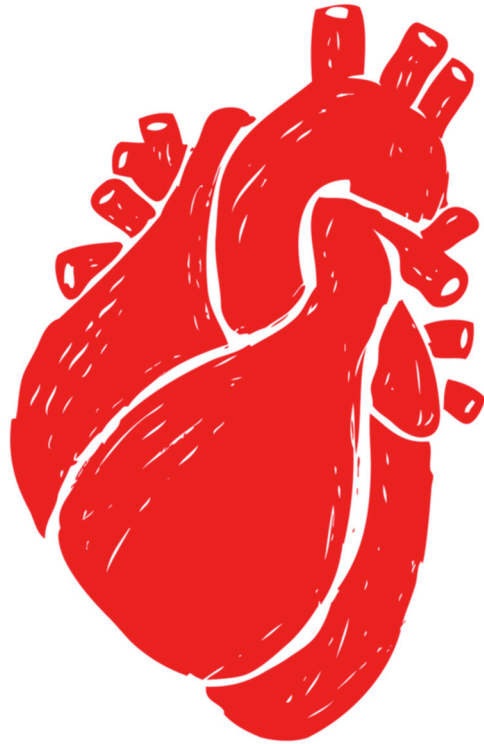


Red



DISCOVERING
*a LOVE that LASTS in a CULTURE
that DOESN'T BELIEVE it CAN*

NEAL SAMUDRE

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RETHINK CREATIVE PRESS

ARLINGTON, TX

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INTRODUCTION

For the longest time, there were only two sure things I knew about love: one, it hurts like hell; and two, it ends.

I knew this because of my parents. For years, I watched them bicker and rage until the small strand of their marriage finally snapped into a heavy legal dispute and complicated emotions. I always wondered what sort of thread wove them together, because if it was love, I wasn't sure I wanted that.

I also knew this because of culture. Many people in our society take to the podium with messages like “getting married young never works” or “getting married at all never works.” I didn't know why culture preached this. Maybe, a few too many celebrity couples have broken up, dashing their hopes on love ever working. All I knew was that people chose to highlight the possible oblivion with love, and I was convinced that this was all there was to it.

But then, I heard a man say that love changes us, and I thought that maybe this is why love hurts and sometimes ends. Change, like love, is never a pretty process. It sets us on fire and melts off our imperfections, all with the intention of making us better people in the end. And becoming better so often involves facing the monsters we don't want to face.

After hearing this, I realized that I doubted love because I feared change. I chose to see the worst in love because I was scared of going through the fire to refine myself. I didn't trust it to make me better in the end. I only thought it would leave me bruised and burned.

Yet, things are different now. I'm no longer afraid of change, and I'm no longer afraid to love deeply and passionately. I don't see the oblivion

waiting with love's end anymore. I've passed through to the other side, and it taught me some things on love.

I used to doubt love because I knew that it hurt. But love only hurts because it changes us. This is no indication to doubt it. Rather, this is indication to believe in it all the more. The things that change us, make us into better people, are worth believing in, even if they hurt.

Love is raw, gritty, and messy, but it is in the mess that we change. And maybe, this is the truth we need to highlight more than anything with love: that it is not here as a condemnation or burden, but rather exists to preserve us, if only we choose to make it last.

I used to be love's greatest critic, but that was before it changed me. Here's the story of how that happened:

CHAPTER ONE

SINGLE

1.1 How I Learned to Love Myself

I always thought of writers as astronauts because they could somehow float in their minds with no gravity and let their imagination bump heads on the heavenly realms above. It seemed so beautiful that writers- and really any creative- could let wonder captivate them, propel them to see something more than the gloom and doom of the world. But unless they're crazy successful, we shrug our shoulders at artists like this. We mark them as being silly, not reliable, and not grounded within the gravity of present day life.

Yet it's so fascinating that artists can create out of a sense of beauty that others can't always see. It's honestly what caused me to struggle as a writer. I have this peculiar tendency at times to see the world as it is, but when that happens, I find my art suffers, along with my hope.

All this to say: I'm a naturally cynical person. It's something I'm still learning to combat.

It's odd how we choose to dwell on the negative aspects of life rather than celebrate the many wondrous blessings there are. I believe it's somehow easier to see the negativity because life can seem empty after a number of failed attempts. We can be impatient people, wrestling with a certain longing, yet see it denied several times, forcing us to see life as nothing more than a parade of getting up and falling back down again. It's easy to see life through a negative lens.

And at one point in my life, I was highly cynical about love and relationships.

For a brief time during college, I gave up pursuing relationships. In my heart, I desired it, just like any normal person does. But after a string of failed attempts at relationships, I grew callous in my heart. It didn't beat with hope or optimism. It just sank low with bitterness. And since the brain and heart are often in cahoots with each other, my brain concocted lies and cheap rationalizations to justify my bruised heart.

When you choose to live within your pessimism, there are a couple roads you could take: you can either wallow in your self-pity, rationalize the situation to make yourself feel better, draw others into your mess so they can give you the attention you desire, or change and work to be an inspiration for others. I took the middle road between drowning in self-pity and being overly logical. The problem with these two options is that I had concealed my feelings from the rest of the world. I had this grand idea that I could solve my desire and cynicism by myself, if only I spent more time writing and diving into my thoughts.

At the Student Union area of my college, I would carry my computer over to a corner table by a window that I loved. Being at this corner table made me feel like I had charge over who came and talked to me. The Student Union area was always bustling with people, but the corner table was far enough from the main traffic that I could remain by myself if I wanted to. Also, at the corner table, no one could sneak up on me. I could see everyone who was in the room and everyone who was coming my way. Nothing surprised me.

I mention this corner table because it's where I spent much of my time writing and thinking about relationships. In the Student Union area, there would be couples cuddling with each other on the couches, holding hands, and throwing back their heads to laugh at what possibly seemed to be some of the worst jokes ever. They were happy they weren't alone. And I was in the corner, leaning over the table, studying them and wondering if I could ever be that happy.

I would be lying to you if I didn't say I often daydreamed of girls coming to my corner table, sitting with me, and exclaiming their love for me. That would have made the search so much easier. But no one did that, and part of me wondered why.

My mind was spiraling down to the bedrock of self-loathing, a pit as large as the Grand Canyon. I could feel my back slamming against the rocky ground, paralyzing me from ever moving again. I felt stuck, like I couldn't get back to a more positive view on relationships.

But as a saving grace, my logic entered in and told me some things that gave me a little hope:

You should use this time to work.

The fates say you aren't ready for a relationship yet.

You're suppose to do something great before a relationship takes up your time.

There it was: my mind rationalizing that I wasn't in a relationship because I had work to do.

I read of writers who produced one compelling work after the other, and this life always appealed to me. I imagined that if I really put my mind to it, I could publish a new book every two months (impossible I know, but I was naïve then). I could pack up my bags, travel up to an unknown cabin somewhere, and shut myself in, not leaving until I wrote my next book. I

figured that the artists who lived this sort of life had no partner by their side. So this is the life I dreamed about: a life where I could live as a hermit in the middle of nowhere, listening only to my own inner dialogue chant away possible new books.

I falsely believed that the life of a leader, someone who works to change culture, is an intentionally solitary path. In order to do your best work, you must be alone.

But this was simply a justification my logic gave to make me feel better about myself. What I found instead is that the life of a leader can be unintentionally lonely.

And so I sat at the corner table, dreaming up scenarios of women talking to me. But then I would shut down those thoughts the next minute so I could put pen to paper. Not many people bothered me, and I didn't tell others how I felt. I just continued writing, hunched over the table like I was inspecting tiny particles on the tabletop.

The solitary life was a lonely one, but it was the life I had chosen, or at least, what the shoddy logic of my mind chose to believe. It made me feel better about myself rather than being a hopelessly sad person wearing my emotions on my sleeve. It was better to not tell anyone, to shut myself in, and busy my upset mind with work.

Yet the problem was, I was only busying myself with work because I was avoiding what lied underneath the surface. Beneath my fortified exterior was this deep haunting feeling nipping away at my core.

I thought, maybe I wasn't with someone because I wasn't good enough.

Looking back, I can't believe I actually thought this. It's not a rare idea to have in our society. It spreads among us like the Black Plague of love and relationships. Many of us struggle with this idea that love is for lovely people, and if we're not lovely, then we were never designed to love somebody.

But this is hogwash- a lie born from the depths of Hell, where Satan concocts everything evil in the cosmos.

The mere fact that we are alive, have beating hearts inside our chest, and emotions swirling around in our minds means that we were designed to be vulnerable with others. It's in our very nature to love, imbedded in the way procreate, interact, and yearn for community. We were designed to love, and our inability at snagging a relationship for ourselves doesn't change that fact.

But the trick is discerning whether this means to love someone in a relationship or love our friends and family, because if we're honest with ourselves, we know not everyone is meant to be in a relationship. A relationship is not an obligation set forth by the universe. We desire it because it's beautiful, not because it's necessary.

Yet love, in the form of brotherly affection and community, is something we really need to saturate our existence. There is a large difference between the love of a friend and the love of a spouse, and while both are great, only one is obligated for our human flourishing. Deep friendship, strong enough to cut through our bones and rest in our hearts, is a requirement for this human life we live.

I say all this because maybe many of us are single because we haven't yet learned what it looks like to love ourselves. And maybe, we can't love ourselves because we have trouble recognizing the love already present in

our lives. We can't see that we are in loving relationships with our friends and family. And because we can't receive that friendship love for ourselves, we can't truly love who we are because we see ourselves as empty of love.

Love for ourselves begins with the love we experience around us. And when I say the love we experience, I don't mean in the terms of a dating relationship. I mean love in general. I mean the intimacy shared between family. I mean the devotion given to friends. I mean the love we experience daily, but never fully realize we do.

It's this kind of love we need to survive, and it's this kind of love we need so that we may appreciate who we are.

One day, I was writing at my usual corner table, accidentally smearing my pencils marks as I worked across the page, when a friend came by with a sandwich wrapped in her hands. Her eyes were genuine and sincere, and she said, "Could I join you?"

This happens often when you choose to do your work in a public place, but I figured that when you refuse to make eye contact with anyone else, and look as if you don't realize the world moving in a rush around you, people typically tend to leave you alone. My friend, however, thought otherwise. She saw me by myself, scribbling away thoughts on page, and she figured I could use some company.

When she asked to join me, the look in her eyes was so warm and jovial that I loosened the grip on my pencil, and said, "Of course you can."

I scrambled to organize my sheets scattered across the tabletop as she unwrapped her sandwich. For the next half hour, we talked, caught up on life, and laughed over the silliest events that occurred in the past few days. It was a refreshing experience, like taking a breath after emerging from deep

waters. For a moment, I could feel the machinery in my mind begin to slow down, as if it were taking the time to fill up on oil. And then, I was focused entirely on living in that brief pause of invigorating friendship.

It was then that I realized something: love is not something you can accomplish alone. It is not solitary.

This might seem like an obvious truth, but it really isn't. Yes, you do need two people in order for a love between people to operate, but there is also the neglected aspect of loving yourself. And while it might seem like you can love yourself by your own devices, this isn't possible.

Truth is, you can't fully learn to love yourself without the help of others. You need people to communicate the mysteries raging on inside you, the mysteries you've tried to solve for so long but couldn't.

It's not possible to ever achieve love alone. Every type of love, including the love you give yourself, requires the nourishment of community.

And after sitting at that corner table with my dear friend, I felt nourished in some mysterious way. She brought me out of myself, out of the pit of busyness and sadness corrupting my ability to enjoy life. For a short moment of time, I could feel my hard heart lighten and dance in a wonder my brain didn't fully comprehend.

As we sat there, laughing at life's sense of humor, I rejoiced in my inner most being that finally I had known what it was like to appreciate myself. I finally felt at peace with my warring self-esteem, acknowledging that love for another was possible for me; it's just taking its sweet time to flourish.

1.2 Why I Chose to Not Be Pressured into Love

Around this same time, I was sitting on a staircase with one of my friends, when he said something that struck me as odd.

“You ever feel like you have to have a girlfriend?” he asked, his voice hushed so it wouldn’t echo in the stairwell.

“I always feel that way, but I know I shouldn’t.”

“Well, I know we shouldn’t,” he began. “But, if you think about it, it makes sense. Look at it this way: we missed our chance at having childhood sweethearts, so we cross that off the list. We also missed our chance at high school sweethearts, cause I don’t know about you but I was stupid in high school. And now, we’re in college! This is our last chance at finding a girl. We’re never going to be with these many people ever in our lifetime. Once we enter the real world, it’s going to get much harder to find someone to date. We’ll have to find someone in our field. And what if we’re in a male-dominated field?”

“Well then, life becomes hard,” I said.

We both slouched on that staircase, our chins resting on our hands, dreaming of all the possible ways we could find a girlfriend in the remaining time we had left in college. If I’m being honest, I felt pressure in that moment. It was as if my friend’s anxiety over the situation contaminated my thinking also. I started to believe I had to find a girl soon, or risk a life of loneliness.

I’m convinced that this was one of the many factors feeding into my cynical perspective on love. To believe that it was necessary to find love before a certain amount of time made me doubt love more than believe in it.

It goes like this: you know those times when you set a billion alarms on your phone to remind you of an important task, and you think you would never forget that task, until you lose your phone, get wrapped up in

something else, and completely forget the task? Those times frustrate me, but they taught me a valuable lesson. Sometimes, it doesn't help when we pay more attention to something. It just makes us more frustrated when we don't accomplish the task we are paying more attention to.

It's the same thing with love. When we obsess over finding the right person before a self-perceived deadline we have floating in our minds, it becomes more difficult, more disheartening when we don't find that person fast enough. We think the search for love should be easy and manageable, but when we find that it isn't, we get angry, hopeless, and doubtful about love ever working in our favor.

Deadlines on love don't help us in our search for it. They only make us angry.

When I left down the staircase, my mind still whirring from the conversation I just had with my friend, I realized I was getting more doubtful on love the more I felt pressured to find it. By the time I reached the end of the staircase, I made a claim that I wasn't going to feel pressured into anything. It was only ruining me.

We are people of freedom. We like to stretch out our arms and move around in an open and free space. We don't like being constricted. Sometimes being constricted helps us work harder towards the things we need to accomplish, because the more pressure you place on something, the more it longs for freedom. But deadlines for task that aren't completely in our control don't work, because then, freedom seems impossible. And the less possible freedom becomes, the more bitter we become. This is how both life and love work.

Love is more precious, more beautiful, and more appreciated when it coincides with freedom. In other words, love is more powerful when it's a choice, not an obligation.

I had a friend once tell me that culture exalts marriage and relationships to appear as if it's an obligation, like it's part of some checklist to life. You grow up, get an education, fall in love, get married, work, and then wait to die. This is how the American Dream operates. So when my friend told me this, I agreed with him. The greater culture does press love on us, and as a result, one can get cynical about relationships because they don't feel as if they are choosing. They're simply just following after societal norms.

But much of this is self-perceived. These pressures only press on us because we allow them to. If love is better as a choice, then start first by choosing not to be pressured into it.

A couple days after that conversation, I was perfectly fine being single. In fact, I had come to terms with it. Sure, I wanted someone by my side, but I didn't want that desire to corrupt my ability to live in the present. So I continued sitting at my table in the corner of the Student Union, simply writing and commenting on love rather than engaging in it.

Yet, an odd thing happened once I chose to not be affected by the pressure of love. Once I stopped looking for it and stopped being burdened by it, it came.

Love has that stealthy quality to it. It likes to blindside us. It likes to come when we least expect it because only then does it have the ability to sweep us into something wonderful.

CHAPTER TWO

IT'S COMPLICATED

2.1 Why Love Should Make You Laugh

When you think about it, there is something so whimsical and amusing about love. It's one of the only qualities or emotions in people that shifts us out of being boring individuals, or people stuck in mediocrity and routine. Love has some special power that subverts the natural tendencies of this world, the kind that constricts us to stay on certain, dull paths.

I've always wondered why love is so silly, so off the wall in its expression, and I've found that it's part of its foundation. I know many couples who are the definition of boring because they don't talk to each other or do anything fun like take a night out on the town or make a meal that's different than something you warm in the microwave for three minutes. They just sit and watch television with a world of space between them. Between the two, there's no slight grace of the hand, no endearing words spoken, and not even a warm glance to communicate love when words just won't cut it. This boggles my mind, and I know this is just the dynamic of some couples, but I can't imagine a love where the greatest risk taken is who gets to control the remote.

A love characterized by boredom and a fear of the ridiculous is something I'm not sure I want.

This might be my own personal preference, but I believe if we all dig hard enough, we'll find that love, at least at its conception, transforms us into

people who we are not so familiar with; or in other words, better, more fun versions of ourselves. If we allow love to whisk us away, I'm sure it'd make us into silly people.

I've attached this idea to one of my own definitions of love: that love is characterized by the whimsical and ridiculous. And by living according to this definition, it's helping me not get stuck in dullness or monotony with my love story.

It's incredibly easy for us to become boring people. When we dive into a difficult day at work and let reality deal its blows to our optimism and attitude, we come back to join our loved ones, only to sink into a time where we shut off our minds and become about as entertaining as a potato. We slip off our shoes, melt into comfort, all the while leaving our loved one craving attention and adventure.

This is all too easy to do. It's easy to live a dull life of routine where reality zaps our energy and sense of fun. It's easy to be boring.

But this, I've learned, should never be the foundation of our love stories. There's no excuse, no "I've worked this hard" or "we have to take care of the kids" mentality that should ever deplete us of our silliness.

Love is silly. It's loud when the world wants it to be quiet. It's reckless when others would rather promote safety. It's creative when life becomes repetitive. And it's that one, crazy emotion sprouting within us that, for a moment, takes us out of character. It reveals us to adventure, spontaneity, and ridiculousness, in a world that wants us to stay bored.

Truth is, a love that is not silly is not a love worth having.

But I didn't always have this as a definition for love. In fact, I didn't even believe life had a whimsical quality to it.

I wasn't exactly the most boring individual on the face of the planet, but I also wasn't much of a fun person to be with per se. My friends in college would often rag on me for not going with them to do some daring, yet safe, college stunt with them. I would shake my head no, and when they would leave without me, I would crawl in my bed and read a book. Sometimes, I would have thoughts that I was missing out, but missing out was worth it if I didn't get physically hurt or embarrassed.

I think my boringness went along with my little self-esteem issues at the time. The less I put myself out there, the less I got hurt, and the less I got hurt, the better I felt; or at least, I thought I would feel better. Eventually, the feelings of missing out overwhelmed my feelings of comfort as I looked out at my peers and imagined myself offering the most boring story ever told.

It seemed that everyone else around me had better stories they were telling with their lives. Many of my friends went on mission trips around the world as if it was their day job. I only left the country on vacation. Others were involved in a million organizations, impacting the culture of our school. I was only involved in an on-campus ministry. Many people were willing to go out on a Wednesday night. Wednesday night for me was the time LOST came on.

The students around me weren't letting life pass them by. Just as I was starting to feel bad about this, a senior student told me, "Take advantage of your time in college. It goes by fast."

That pretty much hit the nail on the head for me. I needed adventure.

And that's what led me to Carly. After all, what better adventure could there be than love?

Carly and I were both sophomores in college when we met. And at the time, I was part of an all-male acapella group called Madison Project.

It was honestly odd that I ended up with these men, because like I said before, I was a non-risk sort of guy. Joining the group was part of my move to be more adventurous in my college career; and I don't regret the decision for a minute. I loved these men, because these men helped me step outside of my rigid, boring self so many times. They made me into a more adventurous person, just by being around them.

Speaking of adventure, the night I met Carly was the night we accepted new members into our group. As we were awaiting the answer for who was going to be in our group, the men and I paced around a room in the Music Building on campus. Some of the men were drawing on the whiteboard while some jumping around with excitement. And then there was me, taking turns sitting and pacing at different spots around the room.

Suddenly, the door burst open with our President waving a sheet of paper with our new members on them.

“We have four new members!” he cried.

We leaped in the air, did our manly grunts and squeals of excitement. And then, we rushed to our cars and took off driving around campus at 3 in the morning.

The Project men and I were the epitome of silly, especially when moments like this came along. We were brewing with jubilee, letting out high-pitched yells of thrill and the occasional bouts of roughhousing to express our happiness.

We called the new members “newbies”, and we drove to each of their dorms, telling them of the good news, singing to them, and throwing them in

our army of five cars. When we picked up the final person and shoved him in our car, someone said, “How about we take the shortcut to IHOP?”

Going to IHOP was our tradition when we received newbies. Each of the seven acapella groups would meet at IHOP with their newbies, and we would parade them around to the tables, showing off on how well they did in their auditions and how stunning and cute they look. And then, we would stuff their face with pancakes, all at 4 in the morning. It was a magical time, a time I would treasure.

We all knew what was meant when our friend stated the shortcut as a possibility. The shortcut was across the college quad, a pristine green field surrounded by beautiful stone buildings, the gem of our campus. At the mouth of the green field was the Wilson Steps, and that’s where Carly was.

Carly had just been accepted into the all-female Christian acapella group, Into Hymn (acapella groups love puns), and as part of their initiation, they would pray together with candles surrounding them on the Wilson Steps. It was a picturesque scenery the girls would set up for their newbies, ensuring that they would remember it forever. And Carly certainly did remember it. She was blindfolded on the Wilson Steps, overwhelmed with emotions bursting inside her. Then, all of a sudden, when she expected to hear the girls tell her to remove her blindfold, what she heard instead were the loud cries of men honking their cars as they zoomed by.

The Project men and I laughed as we drove along the brick right past the Into Hymn girls. I could’ve sworn that I looked up and locked eyes with an Into Hymn girl glaring at us with rage. But, we veered our cars to travel right down the middle of the quad, and soon the girls were masked in the darkness and faint glow of candles behind us.

The sprinklers beat against our windows as we drove in zig-zags across the field. Mud flung up on our cars like spit from a raging madman. I rolled up my window every time a sprinkler looked like it was about to attack us. And when we were free from their onslaught, I would stick my head out the window and yell at the top of my lungs.

And that's when I saw them.

Up ahead, surrounding the first four cars, were police cars zooming off the main road with their lights flashing red and blue. I was in the fifth car, and we were enough behind to steer the car away and go driving back down the opposite end of the field, towards the girls. By this time, the girls were done praying and were laughing at us trying to escape the police. But inside the car, I was a mess.

"We need to stop the car!" I frantically yelled, my conscious screaming guilt on the inside.

But then, I turned to look behind us and found zero police cars chasing after us. Instead, there was only one man on his bicycle, pedaling hard for his life.

"Aw," I said as if I were looking at a helpless puppy. "We have to stop. Look how hard he's trying!"

Eventually we stopped, and the police officer on the bike nearly collapsed on the ground when he came to a halt. He trudged over to the driver's window, still panting heavily from the ride. We all had guilty looks while he held a stern expression. We awaited the verdict.

Yet, what he said instead surprised us.

"You're free to go," he said wiping the sweat off his forehead.

We were shocked. My jaw dropped. The newbie sitting next to me had a demeanor that shouted his satisfaction with the night. We exchanged glances all around before we finally chose to spoke.

“Why?” the driver asked.

“Trust me,” the officer began. “I’ve seen worse things happen on this quad.”

As we drove off, I slumped down in seat, relieved yet still frightened by the moment. We were the only car from our group to be released to IHOP, and because we were, I was able to meet Carly.

When we reached IHOP, I had time to walk around and meet each newbie, and there she was, dressed in all black pajamas sitting in a booth with Into Hymn girls.

It’s crazy how I met my future wife in that moment. At that time, I didn’t believe in love to even think that was a possibility. But who knew that this one encounter would change my perspective on the subject entirely? Who knew that everything I had believed about love was about to change?

My friend from the group introduced her to me.

“Hey Neal! Carly lives in our same building! On the third floor!”

That caught my attention. We turned to each other, and a silly smile stretched across her face. In that moment, I was honestly embarrassed, and so was she. She was embarrassed for a more valid reason than I was because she was in her pajamas. Yet for me, I was worried she was judging me for trying to run from the police. I knew she was one of the girls laughing on the Wilson Steps that night. I was embarrassed and nervous she thought of me as a delinquent running from the cops.

But she just laughed with a sweet smile, her golden hair whipping around her shoulder as her laugh grew more intense. My petty fears and nervousness melted away in that laughter.

This is the thing with embarrassment and silliness in our love: if we never do anything of risk that doesn't warrant a bit of embarrassment, we'll cultivate a love empty of laughter. And I read somewhere that laughter is so healthy for any relationship. As I thought about that, I couldn't figure out why. But as we were laughing in that moment, it became so clear to me. Laughter, especially when shared between two people, bonds people in an appealing spirit of friendship. It ties us together, like two threads distant until they wrap around in a knot. Laughter, friendship, and silliness draw us together to experience something beautiful and fun.

There are days now when Carly and I need a bit of silliness to break us out of our mundane routine of living. I grab her hands, sway her from side to side, jump up and down with her, until she laughs. When she does, I know we're once again reminded of our friendship, something so foundational to our love.

For a brief moment, a little bit of silliness reminds us why we've fallen in love. Carly and I fell in love because we were the best of friends who helped each other draw out the wonder to life. Friendship, strong enough to outlast the dreariness of reality and remain silly, is why we feel love and stay in love.

That night when we met, we didn't fall in love at first sight, but I knew then that this was the beginning of something special.

2.2 What You Can and Can't Control About Love

Sometimes, I believe love is like a slot machine at Chuck E. Cheeses. If I move around the play area and earn enough tickets, then I can get the prize I want. The pursuit of love to me was a series of calculated steps, one right after the other, to get the desired result. If I earned enough tickets, love would work in my favor.

But then, I watched the movie *Hitch*. No joke. I watched that movie and took notes. This movie was about Will Smith being a consultant who helps guys be with the girl of their dream, and for some reason, I entered into this movie thinking that I would walk away with tips to chasing girls. Instead, the greatest lesson I walked away with is that with love, there are no calculated steps. Though Will Smith pulled out all his classic moves on pursuing his girl, they didn't work. There is not much we control about love.

There are so many tactics floating around with love today, such as always buying dinner, holding open doors, not barraging your date with questions, etc. etc. I held onto this tactics like they were scripture from the holy book of dating. Yet now, I don't believe in these methods as much, not because I think these tactics are bad, but rather because I know love is not something you can absolutely control.

The things you can control about love are the ways in which you pursue the apple of your eye. But the rest is what you leave to fate, chance, or whatever you like to call it. Love is complicated like that.

I honestly didn't know much of what it looked like to be interested in a girl and get to know her in an appropriate manner. The idea of a pursuit was frightening to me. It took me back to times when I would lay my heart out on the line, only to receive a rejection, which ended up making my heart even more resistant to love.

The pursuit is even more frightening when you think about your inability to control all of it. Love would be so easy to believe in if all we had to do was follow a number of steps, like following instructions for assembling furniture from IKEA. If we could somehow calculate every move and be able to predict what was going to happen, love wouldn't be so scary. But the difficult truth is, we can't control everything. What we can control is how we pursue, but what we can't control is how love pursues us.

For me, it took a large amount of courage to know that I couldn't control every aspect of the pursuit, and still do it anyways. It also took a great amount of faith to not obsess over what I couldn't control about love, and trust it to work out for the better.

But after knowing Carly for a while, I thought I would give this whole pursuit thing a shot.

The night after I met Carly, I sat in the living room of my suite, just two floors down from her, and told my roommate:

“There's a really cute girl living just two floors above us.”

“Really?” he said. “Pull her up on Facebook.”

My eyes widened and my brows rose. “I don't know her last name,” I confessed, until an idea slapped me across the face. “Oh! I'll search the Into Hymn girls' walls to see if they added her.”

Her profile was shining like a gem buried in a field on the first profile I pulled up. It popped up on my screen, and I turned the computer around so my roommate could see a picture of her smiling on top of a cliff. My roommate chuckled and turned around back into his room saying, “That's cool, man.”

I continued to look at her Facebook page, infatuated, but not getting my hopes up too high.

There would be glorious days every once in a while where we would walk out of our dorm building at the same time, and exchange small talk. Sometimes, I would see her trudging ahead at a fast pace, her stuffed purple backpack bouncing along her back, and I would rush to catch up to her.

“Oh hey!” I remember saying to her once when I caught up to her along a path.

“Hey!” she said in a gleeful tone. I wondered if this was a tone she took with every stranger she met, a tone she used with friends, or even better, if this was an expression she gave to people she liked. Turned out, she had the same tone when another friend walked past her and she said hello to him. I was slightly sad.

“Where are you headed?” I asked.

“I’m just trying to catch the bus,” her pace quickened. I thought she was avoiding me. But to make sure, I started walking faster.

“You’re almost there!” I laughed.

“Yes I am!” What awkward conversation.

I had times to redeem myself on other days when we saw each other walk out of the building. I always felt I was trying to catch up with her though, like she was a girl on a mission, intent on getting to a certain location at a specific time. I naturally walk slow, so to try and keep up with her was exhausting.

But this is what you do when you’re interested in someone: you try to rush up to where they are. You quicken your own pace so that for one moment, it would seem as though you’re walking together. It works like this for people with different maturity levels. The guy or girl with the lesser

maturity would feel compelled to grow up faster if motivated by their interest in the more mature individual. Infatuation sparks movement.

We carried on like this for so long. She would be up ahead, enjoying life, and I would be trying to catch up with her, pursuing her down the path to spend a second of bliss with her.

There was one time where we managed once again to walk out at the same time, like fate allotted this time for us. She had a radiant expression on her face, shining as if she was Moses coming down from the mountain after seeing God. I was so captivated, so thrilled to find out what secret she held.

“You look happy today,” I said, mimicking her smile on my face.

“I am happy! Last night, some of my friends asked me to live with them in a house next year.”

“Oh! Where will you be living?”

“In a house called Shiloh,” she said.

She was about to continue with her statement, but I stopped her right there. My face stretched out into a look of jubilee, and she did a small laugh, the kind you give when you’re not entirely sure what’s happening.

“Do you know that place?” she asked.

“I’m living right next door!”

It was true. Just a few days ago, my suitemates and I signed the contract to move into the house literally five steps away from her own.

If you saw the two houses in person, you would see why this was such an odd coincidence. The two houses were in the middle of a bustling downtown area, packed with stores on both sides. If you kept walking down the sidewalk in front of our houses, you would reach the town square, which was complete with our favorite restaurants and go-to spots. Also, across from

the houses was a cemetery, holding decayed Civil War heroes and slaves in its grounds. My housemates and I tried going over there many times, but random caretakers would come, spot us with their hawk eyes, and chase us out. Surely, it was a strange place to put two houses, but within that one block was a vibrant and eclectic spirit defining the area. It gave our choice of residence character, and we relished in its witty delights.

By the time the year was coming to a close, I seriously started considering the depth of my feelings for Carly. She was wonderful, definitely worth the pursuit. But for some reason, I felt that I was hitting a wall every time I tried to approach her. She was running off, consumed by her busy schedule, while I was just busy chasing after her, yearning for some quality time to spend with her.

I'm a person who hates running. I hate chasing after things, because in my mind, if something or someone is running ahead of you, they don't want to get caught. It exhausts me trying to catch up, and so many times along the way, I have to battle the doubt that maybe, they're far ahead for a reason.

But one day, I was reminded that people only run for two reasons: they're either trying to run from something or run towards something. In life, it's hard to see what people are running away from or running towards. Sometimes, it's clear that they're running from a painful past or running towards an ambition lining the horizon. Yet most times, the two are blended together in an obscure shroud of mystery.

When we pursue someone of interest, we spend a majority of time deciphering whether the other is running away from us, or is just ahead at a different pace; and unfortunately, it's easier to believe that they are escaping us. We get highly skeptical and doubt ourselves because this is the kind of

people we are. It's easier to find fault in ourselves when pursuing a seemingly perfect individual.

But maybe, they're running ahead because that's the kind of people they are. Maybe, they're chasing something beautiful ahead, and they don't even realize a desire beating in their hearts for someone to join them on their journey.

This is how it was for Carly. She was so lively, bright-eyed, and joyful, and I believe she was chasing after a sense of wonder. She knew what she wanted in life, and it was a beautiful ambition, compelling her to chase after it with full-speed.

She wanted to become a counselor, so she wanted to do well in school. She wanted to enjoy her friendships, so she invested in her acapella group. She wanted to be a leader, so she involved herself with many organizations. She was pursuing many ambitions, and a man was the last of her desires. So in fact, there was no fault with me. She didn't look at me and think that I was the most disgusting Indian she had ever seen. She just simply didn't look at me. She was too busy running ahead towards her goals.

In life, people run towards something more than they run away from things. This doesn't mean that the individual you are pursuing will be highly receptive to your efforts at a relationship. I say this simply to give hope. Be confident that your pursuit is not in vain. And don't blame yourself. I'm sure you're not revolting enough to prompt others to run from you. In fact, to pursue someone in a good and respectable manner is noble, something that's bound to get noticed by someone.

I hit a wall in my pursuit of Carly when I misunderstood a statement she said. I was incredibly sensitive to the words she said to me, and when she

said one sentence, I started nailing the coffin to any hope for a possible relationship. Like I always do when I get hurt, I rationalized that summer was creeping up, so I stood no chance at sealing a relationship before then. I imagined that once the summer hit, she would find someone with biceps bigger than my face, they would date, and I would come back in the Fall to see her boyfriend always hanging around next door. But by that time, I would heal.

The school year ended with me licking my wounds from the crushing blow of that one sentence. I travelled around the East Coast for my job, filming and editing movies, all the while stealing little moments to ponder what she was doing.

Meanwhile, Carly loved her summer. She travelled to El Salvador on a mission trip, and then to Texas with her acapella group, and in that time, she paused and reoriented herself on what she wanted in life. Travelling has that special effect on us. It temporarily stops us on our pursuit to relax, take a breather, and reflect on the journey ahead. Then, once we return, we sink back into our routines with a clear and rested mind, moving forward at an even greater speed towards our ambitions. Carly and I returned after that summer with a clean-slate, ready to embrace the mysteries we knew God was about to launch at us.

One thing I thought about after that summer is how different love actually is from a pursuit. We always use language like we are chasing after the apple of our eye, or that we're in a race, but if you truly sit down and think about it, love looks nothing like a race we're running. Sure, we're running after something, but the biggest difference is that a race is fast. The whistle blows and everyone at the starting line dashes off into the distance,

until a minute later, it's over and the victor gets showered with praise. Love is nothing like this.

When I think about a race and a pursuit, I wish love were like this, mainly because I'm an impatient man. I love pouring my efforts into one brief moment to get the object of my desire as fast as I can. It would be amazing if I could put all my attention into a quick sprint to catch Carly, and then celebrate with a party of appraisal and pats on the back. But I only say this because I'm impatient. I struggle to see the use of waiting and patience.

When I think about waiting however, I remember I book I read the other day, which said that waiting is a hidden grace we never realize is a grace. We want to rush through the waiting period, thinking that our next big season of life is when we would actually be living out our full potential. Yet, the difficult truth for me to consider is that waiting is the time when we grow to see beauty in the pause. When life slows down, we more adequately see the gifts life hands us, like a trip to relax or some free time to spend with family and friends.

I believe in the summer spent away from Carly, I learned to be patient with love. When we treat love as a pursuit or race, we wish it would come to us in an instant. But true love is a patient pursuit, following close behind with diligence and perseverance, even when hope gets dashed every now and then.

When I returned to be next door to Carly, my interest in her flourished once again. For a couple weeks before the school year started, both Carly and I were the only ones at our house, and I'm thankful we were because it made spending time with her easier. The sun would often shine high in the sky with us taking a walk on campus, and set with us talking on

my roof. She would join me in mundane chores like grocery shopping, coloring these simple tasks with a spirit of adventure. I would often sit on my porch, just so I could spark a conversation with her as she left her house. And that's how we spent many wonderful days together, simply as friends, but on our way to becoming best friends.

Finally, one day, as I was helping my friend film a music video, she texted me and asked me out to dinner. I had told my rapper friend about her earlier in the day, so when the text came in, I waved my phone in the air, and shouted, "She wants to go to dinner!"

In that moment, I felt as though I had crossed the finish line after a patient pursuit, catching my breath and smiling out of satisfaction as I collapsed on the ground, my chest heaving. I laughed, bounced off the walls with my giddiness, and wondered whether I should dress in a collared shirt or t-shirt for the dinner. I chose collared.

I think too many people choose to give up too soon in the pursuit, partly because they don't have a proper understanding of what the pursuit is. In my opinion, the pursuit is brave, taking a daring chance to move forward in the face of rejection. The pursuit is respectable, because what it does is hone in on one person, to highlight their inherent specialness and give them the attention they deserve. The pursuit is patient, which means we shouldn't give up one day into it because it's taking too long to receive a response from them. And finally, the pursuit is necessary. Both individuals need to be chasing after each other, because if they're not, there will be an unbalanced relationship where one person is pouring an unhealthy amount of devotion to offset the lack of devotion from the other person.

This is what I loved about Carly asking me out to dinner that night. It clued me that this relationship was a desire of her heart as well. It gave me

relief because it revealed to me that I wasn't alone in the pursuit. She was actively involved as well, moving towards me to meet along the path.

I was completely blind to the idea of Carly liking me also. And this is why I believe love pursues us more than we pursue it. Though we are active players in our own love story, it's difficult to predict when a relationship is going to happen. We can't entirely predict love. Love has that sneaky and stealthy quality to it. It likes to surprise us.

When we focus too much of our attention on making this relationship happen, we strip love of its ability to blindside us. And not only that, but we also waste our time and energy hoping for something that might not happen. But when we move to instead place the power of surprise back into love's hands, we stand to gain more from the pursuit than if we were plotting every step of the way.

All this to say: you can't predict what's going to happen on the journey towards dating, and that's fine. It's not entirely in your hands. What is in your hands is the pursuit. But beyond that is when we leave it to chance, and not obsess over what the outcome will be because we can't control it. Pour your time and attention into making the pursuit a beautiful thing, and don't waste your time obsessing over what's not in your control.

Thinking back to the beginning of mine and Carly's love story, I can't help but be incredibly thankful that our story unfolded the way it did. I'm so glad she asked me to dinner that night, and I'm so glad I didn't give up when I had enough evidence to do so at first. A pursuit is necessary, and I'm thankful that our pursuit carried out the way it did.

A relationship without any sort of pursuit grows stagnant and still. I've seen many couples who live their lives as if coming into the relationship is crossing the finish line. Not only that, but there are other couples I know who act as if getting engaged or getting married is the end of the pursuit. For some couples, the pursuit ends because the relationship ends. But unfortunately, there are also some relationships that end because the pursuit ends.

The truth is, we don't cross the finish line in this world. Thinking we do is what messes us up so often.

The pursuit doesn't end here. In fact, I believe we cross the finish line when we pass on from this world with our love strongly intact. It's like the scene from *The Notebook*, where in the end, both lovers die in the same bed holding hands. It might not happen that way for all couples, but that's what I imagine to be crossing the finish line. That's the end goal we're striving for—to live a love story strong enough to stay intact and beautiful enough to inspire a world.

CHAPTER THREE

IN A RELATIONSHIP

3.1 Where I Found Hope to Make Love Last

To be honest, when Carly and I first began dating, I was absolutely frightened we would only last for a day, or even a week at most. I was so skeptical on love's ability to work that I kept fighting with myself to end it here because I didn't believe I had what it took to make this relationship work. It boggled my mind how she somehow trusted me that I wouldn't hurt her, and that she could be vulnerable by entering into a relationship with me. Even I didn't trust myself that much.

After the dinner, I asked her if she wanted to go out on an actual date. She smiled and grew red. Her eyes lowered to the ground as if to avoid an embarrassing direct contact. She said, "I would love to," and we both hugged before I left and did a victory dance outside. And it was on that date, when I took her into a wonderful garden filled with fragrant lavenders and blooming flowers, that I asked her to be my girlfriend. Once again she said yes, which is when my doubt made me frightful.

I didn't know what I was doing. I adored her. I cherished her. I wanted to date her. But my cynical mind kept saying that I was only going to hurt her, and that how I felt about her didn't matter. My raging pessimism wanted to say that this wasn't going to work.

It was a difficult struggle, but I chose to silence those pestering voices in my head. There were times when this was easy, because she would stroll

over from next door, her sundress following behind her as she walked against the wind, and I would see her and say, “You look fantastic.” She would melt, grow red once again, and do a little shuffle with her feet as if my compliment snatched the ground from under her. “Thank you,” she would say in a soft tone. And in that simple and sweet response, my doubt would scurry to the corners of my mind, like ants running for cover.

But then there were times when I had doubts. They always occurred when I was by myself in my room, and I had somehow believed my feelings were going to end soon because I had no clue what I was doing. Whenever I was in my room, I was left to wrestle with my feelings, and it was miserable those first few weeks of dating.

Yet oddly, strength came from an unlikely place: my family. For many people, this doesn’t seem so out of place, but when I talked to my family, I didn’t reveal to them that I was feeling this way. It was weird, but when I talked with my family, I was reminded something about love.

Mark was the first person I called to say that I was dating Carly. Mark is the middle child of the three Samudre brothers. He is only two years older than me, which while growing up had its complications because we were in each other’s lives too much. But now, it’s a sweet blessing to have a sibling so close to you in age, and yet so different from you.

Mark’s personality is far different from mine. He has a sense of style. I don’t. He’s a big planner. I’m not. He’s more emotional. I’m more logical. He’s a teacher, and I can’t even imagine what it would be like if I was forced to stand in front of a room full of kids everyday. They would probably eat me alive, but Mark is also tougher than I am.

All that to say that Mark and I are so incredibly different, which is a great gift when it comes to telling him news about my life. When you

encounter someone remarkably different from you yet so invested in your life, they so often offer you a fresh perspective on something you hadn't thought of before.

What was strange about my conversation with Mark was that what he gave me was not explicit in his words.

The phone rang on the other end as I strolled around my room. He picked up in his same old, goofy way.

"Neal!" he said, drawing out the word for about half a minute. "Wassup?"

"Oh nothing," I was pretending to be cool on the other line, like the news I was telling him was no big deal. "I just have some news for you."

"What is it?" his tone of voice shifting to be more eager.

"I'm dating someone now."

Mark chuckled. "Oh really? Good for you. What's her name?"

"Carly," I said with a smile on my face.

"Tell me about her."

I told him how she was an angel, how I met her because of the all-female acapella group, and how she lived next door. I told him about how she went to Cru, an on-campus ministry, and how silly she was. I poured out how many sisters she had, where her family was from, and whether I had told our mother yet. And on the other end, Mark could tell I was enthusiastic about the relationship.

Sly was the oldest brother of the three, and he had a very similar reaction. Except Sly had a cooler, wiser tone in his reaction. Sly is like that. We share many similarities such as our ability to dream, our passion towards the work we love doing, and our sudden aloofness to the world around us.

But Sly holds all those qualities to a higher degree, mainly because he's been living longer than I have.

"That's excellent man," Sly laughed in his laidback tone on the other end of the call. "I'm proud of you."

And then, I picked up the phone to dial my sweet mother. To be honest, I was a little intimidated to tell my mother about my new relationship. My mother was always pragmatic, always thinking about what was best for us. So I knew she would say something like, "get a job" or "you're too young" if I told her.

And she did. One of the first things she said was: "How are you going to pay for dates?"

I chuckled, and said, "I'll save up money."

"Well, I'm happy for you. I can't wait to meet her. Now all my sons are dating women!" I could tell she was brewing with excitement over the possibility of grandchildren in the near future (not from me of course).

My family honestly didn't say much when I told them I was dating Carly. They didn't say words to directly alleviate my fears or soothe me. Yet, there was something about talking to family members who love me that reminded me something crucial about love.

There is a love that's impossible to ignore. It's called family.

Of course, the love of a family member and the love of a boyfriend or girlfriend are completely different, but we still label both devotions as love, and I think there is something so beautiful to that. It's as if, in having family, we have a strong example right from the start that there is a love that can't fail us. And sometimes, we need that reminder to shake us of the times we forget or doubt love.

I am well aware there are families that are broken, and therefore, don't have an example of unfailing love. I know that more than anyone. But, the design of a loving family is still there, ingrained in the idealistic parts of our mind and soul. And as long as the design and intent is still intact, we know a love that lasts is possible.

Though I come from a family ravaged by the pain of imperfection gone rampant, I still cling to hope. Not only that, but my family still pulses with the life of an unfailing devotion. No pain could cause our love for one another to fail.

And so, I was reminded that I already have a picture of love that lasts. There was no reason to doubt that such a thing was possible when I had tangible evidence. Though both types of love are different, I first needed to know that a love that lasts is possible before I could fight for it. And I found that in my family.

Sometimes, when you forget the crucial aspects to life, you need to reach around you to remind yourself of them once again.

It's like finding an oasis in the desert. In your mind, you know an oasis exists, but when the sweltering heat weighs down on you and your blistered feet can't walk anymore, you lose hope. You give up to the point that when you see an oasis, you think it to be nothing more than a crazy illusion.

For me, I thought a love that lasts was an illusion. I continued to wander in the heat of negativity my mind was feeding me. But once I tasted the waters of a strong, dependable love present in my family, I knew that an unfailing love wasn't impossible. Once I dipped my hands in that cool water and replenished myself with hope, I started moving in the direction of finding that love for myself.

Maybe, the greatest thing we could ask for in this world is a little hope. It keeps us moving towards the beautiful things of life rather than depress ourselves with false beliefs and doubts. I believe hope is present in our midst, but sometimes, we have to go digging for it.

Before you give up on love, find it in your family or wherever it may be in your life. Refresh yourselves in those waters and then keep moving forward.

3.2 What Held Me Back from Loving More

Love can be tricky. You believe you understand it while you're on a smooth and comfortable path, but then a rock comes on the road and causes your wheels to shake and rattle with uncertainty. This is the complex mess we would rather not bother with. Yet something I've learned is to not let the rock stop you from going any further, but instead, use them to pave the road forward.

In the beginning days of mine and Carly's relationship, we didn't fight too much. We were still dancing in the honeymoon stage of having a best friend by our side, and we loved it. We went to parties together, went on walks through the park, and always blushed and took a tone of enthusiasm every time we introduced each other as boyfriend and girlfriend. It was a blissful time for us, and my previous doubts of this relationship lasting slowly faded away with each cherished moment spent together.

But then the fights began, and my fears once again resurfaced.

Most of our fights occurred because either Carly or myself had unrealistic expectations for the other. This is how it usually is between people when they first begin dating. They unconsciously believe they're going to

date someone with the same oddities and habits as them, and when they discover this isn't the case, tension happens.

I'm an early sleeper and an introvert, so once when Carly and I were at a party with some friends, I decided I was too tired to continue with the night.

"Carly," I said in a whiney voice. "Let's call it a night. There's too much going on here."

"You sure? We just got here an hour ago!" she was right. I was such a wimp when I came to overwhelming social environments.

"I'm tired."

She agreed, and we hopped into the car and headed back home. As soon as we pulled into the parking spot, I jumped out of the car, and headed over to her side of the car to say goodbye. I wrapped my arms around her, said my goodbyes, and then one minute later, I was in my house getting ready for bed. Soon, I got a text, which went something like this:

"I thought we were hanging out tonight?"

I sat in my bed and felt my heart sink. I replayed the last fifteen minutes in my head, only to see how eager I was to get to bed and how ignorant I was of Carly's feelings. She could've stayed at the party longer. But she didn't know how introverted I truly am and how early I sleep. She expected me to stay up that night, while I expected her to go to bed at what I thought was an appropriate time.

She was obviously upset, and I felt like a jerk. As we both talked about it, I apologized over and over again for expecting something that wasn't who she was, and she did the same thing as well. But once we ended our discussion that night, my fears came crashing in my mind like a tidal wave.

This was our first fight. And it had only been a couple weeks. Maybe, I thought, we weren't going to last.

I tossed and turned in bed that night, thinking of whether I would be able to make this relationship work or not. I doubted and gave myself a beating in my mind.

You're an idiot.

You don't deserve her.

You're only going to screw this up.

These thoughts were on repeat, and my fear grew to a point of utter anxiety. I couldn't shake these poisonous thoughts, like a little devil was permanently glued to my shoulder, whispering lies in my ears. I was being ripped open in that moment. I only felt fear.

What struck me in that night was how willing I was to give up the things that scared me. While I cherished Carly, I had this fear gnawing at my insides that I would only hurt her if I continued this relationship. This fear highlighted my typical response when frightening things come my way: I give up. I discard the things that terrify me and only pick up what I believe will bring me closer to happiness. It's like I'm travelling through a buffet line of choices in life, picking up the delightful things I know I'll like and staying far away from the scarier options.

But, the problem with this action is that if we continue to ignore the things that frighten us, we'll never change to overcome those fears, to be people who try and succeed. We'll only end up managing our fears rather than overcoming them.

In a relationship, it doesn't matter how many things we sacrifice if we don't learn to sacrifice the things that matter, the things that hold us back.

And for me, that meant sacrificing listening to my fears and staying comfortable.

Fear, I've learned, should not be a guiding principle for life. We shouldn't give it the power to govern our decisions and our action, because if we do that, we'll never live the life we want to live.

I wanted to date Carly. I wanted to hold her in my arms and cherish her like the queen she is. I wanted to go through my days laughing at her goofy jokes and her silly expressions and mannerisms. I wanted to grab her by the hand and embark on this new task of living life like an adventure. I wanted to be with her, but my fear was holding me back. My fear said this wasn't right for me to do. My fear said I was incapable of making love last.

Yet, just because my fear said something didn't mean it was true.

Love calls us to be courageous because courage is closer to the truth. It calls us to give up the lies and petty beliefs that hinder us from experiencing the depth of love.

As I lied in bed that night, I thought that maybe what I should give up should not be my relationship, but my own fear. Only then would change occur.

Love is a courageous act, and it's courage that keeps us growing and changing. Without it, we would have a complacent and comfortable love.

Being comfortable is not the goal with love; being willing to do anything is. It's fear that keeps us comfortable, and courage that keeps us daring.

Fear has us avoid trouble. Courage has us embrace them and overcome them. Fear has us never learn anything new. Courage has us grow

from our experiences. Fear keeps us focused on ourselves. Courage turns our attention outside of ourselves to accomplish the things that matter.

Wholeheartedly buying into our fears isn't what we need to make love last in our lives. Instead, we need to be receptive to change, because it's the courage to change that fuels our love. Love moves forward with courage.

In our beings, I believe we all know that love essentially requires more. We know that love without courage doesn't change us, and this is why we're so scared of love. Some of us are opposed to enter into a relationship because we're scared of becoming different. We're people who desire stability and comfort in a topsy-turvy world, so anything that has to come about with change is frightening to us. It's easier to be comfortable than it is to change, but unfortunately, change is the antithesis of comfort.

I learned a crucial truth about myself when Carly and I started dating: my fears kept me safe from hurt, but kept me so far away from where I wanted to be. Listening to my fears kept me comfortable, and comfort ironically is not a sturdy ground to build the foundation of our love. I thought it was, but it's not.

After our first argument, when my fear was telling me to end the relationship because I would hurt her, I found that my fear was speaking lies to me of what a great life would be. It told me that a great life is a comfortable one. It told me that a great life is not where I risk dating Carly when I didn't think I was good enough, but giving up the moment I'm called to be courageous.

Fear so often speaks lies. It justifies comfort when the better ground to build our love on should be one of sacrifice, risk, and change. This is a more fertile ground.

Basically, the point of any relationship is not to be comfortable. The point of relationships is to be challenged towards change, where you and your significant other become better people. Love truly does propel us in the direction of change, but we have to allow it to do this first. If we listen to our fears about a relationship, we'll only chase a path towards comfort, which typically is a lonely road. But if we instead follow the path towards sacrifice and courage, we'll change. We'll be better in the end. Trust me.

CHAPTER FOUR

IN AN OPEN RELATIONSHIP

4.1 Why Love is Not a Vending Machine

I attended a talk once where the two speakers, an older married couple, were speaking on sex and relationships. I was engulfed in their wise words. I drank them in like flowers yearning for Spring rain. I was interested in their words because I figured I would need to rely on them soon; and I did, because months after that talk I started dating Carly.

One illustration they used stuck out to me, not only because it was funny, but also because it was convicting. The speaker grabbed the attention of the men in the room, and said,

“Now men, we have a tendency of treating sex like a vending machine. You believe you put in 75 cents and you can get whatever you want, whenever you want.”

I’ve never had sex, so I had no clue what he was talking about honestly. I just laughed because I was an immature twenty-year-old who loved the illustration of sex and a vending machine. The speaker went on.

“Now, moving on from the area of sex, both men and women can treat their relationships like this. We can treat them as if it’s an ‘I do this’ and ‘you do that’ sort of thing. But the problem with this thinking in relationships

is that when the motivation behind your actions is girded with a desire for self-fulfillment, you are building up a faulty structure for your relationships.”

I left that talk with my mind reeling. There were two things that stuck out to me from that lecture: one was the idea of expectations, and the other was the idea of self-fulfillment in relationships. But first, let me address the expectations aspect.

Expectations left Carly and I bruised and battered so many times during the beginning of our relationship. This happened because oftentimes, our expectations weren't met. I put in the 75 cents and a soda didn't come out. She put in a dollar and she got what she didn't want. We expected things from the other that hurt when our hopes weren't fulfilled.

I spent the days after that first argument dwelling on where we both went wrong, and I found that the root cause of our quarrel was unmet expectations. I expected her to be happy that we were going to bed at a decent time, because I thought she was more introverted like me. But she expected me to stay up longer, because she thought I was more of a night owl like her. Our unsatisfied expectations, dashed on the rocks of reality, snapped us out of our ideal pictures of the other and brought us into the hard place of learning to deal with another wholly different person. And it hurt.

I realized that my unmet expectations sparked the fear I felt that this relationship might not last. It was my fear that moved me into the realm of doubt, meaning that I only doubted our relationship once I didn't get what I wanted. How trivial of me, I thought.

It's odd how the moment we don't get what we want, we consider this opportunity to be something apart from truth. This is not where we are

suppose to be. This can't be all there is. This isn't what I expected. We chant these sentiments as if reality should cater to what we want from it. But life is unfortunately unfair, and our expectations will be unmet more than they will be satisfied.

The key is, however, to not run when our expectations aren't met.

I used to be so afraid of change. I didn't like how it hurt, how it stretched me outside my comfort zone. I didn't like how it challenged me to be more daring and to hold things with loose grips. I wanted security, which is ultimately why I held onto my expectations.

My expectations, to me, were a truth because they made me happy. But maybe, truth is better found in our possibility for change than it is in our possibility for happiness. This isn't to say that we shouldn't be happy with our relationships. This is to say that happiness is not the end goal for relationships; change is.

A convicting reality is that we are not accidents in this world. We are not tiny blips on the radar waiting for the moment we flash off screen. No, life is more than chasing after a brief moment of happiness. Life is drawing the story forward, which only happens with change. Change is the fruit of a meaningful life.

But the hard truth with change is that it requires commitment. The ideal of change seeps into every facet of our lives: in the way we carry ourselves, in our ethics, in our worldview, and for our purposes, in our relationships. We should be positioning ourselves to be in relationships of impact, but that only happens once we commit. Happiness requires wandering, while change requires our perseverance.

The problem with many relationships today is that we live in a tension between a desire for happiness and change. Our ideologies on the matter can go either way. Two people can dive into a relationship for the purpose of being happy or for the purpose of making an impact in each other's lives and the world around them. It's the difference between living a selfish and a selfless love.

Society has skewed the conversation to lean on the side of happiness as the purpose for relationships. This is why people can be cynical on love, because once they find they are not happy, love can seem to be a false illusion misguiding us.

When Carly and I entered into our relationship, I honestly did doubt love. I saw her and she captivated me enough to give our relationship a shot, but I was so convinced that love's purpose was for our happiness that I doubted love could work. I was afraid that at some point, I would be disappointed and call the whole thing off, hurting both her and myself.

But once I discovered after that first fight that love's purpose was rather to make us into better people, things started to change. I began walking deeper and deeper into our relationship, shutting the door behind me as I walked further in. Each argument, petty debate, and quarrel turned into hidden graces refining my hard heart. The more I committed, the more I changed; and the more I changed, the more our relationship flourished.

The most intriguing lesson I learned then was to shut the door behind me as I traversed deeper into the relationship. You see, the problem with having relationships centered on individual happiness is that we have exits propped open behind us. We essentially live in open relationships, where the exit is always available. We can leave anytime we want, forfeiting our chance at change to chase happiness instead.

If we have a way out, we'll truly never commit to things. We might believe we're fully committed, but we're not. There's a difference between committing with full knowledge that there's a way out and committing with knowledge that there is no turning back. With the latter, you'll do anything to make the space you live in habitable. With the former, you'll always have the opportunity to leave when it gets too difficult.

It's further commitment that changes us, and it's a relationship held sturdy upon the ground of change that lasts when the tides of life try to submerge it.

Love is not a vending machine. You don't always get what you want with it, and that's okay. Don't let this be a sign to run. Instead, let this be an opportunity to grow, to let the current carry you instead of drag you under.

4.2 You Should Give Up

Red is both the color of passion and of blood, and I think there's something so profound in that. It's as if the two intersect somewhere; love and pain, devotion and sacrifice, life and death all exist in communion with each other. In fact, I would venture to say that the two can't exist without each other.

True love is the act of shedding your own blood for the sake of another. Passion comes at a price.

I faltered in my thinking upon this. I thought marriages were for happiness, and any relationships that showed a hint of trouble were destined for doom. I figured that a person would know that a relationship is bound to be well if both people were absolutely happy.

But utter happiness without any strife is not the sign of a well-off relationship. If anything, it's the sign of a blind relationship, where ignorance is used to veil everything.

If I've learned anything from love, it's that I shouldn't be going into a relationship because I believe it'll make me happy. I will be happy in the relationship, but when I typically think about being happy, I define it within my own terms, where I sacrifice nothing and only reap the benefits. After all, who wouldn't be happy if they were losing nothing?

Maybe, love is best measured in the willingness to lose everything for the other. It's extending the limits of what we're willing to sacrifice that makes love last.

I remember the time I first told Carly I loved her. I was frightened.

We were sitting on a black couch in my room, lights off except for the Christmas lights strung around the ceiling of my room. Our eyes were locked on one another as we were completely turned to face the other. Her golden hair was swished to one side, hung over her left shoulder. Her smile was warm, matching the red color of her face. And she had this expectant and endearing look, as if she knew what was coming.

We entered into the space of vulnerability through laughter. We were laughing about a recent mishap with friends, and that joy ringing through our bodies eased our muscles, helped us relax. My heart quickened in an instant, like it knew what was coming. I avoided direct contact with my eyes and allowed my stare to shuffle around the room.

“I have something to tell you,” I said, my voice shaking with fear.

“What is it?”

At that moment, my eyes locked with hers, as if they returned home from senseless wandering. I opened my mouth and nothing came out the first time. I opened it again and still nothing. All the while, she just smiled from ear to ear.

“I-”

“Shh,” she interrupted. “I know what you’re going to say.”

And then, the words came out fast and sure, like the moment you dive into water.

“I love you.”

There were many things special about that moment, things seen and unseen. There was the slow and short kiss, the words spoken back, and the smiles shared that served as tangible memories for the things seen. But inside my chest and mind were the thing unseen that sealed that moment as a landmark event, not just for our relationship, but also for my soul.

It was the first time I was truly willing to commit to love. It was the first time I was willing to let go and give up on the things I was holding onto with clenched fists, like my fear of change and my doubt on love, in exchange for a more life-giving and radical perspective. But most importantly, that moment was the first time that I sacrificed my fears and my comfort to step into a space where the door was shut behind me and there was no turning back. Carly and I were locked in this place of deeper commitment, and we wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Love is sacrifice, because it’s sacrifice that brings us to the point of change. I wouldn’t have been any different or wouldn’t have committed to this relationship any further, if I didn’t learn to sacrifice the things that kept

me comfortable. It was in sacrificing my fears and doubts that I changed, and it was in changing that I learned to love more deeply.

I have many friends who don't sacrifice with their relationship, (or at least, not as much as they ought to) and I relate with them on that desire. They want to be comfortable with love, happy and fulfilled with the emotions that allow them to be secure. Yet, it's always a bad and tricky road to navigate when one person isn't willing to move any farther because they can't sacrifice any more. This is when the love ends: when one person refuses to move.

I got in a debate with a group of people the other day who believed that marriage wasn't necessary for relationships. They believed that a person could be fully committed without a contract of marriage. I wasn't in the mood for debating, and it honestly didn't matter to me whether certain individuals chose to get married or not. They live their lives in their own ways.

But as I thought about it, one thing struck my mind as being sad. Marriage is typically the next step for a relationship. Not everyone wants it, and that's okay, but it is a societal norm to get married after some time together. But what a sad thought it is if one person knows that marriage is the next step, but allows their opinions on the institution to speak louder than their willingness to sacrifice every thing for the other. In other words, what if there is always that next step forward that could be taken, could be accomplished through sacrifice, but is not taken? In my mind, it seems like there is not enough sacrifice in that relationship. That one person is not willing to sacrifice everything, because there is one aspect in which they could give up their opinions for a deeper commitment, but refuse not to.

It's like walking up stairs and stopping halfway. How much would it bother you if the person you were walking up the stairs with could take the next step, but decides to camp out halfway up? They're not willing to move up with you. They instead want you to settle in a place of comfort instead of work for change by moving up the stairs.

I described it to the people as this: love means always taking the next step.

This means sacrificing your opinions. This means sacrificing your fears. This means sacrificing so that you ensure your relationship is moving forward, not staying stagnant. This means that if there is a next step that could be taken, you sacrifice so you can take that next step.

Oftentimes, the things we hold onto for our selves provide friction when we want to move forward as a couple. When fear blocks the path forward, we want to stop and not go any further. But love needs growth. It needs movement. It needs for two people to grab hands, express to each other that they're willing to risk for the other, and trek forward into the unknown. This is what sacrifice is.

If you commit yourself to love, you essentially commit to moving forward, not standing still. Love is closer to movement and sacrifice than it is to comfort and complacency.

With love, each step forward is a sacrifice. If you find that you're no longer compelled to change, no longer compelled to become better, then maybe you're standing still. Maybe, you're no longer open to sacrifice. If this is the case, I encourage you to look over your life, find the things holding you back, and give them up. Push forward in the direction of change. After all, love is best expressed in our willingness to change, not to stay comfortable.

Today, I'm excited about what the future holds for Carly and me. This is because we've planted the foundation of our relationship in the fertile ground of change and sacrifice. We know we'll never get stuck at some point. We know our love story will be an adventure because it'll continue moving forward. We know we can change the world with our love because we're willing to sacrifice and risk anything for the other. We've embraced the courage to change; and so far, it's making all the difference.

CHAPTER FIVE

ENGAGED

5.1 How We Inspired the World

Carly and I dated for two and half years before we got engaged, and to be honest with you, those years were difficult. They weren't hard because we fought all the time or doubted love at all. Instead, those years stretched us because we knew after a certain amount of time that this relationship, this strand that tied us together in a heavy knot, was built to last. And we were impatient.

In the Spring of our last semester at undergrad, when everyone started proposing to everyone, Carly and I spent much of our time attending others' engagement parties while wishing we could celebrate our own. But the harsh reality was, both of us were heading off to a completely new area with no money and no job lined up.

Earlier that year, we decided to attend the same graduate school together. It was a seminary called Gordon-Conwell, hidden in the hills of the North Shore area of Massachusetts. We figured it would be years before we could get married because our schoolwork was time-consuming and our schedules were packed. We would instead sit shoulder to shoulder in the study halls, hearing of our friends getting engaged back home, and silencing our thoughts on how we wished that was us.

In that time, we learned to be silent about our wishes. We learned to be patient. And we learned to trust that our time would come eventually.

There were many reasons why we felt waiting was necessary. For one, we didn't have much money or any job we could balance with school. Money was probably our number one reason. We couldn't figure out a way to pay for our bills and insurance while also doing schoolwork on top of giving our marriage the space to thrive. We figured that our marriage would most likely drown in a storm of responsibility that came with the collision of adult life and school.

But we also felt that we were possibly too young. I wasn't sure if Carly felt this way, but I started to listen to the greater culture too much when they said getting married at a young age never works. I thought that if I waited until I had enough money and was a certain age, then I would ensure that my marriage wouldn't fail.

It's silly that I believed this. It's a mystery why I trusted culture more than my own ability at being the difference. Sure, the culture is girded with trends, numbers, and statistics, but in the end, that's all they are- trends, numbers, and statistics. There is no spirit in these facts. That's what my will brings into the discussion. What I'm willing to do to make marriage work should speak more to the possibility of my marriage lasting than general trends in culture should.

In essence, the odds are not facts dictating our lives. Just because a number of people who have married young ended up with failed marriages, doesn't mean you should be afraid to marry young. Your willpower is different than the trends, so dare to rise above them. Knowing the odds only help when you have the courage to overcome them. So be willing and courageous enough to be different than the trends. Be the odd one out.

I only started seriously considering engagement for the near future after talking to a friend from my church back home. She's a bright-eyed, bubbly elderly lady who always asked me about Carly whenever she sees me. I tell her that she's good and that she wishes she were here. And usually, our conversation ends there.

But one afternoon, she asked me a different question:

"When are you planning on proposing?" she asked with a sly look on her face.

"Well . . ." I honestly didn't have an answer for her. I wanted to get married soon. But I thought the only thing in life that I had settled was my love for her. Other than that, I had nothing. So I told the lady the truth. "I don't know. When I'm ready, I guess . . ."

Then she said something that changed my mind about everything.

"Neal, if you're waiting till everything lines up for marriage, you'll never get married."

She went on to speak about how you never have enough money, life experience, and many other things before you get married. But the main part that stuck out from her speech was that beginning sentence.

For so long, I was waiting till I had my life all figured out before getting engaged. But maybe, the mystery of life resolves after a bit of dissonance. Maybe, in order for life to be as meaningful as I want it to be, I need to risk more, throw my story into a bit of uncertainty, and have faith in knowing that I'll be better in the end because of it. Maybe, I need to take a leap into the unknown, and figure it out as I go along. That sounds like a better story.

On December 20th, just five days away from Christmas, I told Carly that my family was planning a Christmas party for that night and she should come earlier in the day so I could give her my Christmas present. She happily agreed to my plan and drove down the night before. We woke up slowly and excitedly jumped into our clothes, got ready, and headed to IHOP for breakfast. I told her that my present was a short story I had written for her, a story that I would read to her as we walked along old town Alexandria, right outside of D.C. I had a particular route plotted out by the water, each stop corresponding to a part in the story I was reading. And then, before I reached the last chapter of the story, we rushed back into the car and headed back to my hometown. We got stuck in traffic, which made me beat the wheel with frustration and worry, but still managed to make it to our next destination in time, where an acapella group was waiting on stage at my church. We danced in a decorated sanctuary to the slow, melodic serenade of my three good friends. Then, after seeing the sun rushing below the horizon, I grabbed Carly and took her to a nearby beach. It was there that I read the last portion of the story, ending with the question that would change our lives forever.

She said yes, and on that night, we celebrated with our loved ones the happiness of a love story stepping forward.

After the engagement, I was overwhelmed with joy. Many of my friends told me that engagement was hard period to get through, but I didn't feel that way. I was just ecstatic that soon we would be united in something unbreakable, something just years before I didn't think was possible.

To be truthful, I was a little bitter towards the opinions I received pointing me in the direction of love's futility. I was so enlivened with joy at the prospect of being united with my best friend, that I sought to correct

these disillusioned, cynical views on love. I wanted to introduce hope into the discussion of love.

As a result, one month later I wrote an article entitled, “5 Reasons Why I Got Engaged Before 23.” I felt compelled to write it, like my joy fueled a passionate fire eager to express itself in the work of my hands. It took me a total of 30 minutes to write; and when I finished, I put it aside and didn’t touch it for weeks.

When it came time to publish an article on my company’s blog, I posted the article. And within just a few hours, it got thousands of views, which then grew to be hundreds of thousands, and finally grew to be more than a million views. I was shocked, honestly because I didn’t think the article was that great. But even more so, I was surprised that this idea resonated with people. It was as if people felt devoid of hope on the subject of love, and once I gave them an idyllic perspective on it, they latched onto it. There were only a handful of countries around the world that hadn’t read the article, which made me happy, not because my writing was passed around the world, but rather because my words were used to introduce a bit of hope into the world.

This is what love does when it knows it’ll last: it grows to be an inspiration for others. Love, in its very essence, is inspiring because it imbues the dreariness of reality with hope and wonder. It reveals us to the stunning truth that we were never designed to go through life alone. We were crafted to be in deep relationships with others, some sharing the emotions of strong friendships, and others sharing their very flesh. This truth is so heart-wrenchingly wonderful, because if we truly were made to go through life alone, then the world has a right to despair.

But there is hope, and that hope is what we live out in our love. Thank goodness we are not alone.

Days later, after a flood of emails filling my inbox, a number of calls coming in on my phone, a barrage of comments spanning my walls on social media, and an emotional rollercoaster of receiving praise and hate mail from the article, I finally relaxed with my new fiancé, tired and weary from the attention. Just months before that moment, I told Carly that we would change the world together. And as I looked in her eyes that night, we both smiled out of satisfaction that those words were not a lie; they were simply a promise fulfilled sooner than we had expected.

5.2 Why the World Needs You to Tell a Good Love Story

I recently attended a lecture where the speaker stated that marriage is more of a community thing.

“No one has to get married,” he said. “Think about it: if you are in a committed relationship, why do you need a marriage ceremony to remind you of what you already know? You practically are married once you make that commitment in your mind, so why bother spending thousands for a wedding ceremony?”

The room was silent. No one was following what he was saying. I looked around at all the engaged and married couples in the room, and some looked as if he was speaking truth, while others had a dismissive look on their faces. As for me, I sunk low in my chair, because at that time, I had just recently gotten engaged.

The man continued. “You know why we have marriages? Because it’s more of a community thing. It’s simply a way of inviting others into your love story.”

I shot up in my chair, feeling at once proud of my decision. I wanted to jump up in the air and scream ‘Amen!’ but that would’ve been weird so I just listened more.

At the end of the lecture, I left feeling that the man’s words were so true. I might think that marriage is solely about Carly and me, but it’s not, and that fact shows up in the way I have eight groomsmen and Carly has eight bridesmaids. It shows up in the way we have more than one hundred guests. It shows up in how we cater to the family’s wishes of what we should include in the ceremony and reception, all while being careful not to offend elder family members who deserve respect. This marriage we are putting on is not for ourselves as much as it is about inviting others to join in our love story.

When two people make a commitment to each other and decide marriage is not necessary, they’ve done something odd to people who want to be involved in their love story: they shut them out. They close the door and say that their relationship is only about themselves. They don’t give others the opportunity to celebrate with them, and their relationship then becomes regarded by others as a mystery, like no one knows what they’re up to anymore.

Two people who are committed to each other are just that- committed to only each other. But if love is taking the next step, there is a greater commitment to be had, and that is to change the world with your love story. Yet of course, this first involves inviting others to join you.

I used to not believe in love, but once I accepted change as a necessary endeavor for my betterment, I began to see the grace shining from a painful love.

Truth is, love is the most practical tool for change there is. If we avoid the hurt involved with love, we'll never learn to use it for our advantage, to be different and institute change in the world because of it. Love is there for a purpose, waiting to be embraced by a skeptical world. All we have to do is be courageous enough to hold it in our hands and use it for the good of others.

I'm not married to Carly yet, but I know that in the moment when I look straight into her eyes, at the altar surrounded by all our loved ones, I'll be different than who I was when I first proposed to her. This is what love does. It makes us different. Love comes with a promise that if we only follow it, it'll stretch us to be better in the end. It holds that same promise for the entire world, which is why we need to tell our love stories. The world aches for a little hope and change, and we have the chance to provide that, only if we're willing to invite others into our stories.

The thing with stories is that all the best ones never end with applause. We applaud when the credits roll, but if they're amazing enough, they become ingrained in our minds and stamped on our hearts as precious memories. The stories continue to be told, long after they're over.

That's my wish for mine and Carly's marriage: that people will applaud on our wedding day, but keep celebrating with us as life draws on. My hope is that as the story gets retold, generations long after us will be inspired by a love that lasted, and be compelled to craft lasting love stories of their own. That's the power of hope and inspiration entering into the

vacuum of culture's growing pessimism with love. It has the power to change everything, to reverse the trends and spark something new.

My hope for you is that you would trek into the void of despairing love, and tell your love story proudly. Share it among the masses, and inspire a world towards change.

There is no greater task than this: to love deeply and change greatly. May this be your cause as you live a love story worth telling.

SHARE YOUR LOVE STORY

Thank you for reading my eBook, *Red*. What you probably don't know is that *Red* is the first eBook in a series of 5 that I'm writing on seeing the wonder to life. The next eBook is entitled *Yellow*, and it is all about securing happiness in pessimistic times. If you are interested in following along with the eBook series, I encourage you to subscribe to the newsletter on the next page, and get free access to the future eBooks.

But now, there is one favor I must ask from you . . .

The world needs to hear a good love story, and because of that, please share my book. Spread the word on social media and point people to where they can get the book. And in the process, share your own love story. Inspire others with a love that lasts, by sharing this book and your love story, because the world needs to believe in love again.

Also, if you don't mind, leave a review on the Amazon book page. I would love to hear what you have to say about the book. And if you believe others would benefit from this book, leaving a review would be a great way to let them know!

If you want to chat more about love, or simply just share your love story with me, I would be happy to hear it. Check out ways to connect with me on the next page.

Thank you once again. I look forward to connecting!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neal Samudre is an accomplished writer, author, and dreamer. He believes that dreamers hold the key to changing the world, and in his writings, he seeks to inspire his audience towards seeing more to the world and changing it. He also believes in the power of a well-groomed mustache.

Neal works with [Rethink Creative Group](#), an organization built to change the world with their creative resources, marketing, branding, and art. Neal is also a frequent contributor for many nationwide publications such as RELEVANT Magazine and The Huffington Post.

Neal currently lives just north of Boston, MA, where he spends his days trying to inspire the world from his writing desk. He's excited to spend the rest of his life with his bride, and he's incredibly happy that you decided to listen to his love story. Connect with him on the platforms below:

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