

# A Little Love Story

*William Cottam*

FOR A MORMON BOY STEEPED IN THE TABOOS of religious purity and small town morality, nothing is so frightening yet so inviting as the wedding day. It was early morning, the first of September. From my upstairs bedroom window, I could see out beyond the temple to the distant Arizona canyons, free and unexplored, their vast expanses marked by varied hues of blue. The muddy and winding Virgin River glistened and trembled below. Not wide enough to be a real "river," it separated the town from the desert. On the east and west sides of the valley, flat volcanic plateaus lay like the walls of a box canyon. They were twins, prehistoric airfields. Behind me was the Red Hill. I knew it so well I didn't have to look back, having run hundreds of times up and down its sides, hiding from make-believe dangers lying in wait in its crevices.

St. George was my town. I had ridden my bike down every street, past every house a thousand times. And the people, I knew them all. Life was simple there. In the summertime, the running ditch water and chirping crickets were the only night sounds. Cottonwood trees along the banks shed fluffy seeds and bred yellow June bugs in the spring. The ditch water wound its way past roots and under roads, through backyard gardens, spreading out to flood lawns of Bermuda grass, and then returned to pass beside the pampas and pomegranate bushes and the old adobe homes. "Trees of Heaven" covered the valley like green umbrellas, and ants and little boys alike crawled up and down their trunks.

The Woodward School was the center of our young world with its mysterious bell tower that never once sounded, old inky blackboards, and well-carved benches that we studied for some message of romance. There were playgrounds (without equipment) and recess, the student police force, home-room announcements, dances that brought trembling to every young man, forgotten gym clothes, yellow buses for out-of-towners, lines at the drinking foun-

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tain before the late bell, tests and grades, assemblies, student elections, fire drills, yearbooks. Old teachers with names like Syphus, Miles, and Pendelton and roots deep in the town's past taught the exotic and the basics: geometry, American literature, gym, woodworking, home economics, and always morality.

Doris lived up Diagonal Street, in "Sand Town" as we called it, in the First Ward where the streets were dirt and the afternoon wind filled every corner with red sand from the hill. Her father "drove truck" and rode with the sheriff's posse in the St. George and Las Vegas rodeo parades. He wore a white felt stetson and pearl-handled pistols. Riding through town in his old Buick, he used to sing "Ghost Riders in the Sky." He died of a heart attack one April day while working at Ron's Sporting Goods and Bike Shop. The store smelled of the new rubber bike tires that hung from the ceilings. I vaguely remember seeing him there once while I was working on a scouting merit badge in the back with one of the bicycle repairmen. I wish now that I had gone out to the front, leaned over the counter towards Mr. Earl, and said coolly, "When I am twenty-one, I will marry your youngest, fun-loving Doris!"

In the center of the valley, at the southern edge of the community, rises a great white temple, which Brigham Young and the early townspeople—including my ancestors—helped build. It was a community service project in the 1860s, a welfare project when people were starving, a temple built from the fruit of the desert environs by a tiny, poor village. To this day, members of the community can tell you which forefather hung each door. My own great-grandfather, Thomas Cottam, and his sons built the cane-bottom chairs, molded the ornamental plaster-of-Paris grape clusters that decorate the ceilings, and poured the concrete walkways.

The walls are a crystalline white stucco, belying the hand-hewn red sandstone blocks beneath. The brow of the walls was designed to resemble a medieval fortress—without, of course, the slings, cannons, or other accouterments of war. Still, from time to time on Easter morning, a trumpeter is summoned from the community to the walk-around of the tower to sound a sacred message: "He is Risen! He is Risen! He hath opened heaven's gate. We are free from sin's dark prison, risen to a holier state. And a brighter Easter beam on our longing eyes shall stream."

Silver arrows top the temple spire, one pointing east and the other heavenward. From the ground, two staircases ascend to the building's front doors—doors without knobs, waiting to be opened by the Son of God when he comes to usher in his millennial reign. It is always quiet on the temple block; the flowers perennially bloom and the grass is ever green. Their arms around each other, young lovers walk the temple grounds, sit beneath the mulberry tree (when it is not bearing fruit), and kiss under the canopy of Virginia creeper and roses. Still, no one dares defile the "House of the Lord" by climbing the long white steps.

At night great lights flood the temple walls, and nearby locust trees cast a shadowy figure on the steeple. Some onlookers below claim the figure is the Prophet Joseph kneeling in prayer. It is not difficult to divine this sign.

Doris and I walked around the temple on our third date. That was the night I wanted to take her hand, draw her close, and kiss her.

Pop's kindly voice followed the curling smoke of burned pancakes up the stairs. "Wake up, Son. You had better get up. You're getting married today, you know." I did know, actually. I had been searching for an escape since daybreak and, with the hollow hope that comes with fear, had wondered if perhaps Dr. Reichmann, who had first delivered me twenty-one years before, would deliver me once again. Would he write an excuse that I could send with someone, saying I had broken my leg or was too sick to travel? But there was no back door to slip through now. I had previously considered canceling the engagement several times, always giving up on the idea, thinking that Doris might not return the tablecloth I had embroidered (as a kid) and given her as a gift and wondering how I would face the embarrassment of returning the sheets and pillowcases Vaughn and Diane had given us as a wedding gift when they came through town months before. What sort of note could I leave now for the reception guests at the First and Third Ward chapel?

I had been looking for someone to marry. I shared, as I supposed, the simple, solitary goal of all returned missionaries. I came home from the mission fields of Sweden grown up, a new person, independent of the past. Gone was my youthful habit of collecting kisses from every girl who would give them. Those were pleasant little conquests, explorations into the world of pleasure — tests of acceptance, small adventures. But now I wanted the peace of marital security, the eternal sort of happiness promised the virtuous. I wanted a Church-sanctioned courtship, a celestial marriage, the marriage Earnest Eberhard describes in his little blue bible, *What Shall We Do with Love?* I wanted to score high enough on his checklist of compatibilities to secure the eternal life promised me.

I underlined whole pages of Eberhard with my red pencil. I knew them well and had used them on study-buddies like Clark Ence to get *them* to date righteously and marry. How then could *I* escape? I could hear the voice of the happily married prophet, David O. McKay, saying to seek the early morning primrose high up on the cliff away from the dusty road below, away from the common traffic, and when I found her, that girl who motivated me to do my best and to make the most of myself, that young lady was worthy of my love and would awaken love in my heart. (I wasn't aware that *he* didn't find his primrose until he was nearly thirty. By the time I was twenty, many young ladies had already stirred my heart.)

Doris and I first met in the high school library while preparing for the ward Mutual Improvement Association's speech competition. The assigned topic was "Who Is My Neighbor?" That day we walked to the church together. My speech stressed the unorthodox view that not everyone was my neighbor, especially not the enemies of humankind, those wolves in sheep's clothing in town, whose deeds my dad frequently recounted to us in great detail. I won the competition. Doris clearly remembers that it was she who won.

Next, I saw her in the *Washington County News*. I was a missionary in Sweden, tossing out newspapers from the mission office addressed to missionaries who had more important things to do than read their local hometown gossip and grow homesick. As best I recall, her photo was on the front page as Dixie College Homecoming Queen. It seemed obvious to me that this girl was not one who had appeared on everyone's kiss list — but someone the reformed me would want to date.

And there she was the day after I returned from Sweden and registered at Dixie College. It was January. The grass was frozen, but the sun shone brightly. She was laughing, walking arm-in-arm with friends towards the Institute of Religion, across the street. (She insists that she would not have been heading *there*, that she never took a class at the Institute.) She was brunette with bangs, and her shoulder-length hair curled attractively under. She wore beautiful clothes (sewn by her mother) and drove a new white Pontiac with a turquoise interior, bought after her father's funeral. The college handbook for 1966–67 called Doris "the old Crow," which no doubt had something to do with her deep voice. It continued: "She is efficient, understanding, poised, and generally lovely . . . but the only editor of Dixie High's newspaper who could hit her 'psychological sickbed' consecutively once every week for 36 weeks." The bio ends promising that students will be happy to know that their "Doris Days" have just begun. Such being the case, I asked her out to the Saturday Night Dance.

She already had a date. I took an attractive blonde instead. The four of us met at the dance at the Rec Hall. Doris and I danced together once as Tom Jones crooned from the phonograph: "Try to remember when life was so tender that no one wept except the willow. Try to remember when life was so tender that dreams were kept beside your pillow. Try to remember when life was so tender that love was an ember about to billow." We didn't find each other particularly attractive.

Several days later, Elizabeth Beckstrom, whose grandfather served for twenty-five years with my great-uncle in the St. George stake presidency and who had always taken an interest in me, caught me by the arm as I was leaving the library and said we had to talk. "I know a young woman you ought to meet."

Well, with that encouragement I climbed the hill to Mrs. Beckstrom's home. She was an older woman, bright and cheerful — a female sage who often delighted the community, especially college students, with her rapid-fire delivery of tales of early Dixie. She had a strong moral eye and didn't hesitate to tell us what she saw. "Doris Earl. Do you know her?" Before I could respond she continued, "She is a most wonderful person, quite unusual, one who has character — quality — which I don't see often in young women. She's a girl, Willie, . . ." (she paused to be sure I didn't miss her point) "that you would do well to marry. Now I'm not interfering with your life, but if you're smart, you'll pay attention!"

I called Doris again. This time she was free. That night we went to a friend's wedding reception, then to the Saturday Night Dance, and last for a

drive past the college. We rode and talked and, finally, back at her place, ate hamburgers and drank orange juice. It was easy, comfortable fun. I thought, while rounding the corner of Tabernacle Street on my way home, that perhaps the Spirit had whispered to me that she was the one I would marry.

Jimmy Cox, my lifelong next-door neighbor who studied psychology (well enough to hypnotize people), said that Doris was too strong, that I would never be boss in my own home. Claudia Haslem, secretary at the Institute, said that as far as she knew, Doris was not entirely active in the Church, that she did not attend Institute classes. Jay Andrus, my double-dating friend of the past decade, reminded me that no one else had done for me what Doris had. "Who else has given you so many free meals and all that orange juice?" he asked. My brother Alvin thought Doris was terrific. Pop pointed out that Doris "had large bones," and he was a qualified judge of that since my mother was embarrassingly heavy. Yet he hastened to add that Doris was certainly a very fine person.

Doris wasn't interested in marriage. We talked of everything else, every imaginable topic from birth control to ambitions to children. We even visited the local hospital together as a class assignment to observe the newborns. We discussed money, and I imagined that she could probably waste a fortune, which my father thought my mother had done, though he never had more than a few dollars to lose. We talked of friends. I complained about her liberated, arty group, reminding her of her patriarchal blessing, which counseled her to choose her friends wisely. She, in turn, reminded me how much fun those friends were and what loyalty they shared.

Eventually, after several dates, we kissed. It happened on the sofa in the living room of her mother's house. She had a cold, and I was tired. She remembers that the kiss was not that great. It didn't do a lot for me either — I felt no great manifestation of love, even after three years of abstinence of all kinds. But what the first kiss lacked, subsequent ones made up for. We saw each other daily, though I continued to date Marie, an attractive coed from Kanab. My cousin David and I even went on a two-day trip with Marie and one of her friends. The four of us went boating on Lake Powell, ate dinner with Marie's family, hiked in Zion Park and the Coral Reef sand dunes, listened to a Peter, Paul and Mary cassette, then returned to St. George. Later that night I went to see Doris, who rubbed lotion on my sunburn and listened without censure to my adventure.

From her mother's car, Doris and I saw the world: the abandoned mining town of State Line with its rusted automobiles, overgrown frame buildings, and dilapidated vats; the eternal desert south of St. George and the Arizona border; Smith's Mesa and the summer wheat fields and the rainbow of a storm; Zion Park and the steep-walled Virgin River Narrows; the road to Kolob in the dark, past the little pond and apple orchard where Carol Cornelius and I used to swim. Once we returned from a hike on the Red Hill to find her mother busy with company and the only private spot the bathroom. We hiked above St. George, along the Black Ridge, tracing the route of the pioneer

water system. We explored Pipe Springs, Warner Valley, Oak Grove. And always we felt pleasure — delicious and laden with anticipation.

Doris went to California with her mother when summer came. I worked as a cook at the Trafalga Restaurant. We corresponded, and she changed her mind about marriage. Of course, by then my post-mission desire for matrimony had left me entirely. But I worried about the upcoming year. I'd be leaving for school. All alone. Where would I live? How would I eat? And what about Doris? What if she met someone interesting, which she might very well do at a university? One morning she showed up unexpectedly at the back door with the news that her brother had offered her a trip to Europe if we didn't marry and \$500 if we did. A week later as I stood frying hamburgers at work, someone called out, "Turn on the radio. Doris Earl is giving a dramatic reading in the Miss Utah Pageant." It was *Our Town*.

And it was enough.

At either end of the sealing room a pair of mirrors face each other creating an endless repetition of those at the altar. We knelt across from each other, Doris Earl and I. At the head of the room sat Rudgar Atkin, the marriage license in his hand. Around the room friends and family and my father and her mother had come, proud and smiling, to witness our marriage. I looked over the altar at Doris in her wedding dress of pearls and lace. Just for a moment, she appeared to me to be celestial. She was intelligence — beautiful, noble, and filled with light.

We said *yes* to each other.

Outside, we met near the steps of the temple, on the lawn. We smiled for a few photographs, then, borrowing her mother's car, alone with our wedding gifts, we drove east towards school.