

Love Your Elders

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Nothing thrilled me more as a little girl than hearing my parents' courtship story: my mother, diminutive and dimpled, was eighteen, Australian, and a recent convert to the Church, living with her parents and six sisters in Warimoo, a little town in the Blue Mountains. My father, tall and baby-faced, was twenty-two, an American missionary from Farmington, New Mexico, serving his last three months in my mother's branch. She thought he was handsome in his navy suit; he admired her short dark curls and green eyes. They exchanged shy glances during sacrament meeting and spoke in the halls after Sunday School. My mother's parents had the elders over for dinner once a week, and sometimes my father's hand brushed my mother's as she passed him sausage rolls and steak-and-kidney pie. Once, at a branch picnic, my father tried to jump over a fence while my mother watched, but he caught his pants on the top of the fence and split open the crotch. Blushes and giggles ensued.

The branch president's wife, Sister Davison, noticed my parents' growing attraction and decided to help things along—after all, my mother wasn't the first girl in the branch to capture an elder's heart. A few weeks before my father's release, the branch members and missionaries spent a Saturday tearing down a house in preparation for building a chapel, gathering afterward at the Davisons' house for dinner. While her guests ate and visited, Sister Davison took my mother aside, told her she needed to speak to her in private, and asked her to wait in the master bedroom. My mother obeyed. Then Sister Davison found my father, told him she needed his help and asked him to follow her. Trusting Sister Davison—and perhaps forgetting mission rules—my father followed Sister Davison down the hall to the master bedroom. Imagine his surprise when he entered the bedroom and found my unsuspecting mother waiting there. But before he could back out of the room, Sister Davison locked the door from the outside.

“Now, you two aren’t coming out until you’ve settled things,” she said through the keyhole.

After an awkward silence, my father collected himself and began to speak—and what could he do but declare his love? Though they’d hardly exchanged more than a couple of sentences, my parents became engaged within minutes, even sealing the proposal with a brief kiss (definitely forgetting mission rules). Sister Davison, who had been listening through the keyhole, unlocked the door and gave them both a hug, then, beaming, led them outside and announced their betrothal to the rest of the branch. Congratulations ensued. Wedding plans were hurriedly made. My mother would join my father in the States after his mission release. But at the time the United States issued visas only to spouses—not fiancées—of U.S. citizens. So three weeks later, with the mission president’s permission, my parents were married at the Sydney courthouse before my father boarded a plane for the States. Six weeks later, after my mother received her visa, she joined my father in California, where they were sealed in the Los Angeles Temple and then went on their honeymoon—and on their first real date.

Fast forward to 1975, my sixteenth year. After spending their first seven years in the States, where I and two younger siblings were born, my parents had moved back to Australia and had had two more daughters. We’d been living in Australia for eight years and now lived in Emu Plains, a town nestled between the Nepean River and the Blue Mountains, where my father was the bishop of the Emu Plains Ward—the same branch in which he’d met my mother. I’d had several crushes on Australian boys: I’d written love notes to Paul Stapleton in the fifth grade, then cried when he jilted me for Gina Norris; I’d played spin the bottle in sixth grade and kissed half of the boys in my class. Recently I had liked both of the LDS boys in our ward: I’d held hands with Simon Kerr while playing hide and seek during Mutual, and Garry Rogers had kissed me on my bunk bed when his family came over for dinner before taking the final missionary discussion. But now, at fifteen, I was reading Barbara Cartland romances and *The Fascinating Girl*. I was ready for real love.

That’s when I discovered missionaries.

I knew missionaries were off-limits and on the Lord’s errand and all that, but given my parents’ history, aspiring to my own missionary romance didn’t seem that improper. And since my parents’ courtship sixteen years earlier, member/missionary romances had continued to flourish in Australia. In fact, Nora Dainey had just flown to Seattle to marry El-

der White, who had served in our ward and courted her afterward through letters, and several older girls in our ward were writing to American missionaries with hopes of an engagement. Given the scarcity of eligible LDS men in Australia, missionaries continued to be prime romantic targets—and I eagerly engaged in the hunt.

Tall, short, dark-haired, or blonde—I found all missionaries appealing. For one thing, they were American. Though I spoke like an Aussie, I considered myself American and loved everything American—as did most Australian Mormons because America was the “Promised Land.” Missionaries were also just the right age—nineteen and twenty—suitably older and mature to a fifteen-year-old girl. Wasn’t my own father four years older than my mother? And there was something about those suits—even the plainest boy looked handsome and authoritative in his crisp white shirt and tie. Since missionaries were taboo, the appeal of the forbidden fruit made them all the more desirable. Yet being off-limits also made missionaries safe: I could fantasize about them and practice my newly acquired feminine skills on them without worrying about being rejected and not being asked out (although I hoped one of them would fall in love with me and we’d marry when I was respectably older—say, eighteen). Best of all, there was a steady supply of them—when one left, another took his place, each with his own charms.

I had plenty of opportunities to pursue my crushes. Not only did we see the elders several times a week at church and seminary and Mutual and firesides; but fortunately for me, our home was one of their favorite hangouts. Since my father was American and the bishop, and since we’d fellowshipped and helped baptize several of our neighbors, the missionaries were always dropping by for dinner or to teach a discussion to one of our neighbors, or to just hang out and listen to Neil Diamond and John Denver records and talk about the States with my dad. One summer night they brought us a bottle of Hires extract and helped us make root beer chilled with dry ice in a clean garbage pail. I liked the root beer’s strange, medicinal taste. We drank it all evening, with the windows open in the heat and the cicadas chirping in the darkness, while the elders talked about high school football and trick-or-treating and McDonalds.

I began cataloguing my crushes in my diary, starting with Elder Hansen. He was brown-haired and brown-eyed, with a slight Idaho drawl. “I’m really flipped over Elder Hansen,” I wrote. “He makes my head spin.” His companion, Elder Hall, was short and chubby, but he enter-

tained me with stories about American high school and loved to bounce my baby sister, Charlotte, on his knee. Elder Hawke was only five foot three, shorter than I was, so I secretly nicknamed him “Tom Thumb”; but he told me funny jokes in the hall after Sunday School, and I wrote in my diary that I thought he was “cute.” Elder Gardner had blonde hair and a “darling” nose, and I noted that our eyes kept meeting during sacrament meeting. Elder Blum was from Canada, had curly hair and acne, and entertained us with expressions like, “You bet your sweaty socks, mama cakes!” and “Hold the pan, man.” He could also stagger about the room while dragging his knuckles on the ground and laughing like a monkey, which made my five-year-old sister, Shannon, giggle.

Then there was Elder Wilde. He was six foot three, dark-haired and serious—“my idea of a dream man,” I wrote. He had a fiancée back home in Utah, but that didn’t stop me from staring into his chocolate eyes while he taught our Sunday School class and imagining kissing his perfect mouth. Then tragedy struck. A month before Elder Wilde’s release, his fiancée froze to death in her stranded car during a blizzard, and poor Elder Wilde roamed the halls at church, hollow-eyed, a Heathcliff mourning the loss of his Catherine. While the other ward members patted his arm and whispered condolences, I kept a sad and respectful distance, pitying him and loving him all the more.

Elder Wilde stayed an extra month. When he finally left, still sad-eyed, Elder Teriyan took his place. And that’s when I realized all of my previous crushes were merely puppy love. *This* was the real romance I’d been waiting for. Elder Teriyan was five foot eleven, with wavy light-brown hair and hazel eyes, and a brilliant white smile. “He looks just like Merrill Osmond!” I gushed in my diary. I went to work with my *Fascinating Girl* skills, laughing coquettishly when we spoke in the halls, gazing at him during sacrament meeting, and then looking away when I caught his eye. “Elder Teriyan and I seem to be more and more attracted to one another, I’m afraid,” I wrote in my diary. “I blush like a silly thing whenever our eyes meet.” I looked forward to Sundays, and took extra time getting ready for church. I wore my white crepe dress covered with tiny rosebuds, or the mint green dress with the puffed sleeves and sweetheart neckline, and I brushed my hair into soft curls and carefully applied green eyeshadow under my newly plucked brows.

About this time the missionaries got permission from our high school headmaster to teach the LDS kids during the weekly scripture

study class on Thursdays. Usually we went to the library during the scripture study hour while the Baptists and Methodists and Church of England members studied the Bible with their pastors. But now there were six of us Mormons, so we got to have our very own class. For me, it meant one more opportunity to see Elder Teriyan. Normally I wore no makeup to school; it was prohibited and girls caught wearing so much as nail polish risked being suspended. Usually I pulled my hair up into a ponytail; but now on Thursdays I woke up early, washed and curled my hair, ironed my school uniform, and then applied a little mascara. It was worth risking suspension to look attractive for Elder Teriyan. Luckily, I was never caught.

I loved scripture study. I'd sit in the front row while the elders taught us lessons from the Book of Mormon, eagerly raising my hand to answer every question. When Elder Teriyan taught, I'd gaze up at him, chin in hand, and flutter my eyelashes and smile. When I read the assigned scriptures out loud, I'd try to sound more American by making my "r's" hard instead of soft, which the elders must have found amusing. But if they did, they didn't let on. Narelle Jarman nudged me, though, and asked, "Why are you trying to talk like a Yank?"

I ignored her.

The weeks passed. The elders dropped by our house several times a week, usually on week nights. During their visits we talked about school and friends and Elder Teriyan described Las Vegas, his home town, while I listened to every word. He called me "Curly," which made my heart dance, and once he tweaked my hair before leaving. That's when I knew the attraction was mutual.

One Sunday night after a fireside, Elder Teriyan and I chatted afterward; and I wrote in my diary that, when it was time to go, he shook my hand and said, "Goodnight, madam." "We laughed," I wrote, "but then as we gazed into each other's eyes we weren't laughing anymore. Then he finally let go of my hand. I love the way he makes me feel. He treats me like a woman and I treat him like a man."

One Saturday afternoon about a month before Elder Teriyan was transferred, I sat in the shade of our backyard gum tree, reading the latest Barbara Cartland romance and listening to the ski boats drone on the river and the lyre birds whistling in the bush. I was wearing my ratty jeans, a faded green shirt, and no makeup. My hair was in sponge rollers. Suddenly my sister Shellie bolted out of the back door.

"The missionaries are here!"

Normally this announcement made my heart skip with delight, but that afternoon it filled me with horror. I thought about stealing away to the gully behind our house and hiding until the missionaries left. But then I had another idea. I told Shellie to go back inside and sneak downstairs to the basement, where my bedroom was, and open my bedroom window at the front of the house. Meanwhile, I edged around the side of the house and climbed through my window, changed into a sundress, quickly did my hair, and put on some lipstick and blush. Then I sauntered upstairs, feigning surprise when I saw the missionaries sitting in the living room talking to my mother and sipping ginger ale.

We chatted for awhile; and when they were leaving, Elder Teriyan said, “You look very nice today.”

Later I gave Shellie two fifty-cent pieces.

A month later, the moment I’d been dreading arrived. Elder Teriyan was transferred. He came to us one night, said his goodbyes, and tweaked my hair and shook my hand one last time. I wrote in my diary that he held my hand for a “long time” and looked at me until my eyes met his. Then he let go of my hand, and he and Elder Johnson walked to their car as I watched through the window. For days I drifted about the house and hardly spoke during dinner. I went to sacrament meeting, seminary, and scripture study but didn’t listen to the lessons. Elder Green, the elder who took Elder Teriyan’s place, was nothing in comparison. I stopped wearing mascara on Thursdays. I checked the mailbox every day. Finally, several weeks after Elder Teriyan’s transfer, we received a letter. There was his beautiful handwriting on the envelope. I tore it open and read the letter eagerly. He described his new area, his companion, and the people they were teaching—it was nothing but missionary talk. My heart sank. But at the end of the letter he wrote, “I just want you to know that I love all of you. I mean it. I really do love *all* of you.” I smiled: By underlining the second “all” he was obviously trying to tell me that he loved me.

Of course, now, years later, I laugh at my girlish fancies. No doubt most of what I wrote in my diary sprouted from reading a few too many romance novels. But I wonder if Elder Teriyan returned a little of my crush. I suspect that, while most of the elders ignored me or indulged me good-humoredly, some of them may have encouraged me. Missionaries like Elder Hawke, who was only five three, or Elder Blum, who had severe acne, probably didn’t get noticed much by girls at home, so having a fifteen-year-old Australian girl fawning over them would have been flatter-

ing, even welcome. They may have considered my crushes a harmless, pleasant diversion from the work.

As I re-read my diary now, I see evidences of flirting. Elder Blum once asked me how I managed to shape my eyebrows in such perfect arches and told me I'd make a good model. Once, after an area conference, I overheard Elder Gardner ask another missionary, "Melissa's pretty, isn't she?" which made me flush with pleasure. As for Elder Teriyan, even though he didn't really "treat me like a woman,"—whatever that means—he did call me "Curly" and tweak my hair, and he seemed to enjoy shaking my hand and talking to me after firesides and scripture study. The underlined "all" in "I really do love *all* of you" may have been a coded message of affection for me, after all.

My correspondence with Elder Teriyan seems to have fizzled shortly after we received his letter, however, because I don't mention him much in my diary after that. In the meantime, I moved on to a new and more exciting stage. Several months after Elder Teriyan's transfer, my parents sold our home and we moved back to the States, just as I turned sixteen. I could now date pre-mission American boys. What were missionaries in comparison with dark and handsome Brian Thomas, who drove his own Camero and gave feather-light kisses? And so, my fascination with missionaries ended—until two years later, when I sent my boyfriend, Ralph, on a mission and waited for him.

But though I waited for a missionary and, when that romance ended after Ralph got home, ended up serving my own mission (this time finding most of the elders annoying and immature), a missionary romance culminating in marriage wasn't to be my fate. My own eventual courtship came three years after my mission, beginning with an ordinary blind date while working on my master's degree at BYU. Though my husband was a returned missionary, we didn't meet in the mission field; we didn't exchange heart-racing handshakes or furtive glances during sacrament meeting; we didn't court through letters. We dated, got engaged, got married, and the last of my old notions about mission romances slipped away. Still, sometimes I remember the fluttery-heart excitement of meeting a new, fresh-faced boy in a suit—and the world of romantic possibilities that lay in a handshake, a compliment, a look, a wink.