

God Bless the Broken Road

Divorce.

After six years with my abusive ex, I was free. But that wasn't the end of my struggle. At twenty-four with no income, no education and three children to raise my nerves stood at the breaking point. The turmoil in my early adult life conditioned me to look on the dark side. When things were joyous, I thought the time only a momentary pause in the dirge of my life. However, one thing I knew – every morning I had three beautiful faces shining up at me. No matter how depressed or callous I got, giving up on making a good and happy life for them was not an option. Those kids depended on me and, God knows, I needed them.

Years passed. Struggles came and went. My self-esteem, which had been in the toilet, rose. My daughter was fifteen and beautiful, my two sons, handsome, strong and prepubescent. I'd been without a life-partner for nine years. The realization hit that I didn't really want to be alone after the kids left home. Marriage was out of the question but a close companion would certainly do.

So it happened one night that I made this small prayer. Now, I was never a religious person, but being raised in a Christian home, I had always believed in the power of faith in a greater being to transform one's situation. Thus, when I had an opportunity to date someone new, I wanted help to see if this could be "the one". Sitting alone, I looked up and said this prayer – "God, if something with this guy is supposed to happen then let it. But if not, Lord, please send someone by because I'm really lousy at picking out men."

Keep in mind we lived in a small house in the rural tobacco fields of North Carolina. Only someone who'd been led there could find the place. Now, you may think that's an odd request from God but under the circumstances, I thought it justified. What did I know? Throughout my adulthood, I'd entertained one bad relationship after another. But after I said the prayer, I slept more soundly than I had in months.

Strange I didn't think about that request for several days. Not until I came home and found my daughter laughing over the telephone. She told me a twenty-one year old guy wanted to take me out. My first comment was something like, "Yeah, right." Then she told the caller I would go. Can you imagine? I chased her to get the phone until I'd figured I'd never catch her. Out of breath, I simply told her, if he wanted to take me out, he'd have to call me himself.

She relayed my message to her caller, an older teen she'd known in school who'd graduated. The man, now in the 82nd Airborne at Fort Bragg, was part of a group who'd come by the house the previous Saturday. I, of course, had looked stupendous in my rumpled white gee as I had just come from a karate demonstration that I had participated in that morning. I'd been in the yard and remembered some black Blazer pulling up – tinted windows, of course. What else for a young Army guy? Anyway, I stood talking to my neighbor in the afternoon sun as my daughter ran up. After telling her there was no way she was going out with anyone I didn't know, especially an adult

male, I dismissed the situation entirely. I didn't even know what these men looked like much less know who they were – remember, tinted windows.

But apparently, my ardent suitor didn't shrug the incident off. My stunning image, messed up hair and all, had caught the eye of this younger man. A few days later, a gentleman called from out of the blue.

"Hello?" I'd answered the annoying ring.

"Hi, this is Tom Fuller."

Hmm, a deep voice. "Tom, who?" I asked, perplexed.

"Er, ah..." The pitch of his voice went a mite higher. "The guy you're daughter talked to you about?"

"Oh." I paused, really taken back. I couldn't believe the man really called. "Do you know how old I am?"

"Yeah." His voice deepened again. "So, you wanna go dancing Friday?"

"Eh, no."

He kept talking. At some point, I figured he wouldn't stop until I agreed. Then that crazy prayer came into my head. "Lord, please send someone by because I'm really lousy at picking out men..." Could it be?

Naw. Then I rethought myself. If this was the guy I'd asked for, now wasn't the time to say no. After all, I hadn't been very specific. Didn't ask for rich. Didn't ask for mature. Didn't even ask for good-looking. And the only way to find out if he was the one was to meet him. I interrupted. "How about dinner and a movie?"

"Great!" he answered.

I somehow heard his relief. We set the time. He asked how to dress. "Casual," I said. After saying our good-byes and hanging up, I went back to whatever I was doing and forgot about any 'date.'

The next few days came and went. Then the day came. While I got ready, my eldest son, a wise-in-the-ways-of-the-world thirteen-year-old, got antsy. "Mom," he tells me, "if this guy has a van, you can't go."

"Huh?" I replied. What the heck did my thirteen-year-old know about vans? "I'll be fine," I told him.

He sighed and went with his younger brother to stare out the den window.

Some minutes later, my concerned son runs to the bathroom, where I was applying my makeup. "Mom! Mom! He has a van! He has a vaaannnnnn!"

After rolling my eyes, I held up my hand. "It'll be fine. You'll see."

He frowned and walked away as the doorbell rang. I checked my watch. Exactly six o'clock, the time we'd planned to meet.

Remember, I didn't have a clue as to what this man looked like. I wore some nice jeans and a red sweater. I'd curled my hair and put on makeup, red lips and all. After approving of my reflection in the mirror, I strolled out. In our small rancher, you needed to go through the kitchen to get to the den. The narrow doorway between the two afforded me a view of my daughter sitting on the couch – laughing. I stepped closer. My two sons were off to the right, arms crossed, a menacing look etched on their faces. Taking note, I stepped to the doorway and glanced at my 'date'. There stood a

tall, skinny, baby-faced guy in tennis shoes, ripped jeans, a hospital scrub shirt, a calf-length black leather jacket, no hair and a dangling feather earring. Stunned, my first thought was 'Oh, my God, what did I get myself into?'

"Ready?" he asked, his voice warm.

"Er, yeah?" I said, not really sure at all.

As we left, I think my daughter fell on the floor, her belly aching with humor.

Outside, he held the car door for me. Nice, I thought. And after we got going, it didn't take long for me to get to know him. Tom was, and is today, an avid talker. He especially ran-on when he got nervous. He was nervous now. And he talked.

A natural introvert, I never could get the hang of what to say on a first date, so Tom's ability to speak was advantageous. I was glad we were going to a movie. That way I wouldn't have to say much. Watching him talk, I thought, not much at all.

When we arrived at the restaurant, Tom asked for a beer. He reddened when the waitress carded him. Yes, he was twenty-one. Just barely. Good thing to know. I shrugged his embarrassment off, pretending not to notice. Then laughed as he told me about his Sergeants. Tom was a private first class. He'd dropped out of college to join the Army. But before he'd made the two-hour trip to see me, his sergeants had spent a lot of time trying to tell him how to take out an older woman. He'd told them, "Guys, when I get my pampers off..." I don't remember now exactly what else he'd said, but the guy was funny. And I, intrigued.

But I had to get this age thing in the open. Fixing my elbows on the table, I asked, "Do you know how old I am?"

"Yeah." He said.

"How old?" I asked.

"Thirty-two."

I leaned over the table. "I'm thirty-three." I lunged closer. "Almost thirty-four." I was serious. How could a guy this young be interested in me? This was important. I wanted things clear upfront.

He kinda grinned. "Okay." He kept talking.

Stunned, I listened as he asked for another beer. He looked disgusted when a different waitress asked for his ID. She giggled. "Does this happen all the time?"

"I don't know?" I replied to her in earnest. "We've never been out before."

"Oh!" Her face beamed. She gave us the best service.

The whole night went like that. One funny thing after another. I'd had the best time I'd ever had in my whole adult life. I certainly had never laughed so hard before. Thus when my then unknown future husband asked in his cocky 82nd Airborne way, his head tilted, confidence spread over his entire being, "So, would you like to do it again?" Of course, I said, "yes."

And meant it.

I figured this might go on for a few dates then he'd go away.

I never could get him to leave. Every free weekend he came to Winston-Salem. He interacted with the kids like I would have expected a step-dad to do. And he did it

without me asking. I watched, looked for telltale signs of discontent. Never saw any. The kids loved him. He had a way of looking at things that made everything right.

Then the tragedy I knew would happen came. We'd been dating for several months when the onus of the first Gulf War hit. Within days, he'd shipped out. The months crawled by. Communication with the front was spotty at best. I realized how much I missed him. I loved him. What could I do? Before he left, he'd promised me he wouldn't die. I took him at his word. Told him I'd kick his backside if he did. He'd only laughed. He loved me, he'd said.

Then he was gone.

The letters between us were written frequently, but delivery left much to be desired. There was no guarantee when or how a soldier would get his mail. A letter written today could get there in a week; whereas one written the week before would get there a month later. You can imagine the how funny some of these letters could be, since the things written about could be detailed in the last letter written, but received before the subject was even brought up. But we managed. And our relationship grew.

Months later, the war wound down. Sometime in mid-March, I got a call in the middle of the night.

"Hello?" I said, groggy, and glanced at the clock. One-thirty something AM.

"Hi." It was a man. "You don't know me, but I operate a ham radio."

"You do?" I asked, my mind still numb.

"Yeah, I have a call from a..." He paused. "Tom Fuller. You want to talk to him?"

I bolted straight up. "Yes!"

"Hold on." The line quieted for a moment. Then he came back on. "Remember, when you're finished talking, you have to say 'over' so that the operators down the line know to flip the switch. We're connected from ship to ship over the ocean then to shore so there's a lot of switching to be done."

"Okay," I said, and held my breath. This would be the first time I'd heard his voice in a long time.

"Remember, say 'over' when you're finished," the man reminded.

"I'll remember," I said.

Then Tom came on the phone. I could barely understand him, the connection was so bad, and I knew it was daylight in the desert where he was – whichever country that was in. I wouldn't know it was Iraq until he came back.

But I heard *his* voice, and if I didn't get anything else, at the moment, that was enough.

"I can't understand you," I said. "Over."

Tom tried again.

"I love you," I said. "I still can't hear what you're saying. Over."

Another incoherent stream but I knew the sound of Tom's voice. It was him.

"I can't make out what he's saying," I told the radioman.

"He's saying something about June."

My body trembled. I knew what Tom said. He wanted to marry me. He'd said as much before he left. Of course, at the time, I'd had a wait and see approach to this new

wrinkle in our relationship. He was going to war. I hadn't even met his parents and he hadn't met mine. What *was* he thinking?

But none of this mattered. I wanted him in my life. "Yes, yes, yes!" I yelled.

"Er...", the guy on the other line said, "you need to say 'over'."

"Over," I commanded.

I heard Tom laugh. Magic, I thought.

No, prayer. I remembered.

When he returned, we married. We've been together for sixteen years, been married for fourteen with another fantastic boy in addition to the first three of our children. So when the group, Rascal Flats, sings "God bless the broken road that led me straight to you," I know what they mean. I had a broken life and God took care of it. All I needed to do was ask, tell him that I was ready for *his* will. Now, around fifty, a bit gray with a few more experience lines on my face, my husband still thinks I'm the most beautiful woman he's ever known. And he tells me always how incredible I am and how glad he is that I'm in his life. He loves me.

And me? I'm still awed by the power of that simple prayer. And grateful of my blessings.

~ Lise Fuller, www.lisefuller.com

End Note: I wrote this a few years ago but I still love this story – and it's true! Many blessings to you all.

~ Lise

How much danger would you risk for the ultimate romance?

(Also, check out Lise's blogs!)

- o Lise Fuller's Writing Adventures, <http://lisefuller.blogspot.com/>
- o Lise's Fitness Tips, <http://lisestips.blogspot.com/>
- o Lise Fuller's Writing Adventures on MySpace, <http://blog.myspace.com/lisefuller>

~ "Intimate Deceptions", 11/30/06, Cerridwen Press, www.cerridwenpress.com

~ "On Danger's Edge", 12/8/ 05, Cerridwen Press, www.cerridwenpress.com – **4 1/2 STARS FROM RT! A RT Reviewer's Choice Award Nominee (2006). NOW IN PRINT!**

~ "Cutting Loose", 2/9/06, Cerridwen Press, www.cerridwenpress.com **NOW IN PRINT!**