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Written by Nicholas Sparks

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SPHERE

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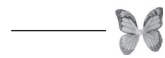
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CHAPTER 1



And Baby Makes Three

Wow!" I can remember saying as soon as Vivian stepped out of the bathroom and showed me the positive result of the pregnancy test. "That's great!"

In truth, my feelings were closer to . . . Really? Already?

It was more shock than anything, with a bit of terror mixed in. We'd been married for a little more than a year and she'd already told me that she intended to stay home for the first few years when we decided to have a baby. I'd always agreed when she'd said it—I wanted the same thing—but in that moment, I also understood that our life as a couple with two incomes would soon be coming to an end. Moreover, I wasn't sure whether I was even ready to become a father, but what could I do? It wasn't as though she'd tricked me, nor had she concealed the fact that she wanted to have a baby, and she'd let me know when she stopped taking the pill. I wanted children as well, of course, but she'd stopped the pill only three weeks earlier. I can remember thinking that I probably had a few months at least before her body readjusted to its normal, baby-making state. For all I knew, it could be hard for her to become pregnant, which meant it might even be a year or two.

But not my Vivian. Her body had adjusted right away. My Vivian was fertile.

I slipped my arms around her, studying her to see if she was already glowing. But it was too soon for that, right? What exactly is glowing, anyway? Is it just another way of saying someone looks hot and sweaty? How were our lives going to change? And by how much?

Questions tumbled around and around, and as I held my wife, I, Russell Green, had answers to none of them.



Months later, the big *IT* happened, though I admit much of the day remains a blur.

In retrospect, I probably should have written it all down while it was still fresh in my mind. A day like the big *IT* should be remembered in vivid detail—not the fuzzy snapshots I tend to recall. The only reason I remember as much as I do is because of Vivian. Every detail seemed etched into her consciousness, but then she was the one in labor, and pain has a way of sometimes sharpening the mind. Or so they say.

What I do know is this: Sometimes, in recalling events of that day, she and I are of slightly differing opinions. For instance, I considered my actions completely understandable under the circumstances, whereas Vivian would declare alternately that I was selfish, or simply a complete idiot. When she told the story to friends—and she has done so many times—people inevitably laughed, or shook their heads and offered her pitying glances.

In all fairness, I don't think I was either selfish or a complete idiot; after all, it was our first child, and neither of us knew exactly what to expect when she went into labor. Does anyone really feel prepared for what's coming? Labor, I was told, is unpredictable; during her pregnancy, Vivian reminded me more than once that the process from initial contractions to actual birth could take more than a day—especially for the first child—and labors of twelve hours or more were not uncommon. Like most young fathers-to-be, I considered my wife the expert and took her at her word. After all, she was the one who'd read all the books.

It should also be noted that I wasn't entirely deficient on the morning in question. I had taken my responsibilities seriously. Both her overnight bag and the baby's bag were packed, and the contents of both had been checked and double-checked. The camera and video camera were charged and ready, and the baby's room was fully stocked with everything our child would need for at least a month. I knew

the quickest route to the hospital and had planned alternate routes, if there happened to be an accident on the highway. I had also known the baby would be coming soon; in the days leading up to the actual birth, there'd been numerous false alarms, but even I knew the countdown had officially started.

In other words, I wasn't entirely surprised when my wife shook me awake at half past four on October 16, 2009, announcing that the contractions were about five minutes apart and that it was time to go to the hospital. I didn't doubt her; she knew the difference between Braxton Hicks and the *real thing*, and though I'd been preparing for this moment, my first thoughts weren't about throwing on my clothes and loading up the car; in fact, they weren't about my wife and soon-to-be-born child at all. Rather, my thoughts went something like this: *Today's the big IT, and people are going to be taking a lot of photographs. Other people will be staring at these photographs forever, and—considering it's for posterity—I should probably hop in the shower before we go, since my hair looks as though I'd spent the night in a wind tunnel.*

It's not that I'm vain; I simply thought I had *plenty of time*, so I told Vivian I'd be ready to go in a few minutes. As a general rule, I shower quickly—no more than ten minutes on a normal day, including shaving—but right after I'd applied the shaving cream, I thought I heard my wife cry out from the living room. I listened again, hearing nothing, but sped up nonetheless. By the time I was rinsing off, I heard her shouting, though strangely it seemed as though she was shouting *about* me, not *at* me. I wrapped a towel around my waist and stepped into the darkened hallway, still dripping. As God is my witness, I was in the shower for less than six minutes.

Vivian cried out again and it took me a second to process that Vivian was on all fours and shouting into her cell phone that I was IN THE DAMN SHOWER! and demanding WHAT IN THE HELL CAN THAT IDIOT BE THINKING?!?!?!? *Idiot*, by the way, was the nicest term she used to describe me in that same conversation; her language was actually quite a bit more colorful. What I didn't know was that the contractions that had been five minutes apart were now only two minutes apart, and that she also was in back labor. Back labor is excruciating, and Vivian suddenly let out a scream so powerful

that it became its own living entity, one that may still be hovering above our neighborhood in Charlotte, North Carolina, an otherwise peaceful place.

Rest assured, I moved into even higher gear after that, slapping on clothes without completely toweling off, and loading the car. I supported Vivian as we walked to the car and didn't comment on the fact that she was digging her fingernails into my forearm. In a flash, I was behind the wheel and once on the road, I called the obstetrician, who promised to meet us at the hospital.

The contractions were still a couple of minutes apart when we arrived, but Vivian's continuing anguish meant that she was taken straight to labor and delivery. I held her hand and tried to guide her through her breathing—during which she again offered various colorful sentiments about me and where I could *stick the damn breathing!*—until the anesthesiologist arrived for the epidural. Early in the pregnancy, Vivian had debated whether or not to get one before reluctantly deciding in favor, and now it appeared to be a blessing. As soon as the medication kicked in, her agony vanished and Vivian smiled for the first time since she'd shaken me awake that morning. Her obstetrician—in his sixties, with neat gray hair and a friendly face—wandered into the room every twenty to thirty minutes to see how dilated she was, and in between those visits I called both sets of parents, as well as my sister.

It was time. Nurses were summoned and they readied the equipment with calm professionalism. Then, all at once, the doctor told my wife to push.

Vivian pushed through three contractions; on the third, the doctor suddenly began rotating his wrists and hands like a magician pulling a rabbit from his hat and the next thing I knew, I was a father.

Just like that.

The doctor examined our baby, and though she was slightly anemic, she had ten fingers, ten toes, a healthy heart and a set of obviously functioning lungs. I asked about the anemia—the doctor said it was nothing to worry about—and after he squirted a bunch of goop in our baby's eyes, she was cleaned and swaddled and placed in my wife's arms.

Just as I'd predicted, photos were taken all day long but strangely, when people saw them later, no one seemed to care about my appearance at all.



It's been said that babies are born looking like either Winston Churchill or Mahatma Gandhi, but because the anemia lent a grayish pallor to my daughter's skin, my first thought was that she resembled Yoda, without the ears of course. A *beautiful* Yoda, mind you, a *breathtaking* Yoda, a Yoda so *miraculous* that when she gripped my finger, my heart nearly burst. My parents happened to arrive a few minutes later, and in my nervousness and excitement, I met them in the hallway and blurted out the first words that came to mind.

"We have a gray baby!"

My mother looked at me as though I'd gone insane while my father dug his finger into his ear as if wondering if the waxy buildup had clouded his ability to hear effectively. Ignoring my comment, they entered the room and saw Vivian cradling our daughter in her arms, her expression serene. My eyes followed theirs and I thought to myself that London had to be the single most precious little girl in the history of the world. While I'm sure all new fathers think the same thing about their own children, the simple fact is that there can only be one child who is actually the *most precious in the history of the world*, and part of me marveled that others in the hospital weren't stopping by our room to marvel at my daughter.

My mom stepped toward the bed, craning her neck to peer even closer.

"Did you decide on a name?" she asked.

"London," my wife answered, her attention completely devoted to our child. "We've decided to name her London."



My parents eventually left, then returned again that afternoon. In between, Vivian's parents visited as well. They'd flown in from Alexandria, Virginia, where Vivian had been raised, and while Vivian was thrilled, I immediately felt the tension in the room begin to rise.

I'd always sensed that they believed their daughter had *settled* when deciding to marry me, and who knows? Nor did they seem to like my parents, and the feeling was mutual. While the four of them were always cordial, it was nonetheless obvious that they preferred to avoid each other's company.

My older sister, Marge, also came by with Liz, bearing gifts. Marge and Liz had been together longer than Vivian and I had—at the time, more than five years—and not only did I think Liz was a terrific partner for my sister, but I knew that Marge was the greatest older sibling a guy could have. With both my parents working—Dad was a plumber and Mom worked as a receptionist at a dentist's office until her retirement a few years back—Marge had not only served as a substitute parent at times, but as a sibling confidante who helped me wade through the angst of adolescence. Neither of them liked Vivian's parents either, by the way, a feeling that had coalesced at my wedding, when Vivian's parents refused to let Marge and Liz sit together at the main table. Granted, Marge had been in the wedding party and Liz had not—and Marge had opted to wear a tuxedo, not a dress—but it was the kind of slight that neither of them had been able to forgive, since other heterosexual couples had been allowed the privilege. Frankly, I don't blame Marge or Liz for being upset about it, because I was bothered, too. She and Liz get along better than most of the married couples I know.

While our visitors came and went, I stayed in the room with my wife for the rest of the day, alternately sitting in the rocking chair near the window or on the bed beside her, both of us repeatedly whispering in amazement that *we had a daughter.* I would stare at my wife and daughter, knowing with certainty that I belonged with these two and that the three of us would forever be connected. The feeling was overwhelming—like everything else that day—and I found myself speculating what London would look like as a teenager, or what she would dream about, or what she would do with her life. Whenever London cried, Vivian would automatically move her to her breast, and I would witness yet another miracle.

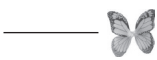
How does London know how to do that? I wondered to myself. *How on earth does she know?*



There is another memory from that day, however, that is all mine.

It occurred on that first night in the hospital, long after our final visitors had left. Vivian was asleep and I was dozing in the rocking chair when I heard my daughter begin to fuss. Before that day, I'd never actually held a newborn, and scooping her into my arms, I pulled her close to my body. I thought I'd have to wake Vivian, but surprising me, London settled down. I inched back to the rocking chair and for the next twenty minutes, all I could do was marvel at the feelings she stirred within me. That I adored her, I already knew, but already, the thought of life without her struck me as inconceivable. I remember whispering to her that as her father, I would always be there for her, and as if knowing exactly what I was saying, she pooped and squirmed and then began to cry. In the end, I handed her back to Vivian.

CHAPTER 2



In the Beginning

I told them today," Vivian announced.

We were in the bedroom, Vivian had slipped into her pajamas and crawled into bed, the two of us finally alone. It was mid-December, and London had been asleep for less than an hour; at eight weeks, she was still only sleeping three to four hours at a stretch. Vivian hadn't complained, but she was endlessly tired. Beautiful, but tired.

"Told who what?" I asked.

"Rob," she answered, meaning her boss at the media company where she worked. "I officially let him know that after my maternity leave was up, I wouldn't be coming back."

"Oh," I said, feeling the same pang of terror I'd felt when I'd seen the positive pregnancy result. Vivian earned nearly as much as I did and without her income, I wasn't sure we could afford our lifestyle.

"He said the door was always open if I changed my mind," she added. "But I told him that London wasn't going to be raised by strangers. Otherwise, why have a child in the first place?"

"You don't have to convince me," I said, doing my best to hide my feelings. "I'm on your side." Well, part of me was, anyway. "But you know that means we can't go out to dinner as much and we'll have to cut back on discretionary spending, right?"

"I know."

"And you're okay with not shopping as much?"

"You say it like I waste money. I never do that."

The credit card bills sometimes seemed to indicate otherwise—as did

her closet, which bulged with clothes and shoes and bags—but I could hear the annoyance in her tone, and the last thing I wanted to do was argue with her. Instead, I rolled toward her, pulling her close, something else on my mind. I nuzzled and kissed her neck.

"Now?" she asked.

"It's been a long time."

"And my poor baby feels like he's about to blow up, doesn't he?"

"Frankly, I don't want to risk it."

She laughed and as I began to unbutton her pajama top, a noise sounded on the baby monitor. In that instant, we both froze.

Nothing.

Still nothing.

And just when I thought the coast was clear and I let out a breath I didn't even know I'd been holding, the noise from the baby monitor began in full force. With a sigh, I rolled onto my back and Vivian slipped from the bed. By the time London finally calmed—which took a good half hour—Vivian wasn't in the mood for a second attempt.

In the morning, Vivian and I had more luck. So much luck, in fact, that I cheerfully volunteered to take care of London when she woke so that Vivian could go back to sleep. London, however, must have been just as tired as Vivian; it wasn't until I'd finished my second cup of coffee that I heard various noises but no cries, emanating from the baby monitor.

In her room, the mobile above the crib was rotating, and London was wiggly and full of energy, her legs shooting like pistons. I couldn't help but smile and she suddenly smiled as well.

It wasn't gas; it wasn't a reflexive tic. I'd seen those, and I almost didn't believe my eyes. This was a real smile, as true as the sunrise, and when she emitted an unexpected giggle, the already brilliant start to my day was suddenly made a thousand times better.



I'm not a wise man.

I'm not unintelligent, mind you. But wisdom means more than being intelligent, because it encompasses understanding, empathy, experience, inner peace, and intuition, and in retrospect, I obviously lack many of those traits.

Here's what else I've learned: Age doesn't guarantee wisdom, any more than age guarantees intelligence. I know that's not a popular notion—don't we frequently regard our elders as wise partially because they're gray and wrinkled?—but lately I've come to believe that some people are born with the capacity to become wise while others aren't, and in some people, wisdom seems to be evident even at a young age.

My sister Marge, for instance. She's wise, and she's only five years older than I am. Frankly, she's been wise as long as I've known her. Liz, too. She's younger than Marge and yet her comments are both thoughtful and empathetic. In the aftermath of a conversation with her, I often find myself contemplating the things she'd said. My mom and dad are also wise and I've been thinking about it a lot these days because it's become clear to me that even though wisdom runs in the family, it bypassed me entirely.

If I were wise, after all, I would have listened to Marge back in the summer of 2007, when she drove me out to the cemetery where our grandparents were buried and asked me whether I was absolutely sure that I wanted to marry Vivian.

If I were wise, I would have listened to my father when he asked me whether I was sure I should strike out on my own and start my own advertising company when I was thirty-five years old.

If I were wise, I would have listened to my mom when she told me to spend as much time with London as I could, since kids grow up so fast, and you can never get those years back.

But like I said, I'm not a wise man, and because of that, my life pretty much went into a tailspin. Even now, I wonder if I'll ever recover.



Where does one begin when trying to make sense of a story that makes little sense at all? At the beginning? And where is the beginning?

Who knows?

So let's start with this. When I was child, I grew up believing that I'd feel like an adult by the time I was eighteen, and I was right. At eighteen, I was already making plans. My family had lived paycheck to paycheck, and I had no intention of doing the same. I had dreams of starting my own business, of being my own boss, even if I wasn't

sure what I was actually going to do. Figuring that college would help steer me in the proper direction, I went to NC State but the longer I was there, the younger I seemed to feel. By the time I collected my degree I couldn't shake the notion that I was pretty much the same guy I'd been in high school.

Nor had college helped me decide on the kind of business I'd start. I had little in the way of real-world experience and even less capital, so deferring my dream, I took a job in advertising for a man named Jesse Peters. I wore suits to the office and worked a ton of hours and yet, more often than not, I still felt *younger* than my actual age might indicate. On weekends, I frequented the same bars I did in college, and I often imagined that I could start over as a freshman, fitting right in with whatever fraternity I happened to join. Over the next eight years there would be even more changes; I'd get married and purchase a house and start driving a hybrid but even then, I didn't necessarily always feel like the adult version of me. Peters, after all, had essentially taken the place of my parents—like my parents, he could tell me what to do *or else*—which made it seem as though I was still *pretending.* Sometimes, when sitting at my desk, I'd try to convince myself: *Okay, it's official. I'm now a grown-up.*

That realization came, of course, after London was born and Vivian quit her job. I wasn't quite thirty years old and the pressure I felt to provide for my family over the next few years required sacrifice on a scale that even I hadn't expected, and if that isn't being a grown-up, I don't know what is. After finishing at the agency—on days when I actually made it home at a reasonable hour—I'd walk through the door and hear London call out, "Daddy!" and always wish that I could spend more time with her. She'd come running and I'd scoop her up, and she'd wrap her arms around my neck, and I'd remind myself that all the sacrifices had been worth it, if only because of our wonderful little girl.

In the hectic rush of life, it was easy to convince myself that the important things—my wife and daughter, my job, my family—were going okay, even if I couldn't be my own boss. In rare moments, when I imagined a future, I would find myself picturing a life that wasn't all that different than the one I was currently leading, and that was okay,

too. On the surface, things seemed to be running rather smoothly, but I should have taken that as a warning sign. Trust me when I say that I had *absolutely no idea* that within a couple of years, I'd wake in the mornings feeling like one of those immigrants on Ellis Island who'd arrived in America with nothing but the clothes on their back, not speaking the language, and wondering, *What am I going to do now?*

When, exactly, did it all begin to go wrong? If you ask Marge, the answer is obvious: "It started going downhill when you met Vivian," she's told me more than once. Of course, being Marge, she would automatically correct herself. "I take that back," she would add. "It started way before that, when you were still in grade school and hung that poster on your wall, the one with the girl in the skimpy bikini with the big bahoonas. I always liked that poster, by the way, but it warped your thinking." Then, after further consideration, she would shake her head, speculating, "Now that I think about it, you were always kind of screwed up, and coming from the person who's always been regarded as the family screwup, that's saying something. Maybe your real problem is that you've always been too damn nice for your own good."

And that's the thing. When you start trying to figure out what went wrong—or, more specifically, where *you* went wrong—it's a bit like peeling an onion. There's always another layer, another mistake in the past or a painful memory that stands out, which then leads one back even further in time, and then even further, in search of the *ultimate truth*. I've reached the point where I've stopped trying to figure it out: The only thing that really matters now is learning enough to avoid making the same mistakes again.



To understand why that is, it's important to understand me. Which isn't easy, by the way. I've been me for more than a third of a century, and half the time, I still don't understand myself. So let me start with this: As I've grown older, I've come to believe that there are two types of men in the world. The marrying type, and the bachelor type. The marrying type is the kind of guy who pretty much sizes up every girl he dates, assessing whether or not she could be *The One*. It's the

reason that women in their thirties and forties often say things like *All the good men are taken*. By that, women mean guys who are ready, willing, and able to commit to being part of a couple.

I've always been the marrying type. To me, being part of a couple feels *right*. For whatever reason, I've always been more comfortable in the presence of women than men, even in friendship, and spending time with one woman *who also happened to be madly in love with me* struck me as the best of all possible worlds.

And it can be, I suppose. But that's where things get a bit trickier because not all marrying types are the same. There are subgroups within the marrying types, guys who may also consider themselves to be *romantic*, for instance. Sounds nice, right? The kind of guy that most women insist they want? It probably is, and I must admit that I'm a card-carrying member of this particular subgroup. In rare instances, however, this particular subtype is also wired to be a *people pleaser* and when taken together, these three things made me believe that with just a bit more effort—if only I tried a little harder—then my wife would always adore me in the same way I adored her.

But what was it that made me that way? Was it simply my nature? Was I influenced by family dynamics? Or did I simply watch too many romantic movies at an impressionable age? Or all of the above?

I have no idea, but I state without hesitation that the *watching too many romantic movies* thing was entirely Marge's fault. She loved the classics like *An Affair to Remember* and *Casablanca*, but *Ghost* and *Dirty Dancing* were up there too, and we must have watched *Pretty Woman* at least twenty times. That movie was her all-time favorite. What I didn't know, of course, was that Marge and I enjoyed watching it because we both had massive crushes on Julia Roberts at the time, but that's beside the point. The film will probably live on forever because it *works*. The characters played by Richard Gere and Julia Roberts had . . . *chemistry*. They talked. They learned to trust each other, despite the odds. They fell in love. And how can one possibly forget the scene when Richard Gere is waiting for Julia—he's planning to take her to the opera—and she emerges wearing a gown that utterly transforms her? The audience sees Richard's awestruck expression, and he eventually opens a velvet box, which holds the diamond

necklace Julia will also be wearing that evening. As Julia reaches for it, Richard snaps the lid closed, and Julia's sudden joyful surprise . . .

It was all there, really, in just those few scenes. The romance, I mean—trust, anticipation, and joy combined with opera, dressing up, and jewelry all led to *love*. In my preteenage brain, it just clicked: a how-to manual of sorts to impress a girl. All I really had to do was remember that girls had to *like* the guy first and that *romantic gestures* would then lead to *love*. In the end, another romantic in the real world was created.

When I was in sixth grade, a new girl joined the class. Melissa Anderson had moved from Minnesota, and with blond hair and blue eyes, she shared the look of her Swedish ancestors. When I saw her on the first day of school, I'm pretty sure I went slack-jawed and I wasn't the only one. Every guy was whispering about her and there was little doubt in my mind that she was far and away the prettiest girl who'd ever set foot in Mrs. Hartman's class at Arthur E. Edmonds elementary school.

But the difference between me and the other guys at school was that I knew exactly what to do while they did not. I would woo her and though I wasn't Richard Gere with private jets and diamond necklaces, I did have a bicycle and I'd learned how to macramé bracelets, complete with wooden beads. Those, however, would come later. First—just like Richard and Julia—we had to get to *like* each other. I began to find reasons to sit at the same table with her at lunch. While she talked, I listened and asked questions, and weeks later, when she finally told me that she thought I was nice, I knew it was time to take the next step. I wrote her a poem—about her life in Minnesota and how pretty she was—and I slipped it to her on the school bus one afternoon, along with a flower. I took my seat, knowing exactly what would happen: She'd understand I was different, and with that would come an even greater epiphany, one that would lead her to reach for my hand and ask me to walk her home as soon as we got off the bus.

Except it didn't work out that way. Instead of reading the poem, she gabbed with her friend April the whole way home, and the following day, she sat next to Tommy Harmon at lunch and didn't talk to me at all. Nor did she speak to me the following day, or the day after that.

When Marge found me sulking in my bedroom later, she told me that I was trying too hard and that I should just be myself.

"I am being myself."

"Then you might want to change," Marge retorted, "because you're coming across as desperate."

Problem was, I didn't think twice. Did Richard Gere think twice? He clearly knew more than my sister, and again, here's where wisdom and I were obviously traveling in opposite directions along the highway. Because *Pretty Woman* was a movie and I was living in the real world, but the pattern I established with Melissa Anderson continued, with variations, until it eventually became a habit I couldn't break. I became the king of romantic gestures—flowers, notes, cards, and the like—and in college, I was even the "secret admirer" to a girl I happened to fancy. I opened doors and paid for dates, and I listened whenever a girl wanted to talk, even if it was about how much she still loved her ex-boyfriend. Most girls sincerely liked me. I mean that. To them, I was a *friend*, the kind of guy who'd get invited to hang out with a group of girlfriends whenever they went out, but I seldom succeeded in landing the girl I'd set my sights on. I can't tell you how many times I've heard, *"You're the nicest guy I know, and I'm sure you'll meet someone special. I have two or three friends I could probably set you up with . . ."*

It wasn't easy being the guy who was *perfect for someone else*. It often left me brokenhearted, and I couldn't understand why women told me that they wanted certain traits—romance and kindness, interest and the ability to listen—and then didn't appreciate it when it was actually offered to them.

I wasn't altogether unlucky in love, of course. In high school, I had a girlfriend named Angela during my sophomore year; in college, Victoria and I were together most of my junior year. And during the summer after graduation from college, when I was twenty-two, I met a woman named Emily.

Emily still lives in the area, and over the years, I've seen her out and about. She was the first woman I ever loved, and since *romance* and *nostalgia* are often intertwined, I still think about her. Emily was a bit of a Bohemian; she favored long flowered skirts and sandals,

wore little makeup, and had majored in fine arts with an emphasis on painting. She was also beautiful, with chestnut hair and hazel eyes that were flecked with gold, but beyond her physical appearance, there was more. She was quick to laugh, kind to everyone she met, and intelligent, a woman who most thought was perfect for me. My parents adored her, Marge loved her, and when we were together, we were comfortable even when silent. Our relationship was easy and relaxed; more than lovers, we were friends. Not only could we talk about anything, she delighted in the notes I'd place under her pillow or the flowers I'd have delivered to her workplace for no reason whatsoever. Emily loved me as much as she loved romantic gestures, and after dating her for a couple of years, I made plans to propose, even putting a deposit down on an engagement ring.

And then, I screwed it up. Don't ask me why. I could blame the booze that night—I'd been drinking with friends at a bar—but for whatever reason, I struck up a conversation with a woman named Carly. She was beautiful and she knew how to flirt and she'd recently broken up with a long-term boyfriend. One drink led to another, which led to more flirting, and we eventually ended up in bed together. In the morning, Carly made it clear that what had happened was simply a fling, with no strings attached, and though she kissed me goodbye, she didn't bother giving me her phone number.

There are a couple of very simple Guy Rules in this sort of situation, and Rule Number One goes like this: *Never ever tell.* And if your sweetheart ever suspects anything and asks directly, go immediately to Rule Number Two: *Deny, deny, deny.*

All guys know these rules, but the thing was, I also felt guilty. Horribly guilty. Even after a month, I couldn't put the experience behind me, nor could I seem to forgive myself. Keeping it secret seemed inconceivable; I couldn't imagine building a future with Emily knowing it was constructed at least in part on a lie. I talked to Marge about it, and Marge was, as always, helpful in that sisterly way of hers.

"Keep your stupid trap shut, you dimwit. You did a crappy thing and you should feel guilty. But if you're never going to do it again, then don't hurt Emily's feelings, too. Something like this will crush her."

I knew Marge was right, and yet . . .

I wanted Emily's forgiveness, because I wasn't sure I could forgive myself without it, and so in the end, I went to Emily and said the words that even now, I wish I could take back.

"There's something I have to tell you," I began, and proceeded to spill everything.

If forgiveness was the goal, it didn't work. If trying to build a long-term relationship on a foundation of truth was another goal, that didn't work either. Through angry tears, she stormed off, saying that she needed some time to think.

I left her alone for a week, waiting for her to call while moping around my apartment, but the phone never rang. The following week, I left two messages—and apologized again both times—but she still wouldn't call. It wasn't until the following week that we finally had lunch, but it was strained, and when she left the restaurant, she told me not to walk her to her car. The writing was on the wall and a week after that, she left a message saying it was over for good. It crushed me for weeks.

The passage of time has lessened my guilt—time always does—and I try to console myself with the idea that at least for Emily, my indiscretion was a blessing in disguise. I heard from a friend of a friend a few years after our breakup that she'd married an Australian guy and whenever I caught a glimpse of her, it appeared as though life was treating her well. I'd tell myself that I was happy for her. Emily, more than anyone, deserved a wonderful life, and Marge felt exactly the same way. Even after I'd married Vivian, my sister would sometimes turn to me and say, "That Emily sure was something. You really messed that up, didn't you?"



I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina, and aside from a single year in another city, I've lived there all my life. Even now, it strikes me as almost impossible that Vivian and I met in the place where we did, or even that we ever met at all. After all, she, like me, was from the South; like mine, her job required long hours, and she seldom went out. What are the odds, then, that I'd meet Vivian at a cocktail party in Manhattan?

At the time, I was working at the agency's satellite office in

Midtown, which probably sounds like a bigger deal than it really was. Jesse Peters was of the opinion that pretty much anyone who showed promise in the Charlotte office had to serve at least a little time up north, if only because a number of our clients are banks, and every bank has a major presence in New York City. You've probably seen some of the commercials I've worked on; I like to think of them as thoughtful and serious, projecting the soul of integrity. The first of those commercials, by the way, was conceived while I was living in a small studio on West Seventy-Seventh between Columbus and Amsterdam and trying to figure out whether my ATM accurately reflected my checking account, which showed a balance with just enough funds to purchase a meal deal at a nearby fast-food place.

In May 2006, a CEO of the one of the banks who *loved my vision* was hosting a charity event to benefit MoMA. The CEO was seriously into art—something I knew nothing about—and even though it was an exclusive, black-tie event, I hadn't wanted to attend. But his bank was a client and Peters was my *do-what-I-tell-you-or-else* boss, so what could I do?

I remember almost nothing about the first half hour, other than that I clearly didn't belong. Well over half the people in attendance were old enough to be my grandparents, and practically everyone was in a different stratosphere when it came to our respective levels of wealth. At one point, I found myself listening as two gray-haired gentlemen debated the merits of the G IV when compared to the Falcon 2000. It took me a while to figure out that they were comparing their private jets.

When I turned away from the conversation, I saw her boss on the other side of the room. I recognized him from late-night television, and Vivian would later tell me that he considered himself an art collector. She'd wrinkled her nose when she said it, implying that he had money but no taste, which didn't surprise me. Despite famous guests, his show's trademark humor was best described as lowbrow.

She was standing behind him, hidden from my line of sight, but when he stepped forward to greet someone, I saw her. With dark hair, flawless skin, and cheekbones that supermodels dream about, I was sure she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

At first I thought she was his date, but the longer I watched, the more confident I was that they weren't *together*, that she instead worked for him in some capacity. Nor was she wearing a ring, another good sign . . . but really, what chance did I have?

Yet the romantic within me was undeterred, and when she went to the bar to get a cocktail, I sidled up to the bar as well. Up close, she was even more gorgeous.

"It's you," I said.

"Excuse me?"

"The one the Disney artists think about when they draw the eyes of their princesses."

Not great, I'll admit. Ham-handed, maybe even cheesy, and in the awkward pause that ensued, I knew I'd blown it. But here's the thing: She laughed.

"Now there's a pickup line I've never heard before."

"It wouldn't work on just anyone," I said. "I'm Russell Green."

She seemed amused. "I'm Vivian Hamilton," she said, and I almost gasped.

Her name was *Vivian*.

Just like Julia Roberts's character in *Pretty Woman*.



How does one actually know when another is *right* for you? What kind of signals does that entail? To meet a person and think, *This is the one with whom I want to spend the rest of my life*. For example, how could Emily seem right, and Vivian seem right, when they were as different as night and day? When the relationships were as different as night and day?

I don't know, but when I think about Vivian, it's still easy to remember the heady thrill of our first few evenings together. Where Emily and I were warm and comfortable, Vivian and I burned hot, almost from the very beginning, as if our attraction were fated. Every interaction, every conversation seemed to amplify my growing belief that we were exactly what each was looking for in the other.

As the marrying type, I began to fantasize about the paths our life together would take, our passionate connection burning forever.

Within a couple of months, I was certain I wanted Vivian to be my wife, even if I didn't say as much. Vivian took longer to feel the same way about me, but by the time we'd been seeing each other six months, Vivian and I were a *serious item*, testing the waters about how each felt about God, money, politics, families, neighborhoods, kids, and our core values. More often than not, we were in agreement, and taking a cue from yet another romantic movie, I proposed on the viewing deck of the Empire State Building on Valentine's Day, a week before I had to move back to Charlotte.

I *thought* I knew what I was getting when I dropped to one knee. But thinking back, Vivian *knew* with certainty—not only that I was the kind of man she wanted, but *needed*—and on November 17, 2007, we took our vows in front of friends and family.



What happened next? you may wonder.

Like every married couple, we had our ups and downs, our challenges and opportunities, successes and failures. When all the dust had settled, I came to believe that marriage, at least in theory, is wonderful.

In practice, though, I think a more accurate word is *complicated*.

Marriage, after all, is never quite what one imagines it will be. Part of me—the romantic part—no doubt imagined the entire venture as an extended commercial for Hallmark cards with roses and candles and everything in soft focus, a dimension in which love and trust could surmount any challenge. The more practical side of me knew that remaining a couple over the long term took effort on both sides. It requires commitment and compromise, communication and cooperation, especially as life tends to throw curveballs, often when we least expect them. Ideally, the curveball slides past the couple with little damage; at other times, facing those pitches together makes the couple more committed to each other.

But sometimes, the curveballs end up smacking us in the chest and close to the heart, leaving bruises that never seem to heal.