

Char's Gift

A Remarkable Story of Hope Through the Storms of Life

by

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Chapter One

Beauty and the Busser

It was her green eyes. They were the first thing I noticed about this waitress approaching me...

It was the summer of 1979 and my first night working as a busser at Russ' Restaurant on Plainfield Avenue in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Russ' was a popular, family-owned chain across West Michigan and on that Friday night, it was incredibly busy with a full dining room and an overflowing waiting area. Great for business, not so great for someone just starting and uncomfortable around crowds. I wanted to be any place but there.

Adding to my misery, I had to face one stressed-out waitress after another, all wanting me to clear *their* tables first. It seemed like an all-out war between them, and I was their pawn.

I thought, Great, what have I gotten myself into?

Then, as I was wiping down one of the tables, this cute, brunette waitress walked up to me. I looked up and couldn't help but notice she had the most beautiful green eyes I had ever seen. My pulse raced at that moment, but then I came to my senses and braced for the inevitable words, "I need you to bus *my* tables next." Instead, she looked out over the busy dining room, then looked back at me and said, "Hi, I'm Char. Welcome to Russ!"

"Hi, I'm...Steve. Nice to meet you."

She simply smiled and walked off to her next table of customers.

I don't know for sure, but I think this girl might have used psychology on me that evening because I can tell you, as soon as the tables in her section became free to clean, I would *rush* over to take care of them—ahead of any tables the selfish waitresses were barking orders for me to clean next. This girl was different.

As the months progressed, Char and I began to develop a friendship. We would meet for coffee and dessert after a shift, first with a group of other employees and then eventually, it was just the two of us sitting in a booth together. We had a lot in common and as time wore on, the depth of our friendship grew as we confided in each another with issues of family, shared hopes and dreams, or sometimes just sharing a laugh. Char and I could talk to each other about anything.

Our friendship grew as we began to meet outside of work for coffee, along with a variety of activities including day hikes at Lake Michigan, tennis, racquetball, cross-country skiing, downhill skiing, water-sliding, and yes, even an attempt to go roller skating and the dreaded ice skating. If you've ever watched a Hallmark movie, they always show the guy skating with the girl as he bumbles around, eventually falling. I was that guy. It didn't matter what we were doing; Char and I enjoyed each other's company, becoming close friends.

Surprisingly through all of this, we both realized there was no romantic spark between us. We talked about it openly, and even laughed about it. Both of us knew in our hearts that all we would ever be was good friends, and we were okay with that. That was, until the fall of 1985.

It had been a few years since we both left Russ' for new jobs, and with that, Char and I saw less and less of each other. Our friendship was in, what I would call, a "dormant" phase. But for some reason that fall, I decided to call her and find out how she was doing.

"Hey, Char, it's been a long time. How are you?"

"Hi, Steve! I'm doing...okay. Just busy getting ready to drive down to Ann Arbor tomorrow morning for a Michigan football game."

"Oh, wow, that's awesome. I've been a lifelong fan but have never been to The Big House."

"Yeah, I'm a little nervous, to be honest. I'm going on a first date with this guy from my church."

A few seconds of silence passed, and then I said, "Oh. Well, that should be fun, I guess." The idea of Char going to the game with some guy didn't sit too well with me for some reason, but I didn't say anything since we were just friends.

"Well, I better let you go," I said. "Sounds like you have a lot to do before tomorrow morning." I didn't know what else to say. I just needed to get off the phone as soon as possible. The thought of her with this guy was making me feel sick in the pit of my stomach.

Gameday arrived, and there I was stuck at home watching it on TV. I normally loved watching Michigan football but with this game all I could think about was Char and this guy being there...together. I had hoped for lousy weather—maybe a nice thunderstorm with lightning so everyone would have to scurry out of there and head home early. Or perhaps a nice Arctic blast and frigid temperatures. But then I thought of the two of them snuggling under a blanket, keeping each other warm. I quickly stopped hoping for cold weather.

So, there I was watching the game alone and feeling sorry for myself, while those two were there, probably having the time of their lives. I was a pathetic mess. As I tried to focus on the game, I realized I was doing something subconsciously that was genuinely shocking for being a life-long Michigan fan—I was rooting for *the other team*. Every time the Michigan offense was on the field, I was hoping they would fumble or that quarterback Jim Harbaugh would throw an interception. I didn't want Char and this guy to have any reason to be celebrating anything together. What in the world is happening to me?! I wondered.

The next afternoon, I decided to call Char.

“Hey, how did the game go?”

“Miserable,” she said. “It was cold, windy, and raining the whole time. I didn't click at all with this guy. To be honest, I couldn't wait to get home.”

My heart suddenly raced with excitement, but I reined that in and sympathetically said, “Oh, that's too bad.”

I hadn't been that jealous over a girl since second grade at East Oakview Elementary. Robin Rudolph was the girl of my dreams. Mrs. Ranck, our beloved elementary teacher, had a dance event planned for the class. She said we needed to pick a partner and so I thought it was the perfect opportunity to dance with Robin. As the free dance began, Robin happened to be all by herself; it was time for me to make my move. I walked up to her and nervously said, “Would you like to dance with me?” Robin glared at me for a moment and then, in a snooty tone, said, “No, I like boys with *curly* hair.” Next thing I knew, she was dancing with my childhood friend Matt Zainea, who happened to have *the* curliest hair of anyone in the class. My poor little second-grade heart was shattered.

Thankfully, Char didn't seem to mind guys with straight hair, which was good because I suddenly found myself thinking about her all the time. I couldn't get this girl off my mind.

One morning I woke up with a clear thought: I need to tell her. And so, that same morning, I called her—and was I ever nervous. I was about to ruin our friendship.

“Char, it's Steve. Hey, can you meet me for coffee this afternoon? There's something I need to talk to you about in person.”

“Sure,” she replied. Char sounded very uncomfortable. “There's something I need to talk to you about, too.”

So, there we both were, sitting in a booth at Russ' of all places, and I went first. “Well, I don't know how to say this. I, uh...wasn't too happy about you going to the Michigan game with that guy from your church. All I know, is that I didn't like it. I guess what I'm trying to say is that I was jealous.”

At that moment, I figured I was already dying on the vine anyway, so I just looked her right in the eyes and said it—“Char, I'm in love with you.” I immediately looked down at the table for security, like Linus looking for his blanket. There was complete silence for several moments. Then I found the courage to look up at her. Huge tears were filling her big, beautiful green eyes. She said, “I'm in love with you, too. I was so afraid to tell you.” Char broke down and cried with such tears of joy. God had finally lit the spark between us. Actually, it was more like a fireworks finale.

The funniest part of that afternoon was when we decided to tell everyone at Russ' the big news. The first person we told just laughed and said, “Oh, we all knew about you two a long time ago. Surprised it took you this long to figure it out.”

So, the rest was history. We had our first “official” date at a beautiful restaurant in Grand Rapids called The 1913 Room. It was a wonderfully relaxed first date, seeing that we knew each other so well. Then on Christmas Eve, I proposed to Char. She said yes, and we immediately began planning our wedding for June 14, 1986.

A week before the wedding, we learned a valuable lesson; never plan a trip to the dentist close to the big day. The trouble started when her regular dentist was out sick, and Char had his replacement dentist do work on a filling. The result? Amalgam dropped in Char's eye, a nick in her lower lip from the drill slipping out of his hand, and finally, a gaping hole created under her

tongue from the same “slippery” drill. And then to make matters worse, the penicillin they prescribed, for the nicked lip and hole under her tongue, made her sick to her stomach. That lasted until the morning of the wedding, when Char finally began feeling better. There was no shortage of stress that day, but we did get through it.

The ceremony was beautiful. One of the highlights happened while we were up in front, lighting the unity candle. It had been a rainy, dreary start to the day and the forecast offered little relief. There we were toward the end of the ceremony, standing with our candles and listening to our singer, Dave Gage, perform a beautiful rendition of the song, “We Are An Offering.” As Char and I were just beginning to light the unity candle, outside there was a break in the clouds and a ray of sunlight beamed through the stained-glass window, shining directly on us. It seemed impossible and yet, there it was—causing a murmur among the crowd gathered and serving as a sign to Char and me that God was blessing our new marriage. It was an amazing beginning to what would end up being a truly remarkable journey together.

Chapter Two

The Journey Begins

Char quickly found out the lengths I would go to for her in our budding marriage, starting with the honeymoon. When we were planning out the wedding, the idea of picking out flowers and invitations didn't sound all that exciting to me and Char knew it. We knew we wanted to spend our honeymoon in northern Michigan but still needed to select the hotels and bed-and-breakfasts, and so I wanted to show her I was committed to being involved and offered to handle arranging all of the honeymoon lodging.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” she asked.

“Yes, and I had an idea. I would like to keep the hotels and B&Bs we stay at a surprise to you until we get there. What do you think? It will be fun.”

Char looked a little nervous at first, then cautiously said, “Okay, as long as you pick out three or four nice places.” I assured her I would.

Now with it being 1986, there was no internet to easily look up hotel reviews. It was old-fashioned research through finding brochures and making phone calls. I had spent several weeks doing this and found myself frustrated, wondering if the places I had tentatively booked were truly worthy of a honeymoon. The last thing I wanted to do was disappoint Char. As I looked at the list I compiled of lodging candidates, I had an idea. The only way to truly know was to visit all of them. I didn't want to tell Char I was even thinking this, as I knew the idea of scoping out ten different locations sounded ridiculous and traveling that far would be a waste of gas—but it was the only way.

One of the hurdles with this elaborate plan was pulling it off without Char having the slightest clue. I wanted to do it without resorting to lying about needing to go on a business trip or that I had the sudden desire to go on a fishing trip up north. No, I needed to visit all of the locations and do it in a very tight window of time, in other words—all in one day. The idea seemed impossible, yet I relished the challenge.

After making several phone calls to arrange the timing, I was ready to embark on an epic, one-day marathon trip. With a thermos of coffee and full tank of gas, I was ready to roll. Leaving at 4:00 a.m., I managed to reach and tour all ten destinations, located in the towns of Northport, Charlevoix, Petoskey, and finally, all the way to Mackinac Island. After leaving the final B&B on Mackinac Island and taking the ferry back to the mainland, I stopped at a restaurant in Mackinac City and thought it would be funny to call Char from the payphone, not telling her where I was, of course, and have her think I was just calling her from work like I normally did. There were no smart phones or caller ID back then, so I couldn't pass up the idea. It was a great plan until I actually called her. That's when she asked, "Hey, do you want to meet me for dinner tonight at Schelde's Restaurant?" A sense of dread washed over me, knowing if I said no, she would wonder why. Unable to quickly come up with a solution, I looked at my watch. 2:00 p.m. I knew I had a four-hour drive ahead of me. I calmly said, "Sure, I'll meet you there. What time?"

"Does five thirty work?"

"Hmm, how about six o'clock?"

"Sounds good, see you there!"

I cut lunch short and was on my way. Nearly four hours later and with five minutes to spare, I pulled into the restaurant, where Char was waiting. As we sat down, I laughed to myself as she said to me, "You look a little tired. Long day?"

"Yeah, you could say that. So, what sounds good to eat?" Mission accomplished.

I gathered all the information I needed on that trip and was able to finally relax, knowing I had done everything I could to give Char the best honeymoon. She was worth all the effort. Thankfully, Char loved every place I picked out and we ended up having a wonderful honeymoon.

As many newlywed couples find out, once the honeymoon is over, the wonder of being carefree is short-lived. As Char and I navigated the first six months of our marriage, we ran into a

crossroads regarding our careers. She was interested in getting a job that utilized her degree in psychology from Calvin College. There were social worker positions available, but Char desired to work with people directly and not have to deal with the mountains of paperwork associated with that job.

Me, on the other hand—I was unsure of my path at that time and had been pursuing a position with Zondervan bookstores. After interviewing with them, I received a call from the manager, who wanted to meet me for a second interview along with the Zondervan Midwest regional director. After forty-five minutes of questions over breakfast, the director said, “Steve, we want to offer you a position with one of our stores.” I was excited about the opportunity, until he said, “We have a store in St. Louis in need of a good manager and we believe that is you.”

“I appreciate the offer and want to talk to my wife Char about it first before I give you an answer.”

I was conflicted at that moment, knowing Char wanted to stay in West Michigan where her friends and family were. After talking with her about it that evening, I knew what I had to do. The next morning, I called Zondervan and informed them that I needed to turn down the offer.

Char’s future was more important to me than my own, and so we ended up going down her path, eventually learning of an opening in the most unlikely role we could ever imagine—serving as house parents to the adult residents of a group home at Pine Rest Christian Hospital. There were several homes there, each with adults functioning at different levels and with unique needs. Many were living with Down syndrome and represented the last generation that was put into institutions as children. It was sad to think about that. Yet, here was a group of people, brought together through difficult circumstances outside of their control, each with their own story. The needs there were so great. So, six months into our fledgling marriage, we took a leap of faith and accepted the position. It was never on either one of our roadmaps. But as we learned, God has His own roadmap for our lives, leading us down the path Jesus walked and to the people He knew had the greatest needs.

In the four years we worked there, we were house parents in three of the homes. Each home was unique and presented its own challenges and opportunities. As we moved into our last home, serving many of the highest functioning residents, Char immediately noticed there was a stagnancy

in their lives, likely due to burnout by the former house parents. Many of these folks, who had already lost their own parents years earlier, hadn't had their clothes updated in a very long time. For other residents, it became clear they weren't really encouraged to use their gifts and talents. There was just no real sense of joy in the home, instead only boredom. That was all about to change with Char.

Within weeks, she was determined to transform the attitude in the home and of the staff. She would take residents shopping for new clothes and shoes, meal planning was healthier and had a greater variety, and the creatives were encouraged to write, draw, and paint. Char was committed to bringing fun back into their lives; planning Hawaiian luau parties, organizing basketball free-throw shooting contests, having everyone dress up as a nerd for a Nerd Night party, and even taking everyone on a trip to Lake Michigan to walk on the beach and eat ice cream afterward at Whippi Dip, a popular lakeshore ice cream destination. There was even a time when Char arranged to bring everyone over to her parents' home for a backyard picnic. I'll never forget how nervous Char's mom was about the whole idea of meeting everyone, but as the evening wore on, the residents ultimately won her heart. To hear the laughter and see the smiles was what it was all about.

Like anyone, these people deserved to be treated with dignity, respect, and love. That is what Char and I tried to show them during our time serving as their house parents. It was hard work, often with eighty-hour weeks. It was that kind of schedule and effort that eventually led to burnout. Even though the blessings far outweighed the challenges and provided us a whole new perspective on life, we were suffering as a couple. And so, we made the decision it was time for the next chapter of our lives. With heavy hearts, we said an emotional goodbye to this special group of people who brought such joy and inspiration to our lives and the world around them.

Char and I both ended up getting "normal" office jobs while we pursued some of our other interests, like hiking, camping, and of all things, working together on feature articles for outdoor magazines. Char was a gifted writer and I had recently taught myself photography. We enjoyed the idea of working together on projects, so it made sense to approach magazines as a team.

I read articles and books about magazine writing, wanting to learn everything I could before jumping into it. The overwhelming consensus from my research was that it was nearly impossible

to break into the magazine market. One article stated, “You can plan on wallpapering the walls of your home with rejection slips before you have your first article published.” Even though it was defeating to read the doom and gloom outlook for this endeavor, I still wanted to try.

For our first article, Char and I picked a subject close to home that we knew would be popular with readers—maple syrup making. We had Grand Rapids–based Blandford Nature Center nearby, who had an excellent Sugarbush program, including a beautiful sugar shack where they boiled the sap down into syrup. We arranged to meet the head of the program, Gerry Moleski. Gerry was tough as nails and one of the hardest working, most perfectionistic people we had ever met. He was also a grouch. His first words to us were, “I hate reporters.” Gerry explained how he had a bad experience with a female reporter from a local news station in Kalamazoo.

“She expected me to work around *her* schedule,” he clamored. “That takes a lot of nerve. Plus, she got a ton of things wrong about the program; in fact, she even spelled my name wrong!” *Now* we understood why he had such disdain for reporters.

Char used her psychology major skills on Gerry, saying, “From what I can see Gerry, you must have worked incredibly hard to have achieved what you have with this program and this entire nature center.”

“You got that right!” he exclaimed. “You have *no* idea.”

Gerry was the one who had no idea—no idea of who he was matched up against. Char continued, “You’re right. I have no idea. That’s why we’re here. We want to learn about and highlight all of the time, effort, and heart you have put into this program, and educate readers that maple syrup making is hard work.”

“Good!” he grumbled. “We get started first thing in the morning. If you’re late, it’s your loss. I’m not waiting for you. Too busy of a day to be wasting time.”

“We’ll be there, Gerry. We wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Char was that good. The best part of the experience was after the article was published. Char took one of my photographs of the sugarhouse at dusk and had it framed for Gerry. During her initial interview with him, she remembered Gerry mentioning how much he loved boiling sap in the sugarhouse at night, how peaceful it was. From that, she ended up writing a free-verse poem to honor him and placed it on the back of the sugarhouse photo.

I suspect no one had ever done something that kind for Gerry Moleski. When he unwrapped the photo, turned it over and read the poem, tears began to well up in his eyes. The ability to take someone from “I hate reporters” to a moment of being overwhelmed with tears of gratitude, is what made Char so special.

This is the poem Char wrote for Gerry:

The Midnight Vigil

As the sun sets, the maple trees become black silhouettes against the purple hue of a March sky. The woods become dark, but a light still glows in the sugarhouse as the lone sugarbush veteran keeps a midnight vigil, waiting for amber gold.

He remembers the many hours of backbreaking work, hand-carrying the sap from buckets on the trees, through the mud, and uphill to the sugarhouse. Letting it spoil would be unthinkable.

As he steps outside to gather firewood, he notices the crispness of the cold night air. Inside, the fire in the arch warms his bones as the sap continually boils and sweet steam rises up into the twilight sky. The first stars appear. An owl hoots in the distance. The Maple Moon rises.

Two days after we submitted the finished article to Michigan Natural Resources Magazine, we had a phone message waiting for us at home.

“Hello, Steve and Char, this is Dick Morscheck, editor of Michigan Natural Resources Magazine. I received your article two days ago. It’s a nicely done piece and I’m interested in publishing it as a feature article in our magazine. When you have a chance, please give me a call.”

As we looked at each other with wide-eyed astonishment, I said, “Well, so much for having to wallpaper our walls with rejection slips.”

Char laughed and said, “I know, can you believe it?!”

Char and I were blessed to have had our work appear in twenty-four articles over the course of four years. We worked hard at it, going through some tough battles with each other over what

stayed in an article and what needed to be cut before we sent it to an editor. But we respected each other enough to know that somehow, if we survived each other, we would achieve the best result in the end. What was most important was that we were having some much-needed fun in our marriage, working on these projects as a team, and traveling our beautiful state of Michigan together. Life was good. But that was all about to change.