

Courtship: A Love Story

by Jennie Ethell Chancey

To tell the story of our courtship, I must begin at the very start--when I was a baby. Yes, I said baby. As soon as I was born, my parents began praying for my future mate. Daily through all my growing-up years they prayed for his childhood, his salvation, his growth in Christ. Little did they know that a family 500 miles away was also praying for their son's future wife!

When I turned thirteen, my mother started me praying for my husband. Not that he'd be rich or handsome (though I must confess I sneaked in a few petitions that he wouldn't look like a gorilla!), but that he would know Christ, desire to serve him, and wait for me. At the same time, Mom told me about a letter she had written to herself when she was thirteen. She sealed it to be opened when she turned eighteen and kept it in a box for herself. That letter contained a list of the qualities she wanted in a husband--the things she would wait for. Inspired, I wrote a similar list and a letter and sealed them up, but I marked the envelope for opening on my twenty-first birthday. The letter lay safe in a little keepsake trunk, nearly forgotten through my high school years. In the meantime, I prayed when I remembered to for the one I would marry. But my parents continued to pray for him every day.

I didn't date anyone when I was in high school, and it wasn't just because I was home schooled or because my parents believed in "courtship." They hadn't really thought about it at that point. But they raised three kids who didn't date by choice all the same. It just didn't make sense to us as we watched friends get involved with someone, get hurt, and break up--over and over and over again. Our youth group at church was full of kids who fell in and out of relationships without managing to hold on to many friends. Mom and Dad encouraged us instead to be friends with anyone we could, whether male or female. They reminded us to wait on the Lord's timing and be content where He had us. That doesn't mean we were never lonely. It doesn't mean I never wished someone would ask me out. I'm human! God places the desire in our hearts for companionship. It takes work to focus that desire on our families and friends without falling into the "dating" trap. I know it would be especially difficult for a person who isn't a part of a close-knit, loving family.

No matter how difficult it is, though, I believe it is crucial to commit our desires and needs to God. God doesn't want His people to be miserable or frustrated! He wants to do His will through them. Aside from salvation, committing to a life partner is the next most important decision anyone makes. It is not something to be done lightly or without a lot of prayer. And young adults need to support each other in this, not tear each other down. I am convinced that the high divorce rate in this nation comes in large part from the dating culture we've built. (By "dating," I mean serial relationships, not just stopping for a cup of coffee with a member of the opposite sex.) Dating creates the mindset that I can get out of a relationship as soon as it doesn't meet my needs, my desires, my wants, and my agenda. We try people on like they were clothing with a money-back guarantee! This does not honor the other person or God, who created each individual in His image. It is selfish and assumes we will always have things the way we want them when we want them.

So we come around to courtship. Let me say right off that I don't see courtship as an alternative to dating. In my opinion, dating should be out of the question. "Courtship" (or "family-centered relating" or whatever you like to call it) is something entirely different. It is not the "biblical" way to meet the opposite sex or go out. That would miss the point entirely. Courtship first is a completely new mindset--one that erases the old "get a date or be a geek" mentality. This takes some doing if you've been brought up to view dating as the normal way to find a mate. It begins with the decision to commit each day to God and His calling on my life. It comes with the knowledge that God has already chosen the person I am to marry--if I am to marry. It is the realization that I can never be content married until I am content single. If I live in despair because I don't have a "significant other," then I have not learned to lean on God. And do note that the word "courtship" gets thrown around a lot these days by parents

and others eager to dump dating, but it's not the name that's important--it is the principle of the thing, whatever buzzword is used.

But let me get back to the story. I went to college with my head in the clouds. Because my parents had met at college, I was sure I would find my future mate there. I had promised Mom and Dad that if anyone asked me out, I would tell him he had to talk with my dad first. I had committed my college time to the Lord and was prepared to follow his leading. I had a lot of friends at school, both guys and gals. The guys treated me like a sister and protected me from any "creeps." After my freshman year, my brother joined me at the same college. He also had lots of friends, and we spent all the time together we could. My second year was fabulous, with even more friends than before. And, yes, there were a lot of neat guys at school that I liked, but I kept my promise to remain focused on God and not go looking around for "The One."

By the time my junior year rolled around, I was beginning to wonder where this guy could be! I had never been asked out by any of the nice guys, and, even though I didn't want to date, I began to wonder if there was something wrong with me. Lots of my friends got asked out. But guys treated me like I was a relative or something. Don't get me wrong--this was all very nice! I just wondered if there ever would be anyone for me. Finally, I asked my brother if he knew why no one asked me out. He said, "You're intimidating." I was shocked. ME? Intimidating? I thought that was the craziest thing I'd ever heard! I asked a close girl friend what David meant, and she told me that guys would never dream of treating me the way they treated other girls, because they knew I had standards I wouldn't let down. They knew I was waiting for the best. I couldn't believe it. I had never told anyone those things. I'd talked with some of my girlfriends about my ideals, sure, but certainly not the guys! But they knew. My brother said it was just obvious. Guys felt protective of me. Some who didn't like me as well, called me the "Snow Queen," implying that I was just too cold to ever go out with anyone. Ouch!

It was that year that I opened the letter I'd written to myself at age thirteen. I laughed and laughed. What a child I had been, I thought. An impossible dreamer! Here is the list of qualities I had written:

1. He will be a Christian and desire to be the spiritual leader of our family.
2. He will love God more than he loves me and will want to serve Him.
3. He will be at least two years younger than me [Dad is two and a half years younger than Mom.]
4. He will have a great sense of humor and love old movies.
5. He will want to raise as many children as the Lord chooses to bless us with.
6. He will want me to be a stay-at-home mom.
7. He will play at least one musical instrument.
8. He will love history and reading and writing.
9. He will be nice looking...at least to me, if no one else thinks so.
10. He will love his family and mine.
11. He will like to eat broccoli.
12. He will sweep me off my feet, but only after he has won my family's approval.

Broccoli? Had I been out of my mind when I wrote that list? I laughed until I cried. I must've been crazy. There wasn't one guy on the planet who came anywhere close to fitting this list! No guys I knew wanted lots of kids. No guys I knew wanted their wife to stay at home--they all wanted two incomes, big houses and cars. No guys I knew played a musical instrument and loved history. I had made up an ideal man who would never exist. So I folded the list back into the envelope and decided God probably hadn't taken it seriously either.

Once I graduated from college, I decided I would never marry. It hadn't all happened the way I'd imagined four years before, so I told my parents I was sure God was calling me to be single. It didn't matter that I'd always wanted to be a wife and mother. I could serve in an orphanage in Africa and have lots of kids around me. I could be a teacher. I could baby-sit for the rest of my life! But God knew me from the womb. He had planned my life before I had a life to call my own. He had everything ready, but He was waiting for the right time.

So I began my full-time job and made new friends. Well-meaning ladies in the church pitied my unmarried state and tried to match me up with "eligible" guys, but I resisted. I was determined to be content where God had me and not look for Mr. Right. I told my parents I had grown cynical at college. I thought all guys (except for ones I was related to) were jerks. Secretly, I wanted to believe in that list I'd written, but I felt silly telling anyone that. I wanted to wait for the best, though it looked as though that was a fantasy. A year passed--one of the most wonderful years yet. God brought people into my life who were readying me for The One, though I didn't realize it at the time, of course. Everything that happened added on to what God had been doing throughout my life. My interests in history and reading intensified. Although I'd always been fascinated by the Civil War, I became passionately interested in Southern history. Little did I know. God does have a sense of humor--and impeccable timing.

I saw Matt Chancey's face and read his words before he ever knew who I was. He had applied to work at my office as an intern to the legal and political staff. Part of my job involved reading through applications and setting up interviews with candidates for the program. Matt's application stayed on file for a long time, though, because he had missed the winter term's deadline by a month. (God's timing, I am certain, since He still had a lot to work out in me.) When the time rolled around for us to interview Matt, I pulled out his file and read through it again. I noticed something I hadn't caught before. Matt was a Civil War reenactor and loved to study history and literature. He was also passionate about Southern history. He'd fit right in at our office, I thought, but that's as far ahead as my mind went.

Matt arrived at our office on a blazing hot July day, fresh from battling the six-lane "beltway" around Washington, D.C. I showed him to his housing quarters, told him who would be living with him, and returned to the office, promptly dropping him from my mind. Two weeks later, Matt and the other interns came to an open house I put on with my housemates. The first thing he noticed was the music I had playing. "You like Harry Connick, Jr.?" he asked. [Harry plays 1940s "Big Band" music, long a favorite of mine.] I nodded and showed him all the CDs and tapes I had. "I love Harry's music!" he said. That was neat, but it didn't register on my Richter scale. I introduced each of the guys to my dad, who had come over for the event. Matt and Dad hit it off immediately, talking about their shared interests in history and the Civil War. If I noticed, it didn't really start me thinking--until much later. I was busy being hostess to my guests.

Three weeks passed. Matt talked to me any time an opportunity presented itself. He and the other interns had a bunch of us over for a meal, and Matt and I ended up talking about history, literature, music, and old fashioned farm life (a favorite topic for both of us) for a couple of hours. Matt kept us all in stitches with his imitations of Jimmy Stewart, John Wayne, and other classic movie stars (he loved old movies). When he wasn't cracking jokes, he was playing tunes he wrote on his keyboard and singing. He was a neat guy. That much I knew. What I didn't know was that Matt had been watching me closely from the first week he had arrived. Other people noticed, but I was blind.

In August my parents invited all the interns out to the house for a weekend of old movies and canoeing on the Shenandoah River. Matt spent most of Friday night chatting with my parents. Our group hit the river on Saturday, toting a picnic lunch. While everyone else began to paddle as fast as they could downstream, my friend, Kathy, and I kept a slow pace, enjoying the scenery along the way. Matt and his canoe partner stayed back with us, and we enjoyed a leisurely float down the river, getting out now and again to swim. Matt sang old songs, and Kathy and I joined in with our best movie-star voices. It was a blast. But I still hadn't figured out that anything more was going on. In the meantime, Matt had called his parents to tell them he thought he'd met the woman God wanted him to marry! They told him to wait a while longer and continue to think and pray. When Matt's parents came up for a visit, I thought they were very sweet, but I had no idea they might be checking me out!

By the time September came, I began riding my bike one evening a week after work on a nearby trail. When Matt saw my bike, he asked if he could join me. I told him I'd be delighted to have

someone to chat with as I rode. We had such a good time pedaling along the trail and talking about our favorite topics. Sometimes Matt would ask questions about my beliefs and world-view. Sometimes we'd just ride quietly. Sometimes Matt would sing like Harry Connick, Jr. I really enjoyed our friendship. My parents loved Matt and were glad he had become a good friend. Secretly, people in the office were matchmaking us and winking at each other behind my back. Still I sailed along in oblivion.

Late in September, I went to a church picnic with Matt and my friend, Andrea. We sat out under a tree and chatted pleasantly. Eventually, Andrea excused herself to find some other friends, and Matt and I kept on talking. Slowly, I began to feel a little strange. Matt was saying things that hit really close to home, and I had to wonder where he'd gotten his information. He told me he had observed that I was a very old-fashioned girl who believed the Romantic [i.e. old fashioned, simple, unworldly] life was not a lie. That I was willing to wait to be swept off my feet and that I thought knights on white horses still existed somewhere. He said I was the kind of girl who read *Little House on the Prairie* and *Anne of Green Gables* and wanted that kind of simple life. That I didn't think children were to be seen and not heard. That, more than anything, I wanted to raise up a houseful of kids who loved each other and their parents.

Then he turned and looked me straight in the eye. "May I ask you a personal question?" I shrugged nonchalantly and said, "Sure." He tilted his head. "Have you ever been courted?" My heart felt as though an electric current had zapped it. I stammered out that an older guy had wanted to "court" me when I was nineteen but my parents had told him to keep his distance. Nothing had ever come of it. Trying not to give away the butterflies in my stomach, I stood up quickly from my spot under the tree. Matt calmly lay in the grass as I headed for a nearby field to walk out my odd feelings. How does he know so much? I never talk about my dreams. Why does he care? When I returned, Matt was still smiling slightly, like he had a secret joke. After that conversation, Matt wrote his father a long letter, telling him all he'd learned about me during his few months in Virginia: my faith, my beliefs, my world-view, and even what kind of music I liked. He asked his dad to give his blessing for a courtship and also to write my father a letter, commending Matt to my family and affirming their blessing on a possible courtship.

Meanwhile, I tried to throw the whole picnic conversation out of my mind. It was nothing. He was just a very insightful person, that was all. Three weeks later, though, I knew there was more to it than that. I ate dinner at the interns' house again. One guy's family had brought lasagna, and we ate a big Italian meal. The family had also brought babies, and I had a ball playing with them and lulling the newborn to sleep. As I stood in the darkened kitchen, rocking the baby slowly side to side, Matt stepped in from the living room. He smiled at me and said I looked like I was enjoying myself. Then he opened the back door to the deck and exclaimed at the beauty of the night sky. "Come look at the stars, Jennie," he whispered. I did. "Hey, look!" he said, pointing outside. "There are two chairs on the deck!" I had to chuckle at the incredible "coincidence." Matt sat in one chair while I wrapped the baby in a blanket and sat in the other. Then the questions began: "Where do you see yourself in five years?" "What do you want to do with your life?" "You love children, don't you?" "How many kids do you want?" By now the old butterflies had come back to my stomach. But my brain set off red alerts and told me not to think anything was happening. He's just being nice! it screamed. There is nothing going on! it cried out, but all in vain. I knew something was going on, and I knew it involved Matt and me and the future.

The timing couldn't have been more awful--or more perfect. I was scheduled to attend a home school conference in Florida two days later. I thought I was going to die. Did Matt intend to tell me anything before I left? The day before I boarded the plane, he asked me when he could visit my parents again. "Oh, anytime," I said lightly. "You know they love having you over." I didn't want him to think I was reading anything into his request! I was tempted to ask my parents if they had talked with him already, but I didn't want them to think I was flipping out. Instead, I asked my friend and confidante, Andrea, if she knew anything. She was reluctant at first to say much, but finally I got it out of her:

"Jennie Ethell!" she cried. "Are you really that blind? Matt Chancey has been head over heels in love with you for a long time!" My mouth dropped. I shook my head. "W-what?" I managed to choke out. "Good grief, girl!" she laughed. "Everyone at the office knows it. We've just been wondering if you would figure it out!" It was too much to believe. I couldn't take it in! And I had to get on a plane and go away for a week! How could I without knowing if this was really happening?

That was the longest week of my life, but it gave me lots of time to think. Everything began to make so much sense. I could look back over the past three months and see a definite pattern. Matt hadn't been idle! I could see how he had been "sleuthing" for months, learning about me without making it look like he was chasing me or monopolizing me. I wrote a thirteen-page letter to Andrea, telling her all the things I was figuring out. I really wrote it for myself, like a diary. I needed it to stay sane that week. And as the days passed, I began to uncover the feelings in my own heart. Matt had become my best friend. I couldn't imagine doing anything that wouldn't involve him. But what did it mean? It had sneaked up on me, and I was left completely breathless.

When I stepped off the plane, Matt was waiting at the gate. His face lit up when he saw me, but he turned to hide it. I tried to act natural. After all, he hadn't asked to court me! A day later, I came down with a bad cold and had to stay home from work. It was miserable lying on the couch with no one else around, so I was overjoyed when Andrea got home and suggested we go out for coffee. When we got back, there sat Matt's car in our driveway. "What's he doing here?" I asked. Andrea grinned and shrugged. Matt asked me if I wanted to go for coffee, and I told him I'd just had some. He insisted I needed another cup, so we headed for Shoneys. He was still wearing his suit and tie from work. I looked like a girl with a bad cold: no makeup, hair in a bun, circles under my eyes. We sat down in a corner booth, ordered our coffee, and chatted for a few moments. Then Matt took a deep breath. "I'd like to tell you a story," he said. I caught my breath and leaned forward. "Once upon a time there was a young man from Alabama..." From there Matt launched into the story of his journey to Virginia, work at the office, and meeting me and my family. That's when he told me about calling his family in August, writing his dad in September, and getting the letter for my dad the day after I returned from Florida. By the time he got to the part where he asked my father's permission to court me, I had tears in my eyes and a big smile on my face. Matt had just come from my parents' house that evening, where they had joyfully given him their blessing to win my heart. As he finished his tale, Matt leaned forward and said, "What the young man would like to know is if the young lady will help him write a happy ending to the story." Speechless, I nodded yes. My heart was bursting with joy.

Our "courtship," begun October 11th, lasted two and a half months. We officially stepped from courtship to engagement on December 28, when Matt knelt down and asked me to marry him. We spent the time in between studying the Bible together, praying, spending time with my family, and talking about God's call on our lives. We also did "fun" things (don't think we're too serious!) like playing games, riding bikes, watching old movies, discussing the future, reading aloud, and going out with friends. We were not "trying each other out" or "going steady." We both knew marriage was the goal from the day my father gave Matt permission to woo me. My parents gave him their blessing precisely because they knew my calling in life went with Matt's. They had studied him and talked to him for three months. Courtship isn't about trying on relationships until you find the one that fits. It is about waiting for that relationship--even when it seems like it will never come. It is about striving to follow God's plan instead of our own. As Matt says, a young man should only "court" one girl. "If you're going to get up the courage to ask a father's permission to court his daughter," he says, "you'd better be pretty sure she is the one." How did he know I was the girl he wanted to marry? He watched and listened for three months before he made his move. He kept his own emotions in check and prayed constantly. He patiently learned all he could about me while winning my family over. My parents loved him long before they thought of him as a future son-in-law. In a sense, Matt really "courted" my family for three months before deciding to ask Dad if he could court me!

Courting isn't a way to meet girls or guys; that's what regular friendship is about. My mom always told me to watch the way a guy behaves in a group. One-on-one he will turn on the charm and try to present himself in the best possible light (girls do this, too!). But watch the way he behaves when he loses a game. Watch how he acts around children. See how he treats his family. Become a detective! Now this doesn't mean we should set ourselves up to judge people; just that we should learn to look at more than externals. Spending those "unattached" years making friends and being a friend is very fulfilling. The goal is to give more than you receive and bless others even when you are not being blessed by them. I won't pretend it's always easy, but it is rewarding. It always is when we stretch beyond ourselves to reach out to others as Christ did.

Today I wear Matt's rings on my finger, and I thrill to be called his wife. Was it worth the wait? You'd better believe it. Would I change any part of our story? Not on your life. God knew the best time and place. Can "fairy tales" come true? Yes, because God is the greatest romancer of them all. Read Isaiah. Read Jeremiah. Read the Psalms. Look at how God has called out to His people through the ages. No matter how flawed we are, God has still chosen us for His purposes, and He desires the best for us. He doesn't want us to "settle" for anything, least of all the mate we will spend the rest of our days with. God gave me every single thing on that list, down to the broccoli (Matt loves it) and the age difference (!). He gave me the best friend I have ever had. He gave me the one I was supposed to wait for. This sweet confidence grows every day as I listen to Matt read Scripture aloud before he heads off to work, hear him pray for us and our future, watch him love my family, listen to him tell me how much he loves me, and see him quietly listen to me. I will never forget a single day of our courtship or the feeling in my heart when Matt knelt down and asked me to be his wife.

God is good! I pray I can do the work He has called me to as I serve Matt and, Lord willing, the many children we will one day have. I know I don't deserve such a gift, but God is a gracious giver who holds nothing back from his children. Getting married shouldn't be about finding someone who will give us everything we want. That only leads to insecurity, jealousy, and greed. (And when I wrote that list, Mom told me it wasn't a "gimme" list to be filled out with temporal desires. She wisely had me write it before I was even interested in boys--so it wasn't written with someone in mind!) Marriage should be about learning to give ourselves fully and unselfishly without expecting anything in return. The beauty of this principle is that, when we take the focus off what we want, God gives to us more abundantly than we ever could have imagined (Luke 6:38). It is His way of equipping us for His service--not so that we will do His work like robots, but so that we will work for and with Him joyfully.

Don't believe the lies television and movies would have us believe. Real Love is very much alive. Not just the emotional highs, but the day-to-day decision that love is. God gives us, in His Word, a perfect picture of His idea of Love:

Love is patient,
 love is kind,
 It does not envy,
 it does not boast,
 it is not proud.
 It is not rude,
 it is not self-seeking,
 it is not easily angered,
 it keeps no record of wrongs.
 Love does not delight in evil
 but rejoices with the truth.
 It always protects,
 always trusts,
 always hopes,

always perseveres.

Love never fails.

(1 Corinthians 13:4-8)

Matt and I are nowhere near perfect, and we know there will be rough times ahead, but God has promised to be with us. In the midst of all the burdens of life, God gives Joy. Wait for it. Courtship isn't about getting, it is about waiting to give. It is about trusting God to bring the one person He has for you. It is about being content right where you are today, even if that means being alone. It is about believing True Love is still alive and well. There are no set "steps" to courtship. I can't guarantee that if you follow A, B, and C, you will meet your mate. Every situation is unique, just as each person is unique. But the principles are the same. Commit your steps to the Lord each day. Ask Him to help you wait for the one He has for you, and purpose that you will not give your heart away, piece by piece, until it is broken and empty. In God's time, and if He wills it, He will bring the person He desires you to spend your life with. You can be sure of it.