

“Well, there's a blessing,” I sighed, as I pulled onto the carport, noting the un-pruned shrubbery around the house. After so many years, the overgrowth of trees and bushes in our yard finally hid sight of the barnyard—the grungiest part of our property. With piles of old junk and used timber lying about, scorched burn barrels, and trash bags bursting with rubbish that piled for months before finally being burned--the barnyard was a hotbed of contention between my husband and me. “At least we live far enough from town that nobody ever comes here,” I thought.

Stepping out of the car, I moaned as my eyes caught sight of the fading pedals of my roses, wilting past their prime. Hesitating, my hand on the knob of the front door, I braced myself for the usual explosion of fiery darts:

“How much did you pay for these cookies?” Larry shouted when I entered, waving a

package of Oreos over his head. “Answer me!”

“Oh, Larry, don’t start,” I groaned, hanging my jacket in the closet. “The boys need to take cookies to church tonight and I knew I wouldn’t have time—or energy—to bake them.”

“Isn’t that just like you... always thinking of yourself? When will you get it through your head that *I* don’t work *my* fingers to the bone to provide for *your* personal luxuries?” He slapped the package of cookies on the kitchen counter, breaking most of them in the process.

“I work as hard as you do, Larry!” I hollered back. I examined the crumpled package and then began shuffling through the cupboards for ingredients to start making a batch of cookies. “What’s so wrong with buying store-bought cookies so that I don’t have to work so hard? Now I’ll need to spend an hour baking...” I muttered.

“You don’t know what hard work is!” Larry glared at me with eyes darker than I recalled them ever appearing. “*And* you don’t know the value of a dollar!” he barked. Then, with a contemptuous glower he snarled, “I’ve got better things to do than fight with you...” He wiped his mouth on the cuff of his sleeve as he tramped past me, slamming the door of his den behind him. Exiting the kitchen, I started up the stairs to the bedroom but collapsed in tired, frustrated tears.

“Dad’s a brick around your neck... *and you’re slowly drowning.*”

From my crumpled posture, I looked up. I thought I was alone when Larry locked himself in his office, but there was my youngest child, Locke, standing above me on the landing. Though still reeling from my husband’s foul temper, I was fully aware of the loathing in Locke’s tone.

“Don’t stay with him on my account...” Locke turned, walked briskly back to his bedroom and then turned up the volume of his rock music--as was his custom of late--to drown out, I suppose, the incessant bickering that had in recent days broken the icy silence of the tomb

we called our home.

Locke was the last of my five children to make such a statement; there was no love-loss between my children and their father. Something was terribly wrong in our family. I had been faithfully active in the church all my life and had labored tirelessly to teach the beautiful precepts of the gospel to my children; but despite the fact that our family was active in church, somewhere along the way something had gone dreadfully wrong and was keeping us from experiencing the joy of family life.

Twenty-five years previously, I had met Larry in the spring after my sophomore year at Brigham Young University. He was just finishing his fifth year as a middle school science teacher and was also serving as the Portland Oregon West Stake Young Adult president. As I sat in the congregation, shortly after I returned home from school, while Larry stood at the pulpit to conduct a fireside, he caught my attention. I recall leaning over to whisper to my girlfriend,

“Who’s that cute guy up there?”

“Who...*him*?” she whispered back. “That’s Larry Clark—he’s the new Young Adult president...he teaches school. Nice, huh? He’s good-looking...*and* has a good job. All the girls want to date him!”

“Hmmm,” I recall saying, “He *is* good looking! Maybe that’ll be *my* goal for the summer, too!”

It didn’t take long to attract Larry’s attention and before I knew it, he was stopping regularly at my folk’s house. He would ride his bike up to the top of steep Cooper Mountain Road where my family lived at the time. I remember once, knowing ahead of time that he was coming, sitting on a tree stump in our yard with a grand view of the Tualatin Valley below. I wore a flowing cotton dress I had just finished making and, as a stiff breeze blew through my

short-cropped hair, I pondered my future. Yes, I was young and idealistic, but as I watched Larry coming around the bend on the road below, it was the spirit of the Lord that whispered we could make a good match.

Eight years older than I, Larry possessed a passion for simplicity, turning his back on the accouterments of the world—a trait I admired. He was a product of the seventies, seeking a less materialistic lifestyle than what previous generations had espoused. He wasn't really a hippy; he just longed for a more unsophisticated lifestyle. I liked what he stood for, and despite the fact he had been less-active in the church for several years and had not served a mission, he *had* been through the temple before I met him. I figured all that might not have been right in his life had been resolved. He was temple worthy when we met and that's all that really seemed to matter.

“Have you ever lied to me?” I harmlessly asked him one night. It was the Fourth of July, three months after we started dating; we were sitting on my folk's back lawn waiting for fireworks to fill the night air from the fairgrounds in the valley below.

Larry's startled expression made him look as though I'd hit him with a two-by-four; he was visibly shaken by my question! I figured, for sure, he was hiding a juicy bit of undisclosed information that would be fun to pull out of him, so I rolled over onto my knees and touched my nose to his.

“Okay, Buster! What have you lied about?” I asked, playfully, pushing him over in the grass. “Tell me!”

“I...well...sheesh,” he stammered. His eyes grew large as saucers, and then misty, as he stared back at me in disbelief. “Well, I, well...” He took a deep breath as he began, “There was *one* time I told you a lie...of sorts,” he sought for words that didn't come easily.

“Yes...” I coaxed, smiling mischievously.

“Do you remember a few weeks ago when you asked me if I liked your last name?” Yes, I recalled a conversation when I had asked him that question. My maiden name was a Danish one, tricky to spell and nearly impossible to pronounce correctly. I had asked him what he thought of it since it was a difficult moniker to master.

“I told you, at the time, that I *liked* your name; that I thought it was unique and special—like you--do you remember?” he asked with quiet confidence, though he still looking a bit abashed. I nodded while I leaned back on my haunches and folded my hands in my lap. I didn’t say a word because I wanted to give my handsome Romeo a chance to express his tender thoughts.

“Well...I went home that night...and prayed...that I could tell you my *real* feelings someday. And I promised the Lord...that if you ever asked me if I had lied to you...that I would...” he paused for a long time.

“*Yes...? You would...what?*” I asked innocently.

“I would tell you...that I wish your last name was Clark...” He spoke with great earnestness, “I would tell you that I wanted to *marry* you.” With those words, he scooted closer toward me in the grass, took my hands in his hands and asked, “Salli, *will* you marry me?”

The unexpected timing of his question momentarily dizzied me with uncertainty. I was struck with the reality that this was a serious marriage proposal from a mature man who needed to move forward in his life. He was inviting *me* to spend the remainder of our days on earth and into eternity, together.

“Golly, Larry...” I’m sure I looked shocked, but I smiled as I composed myself. “This is a question I had hoped might come, but I wasn’t expecting it *today!*” He looked very embarrassed and muttered something I didn’t hear. What I did hear, through the spirit, was the

clear impression to fast before I answered. I placed his hands inside of mine and asked quietly, “Will you give me a few days? This is an important decision.” He smiled back and nodded.

I took the next few days to consider his tender offer and immediately began to fast and pray. This was the first time in my life that I fasted for a matter of such extreme importance. I wanted to be sure marriage to Larry was the direction the Lord wanted me to go. On the third day, I recall what the Spirit of the Lord told me, “Marrying Larry will be a good choice, but you don’t have to do it if you don’t want to. If you do, it will be a special assignment from the Lord and you will both receive blessings that will aid in your exaltation.”

How could I refuse an opportunity like that? When I told Larry my answer was ‘yes’, he picked me up in his arms, twirled me around, and hollered, “Whoopeeeee!”

And thus began the hardest challenge of my life.

Now, twenty-five years later, all I had was a mean-spirited husband and teen-aged children that never wanted to be around their father. My children’s insufferable opinions about Larry were not new to me; their harsh expressions were not the only times someone dear had spoken the painful truth:

“My heart *aches* for you, Babe. The sparkle has gone out of your eyes... Years with Larry have broken your spirit.” I recalled the stab to my ego that *those* words had inflicted when first spoken by my Uncle Moe, eight years before. In saying what he had, he’d breached our unspoken agreement to disregard my troubled marriage and go on as though nothing was wrong. But my resolve to present a cheerful disposition couldn’t change the fact that, even back then, I was depressed and miserable.

Gary-Cooper-tall and slender, one thing I remember most about Uncle Moe was that he always called me, "Babe"; the same endearing term he used for his own daughters who were all

much older than I. As a teen-ager, I figured he called all of us "Babe" because he was afraid of using the wrong name, but I took it as a compliment that he thought of me as one of his own daughters.

As a widower, Uncle Moe had married Aunt Christie after her divorce, when I was 15 years-old—more than thirty years before. When they married each other, it was Uncle Moe and Aunt Christie who gathered the pieces of my shattered life and offered me the guiding hand I needed. Newly wedded at the time, they had invited me to live with them when my father passed away, suddenly, during my freshman year in high school. Uncle Moe had barely retired as an Air Force pilot. A tough military colonel, I'm certain with a new bride and his long awaited retirement years ahead of him, he and Aunt Christie had grander plans than raising someone else's child.

But Uncle Moe was not an ordinary man; he was my mother's tenderhearted brother. My mother had died long before I was old enough to have a memory of her, but all during my growing-up years Uncle Moe had done his best to compensate for the void her death had created in my life. Now, even though I was a grown woman, he continued to look out for my best interests.

“Babe, you’ve been reduced to enduring---and painfully, I might add—a hopeless marriage that has destroyed...not only *your* dignity...but the dignity of your kids, too! Feeding your family from grocery dumpsters...and living on a shoestring when he makes good money, all in the name of ‘conserving the environment’...*it makes my blood boil!*” My uncle’s uncharacteristic show of irritation made it clear on that day so many years before that his words came from deeply held anger.

“I know Larry has unconventional ideas, Uncle Moe,” I had responded in defense of my

husband. “Providing for a large family is frustrating for him—but that doesn’t make him a terrible person... He’ll be better when the kids are grown. You’ll see...” I spoke as someone would who had long before adopted the belief that weathering the billows of life generated by an eccentric spouse would earn a crown in heaven.

But even as I brushed-off Uncle Moe’s concerns, I knew I would never see a change in Larry’s behavior; each life event of the past that I had hoped would mark the dawn of Larry’s kinder, more reasonable nature had come and gone with no significant change. But as quickly as the thought came into my mind, that day, I dismissed it as I always had. Trapped between my staunch determination to stay married and the reality of Larry’s cruelty, I turned from my uncle’s gaze to hide the flickering denial in my eyes. In my heart I knew he was right. Uncle Moe continued:

“Babe,” he groaned in exasperation, “when was the last time Larry did or said *anything* that came close to being polite, not to mention loving? Your aunt Christie and I can’t sit by...*anymore*...and pretend it doesn’t matter!”

We sat in silence for several moments, then his voice mellowed, kindly, as he continued, “We’ve wondered for *years* if the twinkle wouldn’t come back to your eyes if Larry would just exercise a little kindness...and hold you in his arms every now and then...Instead,” his voice grew agitated again, “he’s sneering and derisive in every comment he makes to you and the kids.....Babe, he makes *your* life *miserable* because *he hates living*....Your aunt and I don’t hold any hope that he’ll ever change...” And then, with heated boldness, he had said, “*We want you to divorce him!*”

Sadly, Uncle Moe’s petition had faded into the endless stream of well-intended counsel which tends to flow unheeded on ears not ripe to hear.

Now, all these years later, as I sat battle-weary on the staircase, Locke's words reawakened me to the conundrum I had faced nearly my whole married life. But in my mind, the puzzle pieces of our problems simply didn't fit together. During our marriage, Larry and I had enjoyed many of life's greatest blessings: the gospel of Jesus Christ, a temple marriage, five beautiful children, and a charming 6 ½ acre fruit farm outside Portland, Oregon. With a full view of Mt. Hood out our front window and a driveway lined with one hundred apple trees, I had long held the opinion that we lived in the most beautiful spot in the world. The Lord had granted our family many blessings, but over the years Larry had trashed our beautiful little farm by neglecting needed repairs and hoarding trash he collected from unseemly sources. Apparently depressed by the cares of the world, Larry viewed life as a bitter joke, blinding him to the Lord's tender mercies.

Rising from the stairs that day, I left Locke at the house, got back into my car, and drove the five miles straight to my aunt and uncle's home, hoping for solace from the two people whose opinion I trusted most. I knew they, above all others, loved me without qualification.

"You've done nothing wrong, Babe—Larry's deliberately cruel," my Uncle Moe said, adamantly, after I described the argument that had occurred between us. "I'm worried about you and the kids; Larry's temper is getting more and more insensible...I don't trust him. It's time for a divorce. If you're scared and don't know how to do it—I'll file for you!" I appreciated my uncle's willingness to come to bat for me; it felt strangely comforting to hear the aggravation in his voice, but divorce still didn't seem like the answer.

"I just can't believe the Lord would have sanctioned my marriage, in the first place, just to see it end in divorce, Uncle Moe...Tearing my family apart *can't* be the answer," I cried. "Do you think I should go talk to my bishop?"

“Of course you can receive excellent counsel—anytime—from your bishop,” Aunt Christie interjected, “But the decision to divorce is up to you and the Lord, Kiddo.”

Originally from Texas, portly and ruddy cheeked, Aunt Christie had converted to the church in 1950 during her college days. Since that time, she had held nearly every calling in Relief Society on the ward and stake levels. Most recently, she busied herself bottling fruit in the summer and quilting blankets for servicemen all winter. At home, she always wore her favorite floral apron over whatever shirt she had on, plaid or polka dot--she didn't care! Indifferent toward glamour and style, she focused first on “lifting the hands which hang down and strengthening the feeble knees”.¹ It was rare for me to leave their home without a quart or two of freshly bottled peaches or raspberry jam!

All my married life, I had depended on my aunt and uncle's good-natured generosity. Their own children were scattered hither and yon around the country, so they often told me how happy it made them that I had stayed nearby to raise my family. Now, rocking together on the porch swing in the backyard of their home which was situated on the fringes of an exquisite golf course, I could smell the scent of smoldering leaves on a nearby neighbor's burn pile. The foliage of the trees that swayed peacefully around us, in contrast to the grassy-green lawn, was turning orange-brown.

Uncle Moe reached over to pat Aunt Christie's hand. “How do you know your best days aren't ahead with someone new?” he asked me, though his eyes were fixed lovingly on Aunt Christie. She grinned back at him.

“I just don't feel the Lord *wants* me to get divorced...I'm waiting for Him to open a *different* door,” I answered, as I leaned over across my knees and fixed my gaze at the ground. They stared at me as the wheels turned in their heads. Finally, Aunt Christie asked in a

¹ Doctrine and Covenants 81:5.

crestfallen tone:

“What’re ya doin’, Kiddo... Waitin’ for him to *die*?” she asked. I didn’t answer; I didn’t want to admit the truth. I glanced back at them as Uncle Moe shook his graying head.

“That’s the coward’s way, Babe,” he whispered, “...and it’s certainly is no way to live.”