

Finding a Happier Ever After

{An ebook about expectations, true love and real life}



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About the Author



Mary Carver is a writer, blogger, church planter, wife and mom. She loves Jesus, her family and friends, books and all kinds of Mexican food. She admits to watching way too much TV, and M&Ms are her love language.

A recovering perfectionist, Mary writes with honesty and humor about her less-than-perfect life at www.givinguponperfect.com. Her posts about everything from dieting and housekeeping to parenting and faith encourage other women to give up on perfect and get on with life.

Before discovering the world of blogging and social media, Mary worked in public relations and nonprofit fundraising and event planning. Today she's blessed to work part-time behind the scenes as editorial coordinator for [\(in\)courage](#), a website for women published by DaySpring. She's also a contributing author to [\(in\)courage](#) and the author of [Plan a Fabulous Party {without losing your mind}](#).

Mary and her husband of 14 years live in Kansas City with their six-year-old daughter. She met Mark at a high school football game when she was 15 and he was 17. Since he was cute, laughed at her jokes AND had a car, she accepted right away when Mark asked her to the Homecoming dance that fall. Married at 20 and 22, they've fought against fairy tale expectations (and, FINE, maybe with each other) for nearly 15 years now. Today they're grateful for a redeemed, post-fairy-tale marriage – and expecting their second baby.

Someday soon she hopes to find a recent photo of the whole family, smiling at the same time – but without the presence of the crazy eyes. Until then, she'll be reminiscing with her scrapbooks from back in the day. You know – when taking a family photo simply required dressing the baby and crossing your fingers she didn't spit up?

Connect with Mary on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Pinterest](#) and [Instagram](#) – where you'll find she's not even kidding about the Mexican food.

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What I Really Think About Romance

You don't have to read or listen long to see I'm a hypocrite when it comes to romance.

I've written extensively about the dangers of letting romance novels, pop music and chick flicks shape our expectations and inform our relationship dynamics. Yet, I also confess – [freely and often](#) – to loving books, music, TV shows and movies about love.

So how do I really feel about romance? Well, I'll tell you.

It depends.

Just the sort of definitive answer you were looking for, right?

No? FINE. *Let me expand on that.*

If we're talking about the mythical version of romance that exists only in fiction and delusional girls' minds, then I kind of hate it. Well, I love it and I hate it. It's a love/hate relationship – and that is NOT romantic, no matter what your favorite sitcoms or chick flicks might try telling you.

Does that mean my heart doesn't skip when my two favorite, meant-to-be television characters finally kiss? Um, no. I AM ONLY HUMAN. But it does mean that I'm a big enough girl to realize that all of that is just not real.

You hear me? **Not. Real.** Hot? Yes. Real? No.

So I love it because it's fun and I wish it were real. But I hate it because it's not real – and I wish it were. *But it's not.*

But if we're talking about the real kind of romance that I'm still learning to see and appreciate in my life – my real life – **then oh yeah, I LOVE IT.**

Real romance? Yes, please!

If we're talking about laughing at inside jokes and watching our favorite shows on the DVR and gazing at our so-frustrating-when-she's-awake-but-dang-cute-when-she's-sleeping kiddo together and leaving the porch light on and cleaning the kitchen even when it's not my turn and holding hands in the car?

Yep, I'm all for that kind of romance.

The Problem with Romance Novels, part one

I'm not sure what the book was doing in the elementary school library in the first place. With a main character who was 13 years old, it seems more appropriate for the middle school.

At least, it does now.

When I was in second or third grade and allowed to check out books from the fourth grade shelves because of my "advanced reading skills," a book called "[I Was a 98-Pound Duckling](#)" seemed completely appropriate to me.

My mom did not agree.

The book's description – according to [openlibrary.org](#), not my memory – explains why: *A 13-year-old who suffers from several "beauty problems" improves her self-image after a brief summer romance.*

Not exactly the best choice for an 8-year-old.

Little did my mom know that was not the last time I would read an age-inappropriate book. From hiding Harlequin novels in my desk throughout middle school to discovering Danielle Steele at my first job (at a library – are you surprised?) in high school, I was hooked on romance and I indulged early and often.

Since I've mentioned more than once my love of chick flicks, a.k.a. romantic comedies, you have probably assumed that this romance addiction didn't end with adolescence.

If so, you would be right.

Even throughout the early – and, okay, not so early – years of my marriage, I often lost myself in a paperback book that I'd be embarrassed to be seen reading.

You wouldn't believe how excited I was when our library started allowing patrons to check out their own books with the automatic scanner. *Now I could read all the trashy romances I wanted – and nobody would know!*

I read all sorts of romance novels. Sure, I read the trashy ones, the ones I lay face down on my coffee table. But I also read tons of Christian romances (anyone else remember the [Palisades Pure Romance books?](#)).

Smutty or wholesome – it didn't matter. **Whether the main characters parted with a chaste kiss on the front porch or tumbled straight into bed, the premise of each book was the same.**

The love – *the romance* – shared by the main characters of each story was breathtaking. The kind that sweeps you off your feet. That happens at first sight. That conquers all and lasts forever and solves mysteries and makes babies and cures cancer and wins wars.

And it happened to characters that, no matter if they were cowboys or prostitutes or knights or duchesses or veterinarians or florists or lawyers, the reader can easily identify with.

Unfortunately, I consumed those books, that premise, those characters the same way I consume Doritos or Oreos: in mass quantity without thinking.

The whole time I was gulping down those books, I was building – and reinforcing – a belief system. I was learning about love, about men and women, about relationships. And I was creating a whole lot of expectations.

Am I stupid? Or gullible? No. I knew, full and well, that those books were works of fiction. I knew that they were no more real than the Disney movies I watched with my little brother.

But even though I knew those stories weren't real, after a while, I started believing them anyway. After you've read dozens, possibly hundreds, of books about strong, brave, sensitive and romantic men, you start to think that maybe that's the norm. After you've read so many stories about love that can move mountains and turn back time and inspire poetry, you start to think that maybe that's the way love is supposed to be.

Maybe those men do exist. Maybe that kind of love is possible. Maybe that's what I deserve.

And *that* is where the trouble starts.

The Problem with Romance Novels, part two

We sat shoulder to shoulder in a tiny dorm room around a tiny TV, watching one of our favorite movies. Just as Johnny marched over to Baby and pulled her out of the corner, our friend Jared walked in the room.

As he took in the room, looking from one girl to the next . . . to the next . . . to the next, he said, **“What is wrong with you guys?”**

Blinking, we looked up at him and realization dawned. Every single one of us was staring at the screen with a [ridiculous] dreamy look in our eyes. It was like we were in a trance.

The same kind of *romance trance* I slip into when I read romance novels.

The kind where my eyes glaze over and I forget that what I'm reading is make-believe. It might be grown-up make-believe, but it's no closer to real life than the magic fairies and flying carpets my daughter sees in Disney movies.

For most of my life, I prided myself on being “a romantic.” I dreamed of receiving gigantic bouquets of roses and daisies, song lyrics made me melt, and I pretended to adore Shakespeare. I ate up any hint of love – or what I thought was love.

But surely it must be! After all, my boyfriend – who eventually became my husband – gave me roses. And wrote sweet letters that included lyrics from our favorite songs. And endured a Shakespeare play amidst mosquitoes and humidity.

The problem is that romance novels (and romantic comedies . . . and fairy tales in general) don't tell you the rest of the story.

First of all, most relationships don't follow such a wild path, from meet cute to starry-eyed, tingling toes dates to dramatic tear-them-apart situation to brave, bold, courageous move from The Hero to heart-stopping kiss . . . and fade to black.

Sometimes, you just meet a guy and think he's all right. Sometimes, you don't necessarily have the hots for him right away, but he's got a car and nobody else is asking you out. Sometimes you go on predictable dates and have uninspired conversations with a startling lack of clever quips.

That's what my first (and only) romance looked like. So you know what I did?

I created drama.

I overreacted to every slight and insult. I prolonged misunderstandings and vowed to make him pay for every twinge of hurt I felt. I sobbed while listening to “How Do I Live

Without You" and wrote flowery letters professing my undying love until my hand cramped.

Honestly, I deserved to be dumped. But I lucked out. Mark either didn't know any better or just overlooked my craziness. Because despite my adolescent behavior (for the record, I was an adolescent), he married me.

And that's where the love story ends, right?

Not exactly. Even though, while you're spending every waking (and some sleeping) second planning the most beautiful, special, wonderful wedding EVER, it seems like the wedding is the goal, it's not.

It's just the beginning of a true love story.

Unfortunately, I didn't know anything about true love. I didn't know about compromise and respect and trust and forgiveness. **I knew about flowers and chocolates and surprise dates and grand gestures.**

Imagine my surprise when married life wasn't an endless parade of love notes and slow dances and secret getaways. Imagine my disappointment when marriage wasn't what I expected, wasn't what I hoped for, *wasn't what I deserved.*

SCREECH! {That's the sound effect for tires squealing.} Hold on! Why did I think I deserved such lavish and loving treatment?

Here's why: a lifelong diet of romance novels (with a side of feminist influences and a mostly doting boyfriend) had led me to believe that I could behave however I wanted to and still get everything I wanted in return.

I developed a classic case of *He needs to change. He's the problem. I deserve better.*

Now, I'm not saying my husband is or was perfect. But had I spent more time showing him love and respect, and less time coming up with reason why he didn't deserve those things as much as I did, I might have enjoyed the first several years of our marriage more.

My grasp on reality and my perspective on love didn't change overnight. I started realizing maybe I'd had some things wrong when we visited a marriage counselor a few times. And things looked different after we watched several of our couple friends go through divorce. Of course, having a child changes a lot of people, and it certainly changed us.

And now, I have no desire to read a romance novel.

Haha! Just kidding. That's not true. I still enjoy romance. Most the books I read these days – at least the fiction – are mysteries with a romantic aspect. And you probably won't ever rip me away from watching *Sleepless in Seattle* or even *The Wedding Planner* on cable.

But I read and watch those things with a grain of salt now. Or, as my patient husband says, with a salt lick.

Because the love described in romance novels isn't real. And it can be dangerous if you start believing that's how things ought to be.

And *that* is the problem with romance novels.

Life is Funny, but It's No Romantic Comedy

The first time I picked up a Harlequin romance novel, I was in sixth grade.

Now, before you gasp, shudder and generally question my mother's parenting abilities, let me explain. First of all, my mom didn't know. Secondly, while my reading ability far surpassed my age, my comprehension – at least when it came to love scenes and the such – was a different story.

[No pun intended. But that was kind of funny, right?]

As the not-so-natural complement to my Sweet Valley Twins and Babysitter's Club books, I devoured the little white paperbacks full of manufactured romance and sap. And as soon as I moved up to high school, I graduated to Danielle Steele (along with Mary Higgins Clark and college catalogs).

Those books weren't my first foray into the world of romantic fantasy.

Like every other girl I knew, I grew up on Disney princesses and handsome princes. And well before that, I memorized my mom's recollection of the magical day when, as a teenager in youth group, she gazed at my dad *and just knew*.

I was raised to be kind, do my best, mind my manners and love God above all else. **But I was also raised to believe in white knights, grand gestures and happily ever after.**

Just like the belief that every meal should include a starchy side, the idea that "true love" came wrapped in candlelight, whispered nothings and a big, expensive bunch of roses was deeply ingrained. So deeply, in fact, that it took years before I realized that a) it existed and b) that it was wrong.

In the meantime I kept reading every romance novel I could get my hands on – and then wondered why my own relationship didn't compare. Actually, "wonder" is a pretty tame word for it. "Despair" might be more accurate.

Real Life: The Ultimate Test for Fairytales

My husband and I married stupid young. [I'm not saying that getting married young is stupid. I'm saying that when WE got married (young), we were stupid.] And for several years we lived on the brink of divorce.

Every couple has their issues, and I didn't disagree with the counselor who placed most the blame on my husband. But over time even I had to acknowledge that *perhaps* my romance obsession – and the unrealistic expectations it created and maintained – was causing problems as well.

- ♥ Why didn't he ever plan dates?
- ♥ Would it kill him to tell me exactly how beautiful I am?
- ♥ Why didn't he ever buy me flowers?
- ♥ Didn't he understand how important love notes are?
- ♥ Is it so much to ask that he just open my door?!

Okay, for the record, my husband is a gentleman who often uses polite manners. And he does open doors for me.

But the rest of it? They were my actual complaints – and the source of many fights. But they weren't the real issue. The underlying, marriage-crippling problem was that I truly expected my down-to-earth, never-met-a-chick-flick-he-liked husband to turn into a lovey-dovey, plans-carriage-rides-for-date-night knight in shining armor. And I truly believed that's what I needed, what I deserved.

It sounds so ridiculous. Now. But for the first several years we were married, I truly lost my grasp on reality when it came to love and relationships and marriage. Thankfully, I eventually realized that my expectations and demands were causing a lot of trouble.

And that – surprise, surprise – ***life is not a romance novel.***

Honestly, I'm glad. Real life, *real love* is so much better than any work of fiction. My husband shows he loves me in a hundred ways – ways that are infinitely better than roses and candlelight.

Not that I'd turn down a vase full of flowers. For the record.

The Most Perfect Valentine's Day Ever

{ almost }

When I was a freshman in college, I decided that it was time for Mark and me to get engaged. After all, we'd already planned to get married after my sophomore year, so we needed to get the ball rolling. Wedding planning takes time, you know?

So I told Mark about this.

Don't be alarmed. He started asking me to marry him when I was just 16, so this was only good news for him.

Shortly after that conversation, we flipped the calendar to February. Which, as you know if you've ever been in any sort of relationship, means expectations and plans and all that good stuff.

Chocolate may even get involved.

I assumed, because my experience with romance novels and chick flicks told me it would happen this way, that Mark would propose on Valentine's Day. And so, I planned accordingly.

You know what happens when you assume...

A few weeks before the big weekend, I made lasagna at home. It was no Pioneer Woman dish at that point, but it was (and still is) Mark's favorite thing I make. I froze two servings and took them back to school.

I like planning events, and this Valentine's Day was to be quite the event.

I had a white sheet to use as a tablecloth, and I draped it over a coffee table from the dorm lounge. I [illegally] lit candles and had a bag salad ready to dump into a bowl. My friend Nicole picked up breadsticks from Fazoli's, and I had an elaborate plan to get Mark out of my room while I threw it all together.

Except . . . my plan didn't work out quite right.

I asked Mark to return a couple movies I'd rented, but when he got to his car, he realized he needed directions. So he came back up to my room and knocked on the door.

Because I thought it was Nicole, delivering the breadsticks, I opened the door without a thought. And Mark saw me with scissors in my hands and rose petals scattered behind me.

He thought I was mad at him and destroying the flowers he'd brought me!

I was actually cutting open the bag of shredded cheese for the salad, and the rose petals were to decorate our makeshift table. From a rose I'd bought myself.

We laughed when he came back and told me what he'd thought, but I was so sad that he'd been worried. (And I was worried that he thought I was such a crazy woman that I'd cut up his beautiful flowers!)

Then to top it all off, the poor guy did not, in fact, propose. He gave me a Martina McBride CD with the song Valentine on it. The song that I'd sung at our spring concert the year before. The song that I'd really been singing to him from that stage in our high school gym.

I'm ashamed to tell you that my first reaction was not, "Awwwww! That's so sweet!"

No, I behaved sort of like the kind of crazy woman who might cut up a bouquet of roses. I wasn't angry or *too* ugly about it. But I wasn't gracious and kind, that's for darned sure.

We still had a great weekend together, and I am still proud of the way I pulled together that little romantic dorm dinner. (And I still love that song, by the way.)

But we would have had a much better start – to our weekend and our eventual marriage – if I'd been giving up on perfect (and fairytale romance) back then!

The Problem with "Call Me Maybe"

I know, I know, [the Carly Rae Jepsen hit](#) from last summer is So. Darned. Catchy! So, YOU'RE WELCOME for getting it stuck in your head.

But have you ever really listened to those lyrics you find yourself repeating in the shower? Besides the fact that saying, "Call me . . . maybe," and getting all worked up because he doesn't call is dumb, the tag at the end is a little confusing (not to mention grammatically incorrect, but we'll let that slide just this once).

"Before you came into my life I missed you so bad."

Ummm . . . what? How can you miss someone you've never met?

Apparently this can be done, because it comes up in lots of songs and even the always accurate-in-portraying-real-life romantic comedies.

From Reba McEntire and Rascal Flatts to Lenny Kravitz and K-Ci & Jo-Jo (yes, I did look up the correct spelling and punctuation for that group), singers have been crooning about this convoluted idea of destiny and determination for years. Here are a just a couple recent examples:

- ♥ "Wherever you are, whenever it's right, you'll come out of nowhere and into my life . . . And I promise you, kid, I give so much more than I get I just haven't met you yet." – Michael Buble
- ♥ "Where have you been, cause I never see you out. Are you hiding from me, yeah? Somewhere in the crowd? Where have you been, all my life?" – Rhianna

And then there are the movies.

I will concede that the basic premise of [The Wedding Date](#) with Debra Messing and Dermot Mulroney is heinous. But I will not deny watching it anytime it's on cable, no, I won't. And before I thought about it, hearing these words from the main character's mouth seemed oh-so-dreamy: "*I think I'd miss you even if we never met.*"

I even found an appearance of this craziness on several "top romantic movie quotes" lists. (Yes, I know. The things I do for you. Oh, the sacrifice. Heh.)

Apparently, in [A Place in the Sun](#), Montgomery Clift's character says to Elizabeth Taylor's character, "I love you. I've loved you since the first moment I saw you. *I guess maybe I've even loved you before I saw you.*"

HUH?

Now, look, I am not some hardened, embittered soul who scoffs at the idea of romance. If you're new here, a quick perusal of my archives will reveal my extensive and unashamed love of the romantic comedy, TV shows ripe with romantic tension and even [the admittedly problematic] romance novels.

But come on. What are we doing to ourselves by swooning to the tune of, "I knew I loved you before I met you. I think I dreamed you into life." Note to Savage Garden: *You cannot dream someone into life!*

If only we could. But we can't. **And by perpetuating this idea that the person we love is the embodiment of every dream or fantasy we had, we are simply setting ourselves up for deep disappointment.**

It's been a long time since I fell in love with my husband, but I [vaguely] remember how exciting it was. In the beginning of our relationship, it really did seem like he'd stepped out of my teenage fantasies, perfectly designed to fulfill all of my romantic wishes.

Cue reality.

Your guy might seem like the one you've dreamed of . . . until he forgets your birthday. Or shows up late for your date. Or accidentally offends your mom. Or wears khakis that are just too tight. Or tells you he hates your favorite band. Or refuses to see one more chick flick. Or admits that he knows all the words to every New Kids on the Block song. Or watches football all weekend, ignoring your pleas for conversation – or bathing.

None of those things is really a deal-breaker, but when held up to the impossible picture of Your Dream Man, the discrepancy is harsh.

And it can torpedo a perfectly healthy relationship in no time at all.

As many of you know, [I love reading all kinds of books](#), including serious, grown-up books. And that's why I'm not [too] embarrassed to tell you that I also particularly enjoyed a series of romance novels a few years ago about a romance novelist and two of her characters who somehow came to life.

Ridiculous? Absolutely. Wildly entertaining? You bet!

The issue causing tension in the book wasn't actually how the main character had to keep her fiction-come-to-life friends a secret or how the three of them solved murder mysteries (I know.). **It was how, in real life, all the qualities that had made the leading man an ideal romantic hero were actually quite annoying.**

See, that's the thing. We don't dream about real people. And the people we dream of are probably not all that great in reality. So let's quit singing about how we've been dreaming our honeys into life (gag.) and, more importantly, let's stop comparing our significant others to our dreams.

No, I mean it. Let's stop it. RIGHT NOW.

I'll go first.

My husband has never written me a love song or poem. But the man of my dreams never collected inside jokes with me over the years, tickled our daughter until she couldn't talk through the giggles, or made my heart skip just by winking at me 18 years after I met him.

My imaginary white knight didn't work nights so I could stay at home with our daughter, working part-time and following my dreams of writing. He didn't stay up late to take her to her first day of kindergarten or get up early to go to her first dance lesson. He didn't grill the best hamburgers in the world or teach me how to make better spaghetti.

He might have cleaned up the stovetop after making that spaghetti, though.

Still, messy stove or not, my REAL husband is a million times better than any prince I could've dreamed up or missed before I met him! And there's no maybe about that.

The Most Romantic Gesture Ever

In my high school Valentine's Day was quite the floral spectacle.

Like adolescent boys everywhere, my classmates knew that buying flowers on that infamous greeting card holiday was mandatory if they hoped for any chance of having a girlfriend on February 15.

Rather than interrupt class with deliveries all afternoon, some wise person in charge of our school decided that the best course of action was to simply place all flowers and gifts on tables in the cafeteria. Then, following the last bell, students were responsible for checking the tables.

That meant that if you had even an inkling that someone might have sent you flowers, you had to walk slowly, casually by the tables, eyes darting back and forth, searching for your name on a box or bouquet.

It was an outrageous form of teenage torture, and I can't even believe it was legal.

As a long-time victim of Just a Friend Syndrome who had recently acquired a Boyfriend Who Is Not Romantic At All, I was fairly certain my name was not on any of the smelly flowers.

And yet, I hoped.

I don't remember exactly how I found out there were flowers for me on the table. Did I see it as I walked by, oh so casually, after class? Or did someone else see it and tell me? I don't know. But I do remember exactly how I felt when I saw the roses.

The world stopped. My heart soared. Angels sang. *You get the picture, right?*

Mark gave me a dozen red roses that year – and also gave my mom a rose, too. ARE YOU KIDDING ME? Could anything possibly be more romantic than that?

At 17 years old, I thought not. **Clearly, this was The Most Romantic Gesture Ever.**

A little over a year later, I went to the lake with about half of my class a few days before graduation. We water skied, swam, shopped in the tourist trap town and even got one of those old-timey pictures taken. And after dinner each night, we gathered in the resort's dance hall for an awkward, are-we-in-middle-school-again dance.

As we hung out, waiting for the second night's party to start, one guy punched me in the arm and asked me to save him a slow dance. Since this particular guy is one I'd had a crush on since middle school, I said, "Sure."

And I said it real cool-like, you know. Even though I might have possibly been shrieking in my head, "I WILL SAVE YOU ANY DANCE YOU WANT!"

{And yes, for those of you keeping track, I did still have that one-time rose-buying boyfriend who would become my husband. He was at home. I was at the lake. I have no excuse or explanation for those treacherous and embarrassing shrieking thoughts.}

So the dance started. And it was kind of lame. My friends wanted to go back to our cabin and hang out, but I couldn't leave. *I had promised that guy a dance!*

So I waited. And waited. I waited as he danced with pretty much every girl in the room EXCEPT ME. Finally, I snapped out of my idiocy and realized this whole thing was stupid. As one more slow song started and that guy grabbed Another Girl Who Was Not Me, I turned (in a huff, I am sure) and walked out.

I ran to catch up with my friends, who had wisely decided not to wait for me. And then I heard, "Hey! Wait!" I felt a hand on my shoulder, and I turned around. THAT GUY HAD FOLLOWED ME OUTSIDE. And he said, "Let's dance."

Had more romantic words ever been spoken?

Look, I know. But in the moment? It was Billy Crystal running across New York City at midnight. It was Tom Hanks taking Meg Ryan's hand on top of the Empire State Building. It was John Cusack holding up that ridiculous boombox.

It was romantic.

{Yes, even though it went nowhere and meant nothing. I promise. For those of you keeping track.}

For years I held onto memories like this and stories like that. The roses and the stupid dance and all the things we're programmed to "need" – that was my definition of romance. And every time my husband (he of the dozen plus one roses, remember) failed to live up to that definition, I felt so disappointed, so ripped off.

Where were my flowers? My surprise getaways and weekly date nights and notes just because I love you? The dances under the stars, the carriage rides in the park, the champagne and mix tapes and feeding each other chocolate on a Thursday?

Yeah, I wasn't getting any of that.

And it took me a long time – TOO LONG – to figure out that those things are not all they're cracked up to be.

Those things mean nothing compared to someone who kisses you and never mentions your morning breath, who puts up with your mom and says of course your best friend can go on vacation with you and adores your daughter like nobody's business, who holds your hair and goes to the store for *feminine* products and brings you a glass of water when you throw a grown-up tantrum and cry yourself dehydrated.

But even though I [eventually] figured that out, I didn't immediately become immune to Romance Envy. It flares up every now and then, often when reading gag-inducing Facebook statuses or watching unrealistic chick flicks. (Am I alone on this??)

However, I think I was cured for good this spring. It seems like this year has been the "big" anniversary of so many couples we know. Ten, fifteen, twenty-five years our friends have been together, and they've celebrated right. Vacations, cruises, flowers and wine and all that jazz.

Oh yeah, probably jazz music, too.

Mark and I celebrated our anniversary in May. Well, not so much as "celebrated" as "made it to." The weeks leading up to the big day were filled with arguments, threats, silence and tears. So on the 13th anniversary of our wedding, we went to our first counseling session together.

It was, BY FAR, the most romantic thing Mark could have done.

He made the appointment. He vowed, all over again, to stay with me forever and do whatever it takes to make our marriage work. The issues that brought us to that point aren't important to this story, and we both share the blame for it all. What matters is that we chose to stay, to fight, to find love again.

Most. Romantic. Gesture. EVER.

For When You Think it Will Take a Miracle

Just a few years after I was married, I heard through the grapevine that a couple we knew disliked us. A lot. In fact, they said we were “miserable” to be around.

At the time I was insulted and infuriated. But in hindsight . . . *I have to agree.*

Have you heard people joke about their anniversaries? You know, saying, “I’ve been married for 12 years – happily married for 10. Hardee-har-har!”

I’ve always thought that was a tasteless joke, intended to hurt one’s spouse. But, I can honestly say that in little over a month, **I’ll have been married for 14 years – happily married for one.**

Maybe that’s unfair. We’ve certainly had happy moments since our wedding, and if you add them up I’m sure we could squeeze two years out of it. Still, that’s not a great ratio. Especially when I know just how *unhappy* those other years were.

I’ve probably mentioned that I got married at 20.

I’ve told you how [unrealistic expectations](#) complicate relationships unnecessarily.

I’ve talked about some of the effects of being [a married single mom](#).

And I’ve shared that on last year’s anniversary, [we started marriage counseling](#).

What I haven’t told you is that if we hadn’t gone to counseling, we probably wouldn’t be married today.

Last spring I hit my limit – of forgiveness, of patience, of hope. After more than a dozen years of fighting for my marriage and my rights and my way to hang up the towels in the bathroom, *I was finished.*

And when you’ve hit the wall like that and THEN you’re disappointed or hurt ONE MORE TIME?

Well, I crumbled.

I said things like, “I can’t do this anymore,” and “I don’t know why I bother,” and “I deserve better!” and, finally, “I’m going to leave.”

It’s true. I wanted to leave, to give up, to give in. I’d been fighting with Mark – and fighting for Mark – for half my life (if you count the years we dated, which I do, because we bickered and struggled and disregarded each other’s feelings during those years, too).

It was too much. It was too hard. It was too . . . too.

Learning isn't a simple option, though.

Not when you have a four-year-old daughter. And a house. And bills to pay and friends who don't know and family gatherings to attend and cats to feed and lives that are entwined in the way that lives connected for 13+ years are.

Besides, I didn't want to leave. *Not really.* But I didn't think anything would change if I stayed. After all, it hadn't so far. And, I thought, it probably wouldn't now, either – no matter how much I wanted it and how much he promised it would.

No, I didn't think anything would change. I didn't think it could. I didn't think WE could. **I thought it would surely take a miracle to make this marriage work.**

He didn't ask me to stay. But he called a counselor and made an appointment. I didn't go to the first appointment, but he did. That's when I began to feel a tiny spark of hope.

Maybe . . . this time . . . could it really . . . maybe . . .

I can't tell you exactly when things began to change. I don't have an 8-step plan for saving your marriage or making people do what you want or putting the pieces of your heart back together when it's been shattered. Again.

I can tell you that realizing I shared responsibility for the miserable parts of our relationship was a game changer. It was. Learning to talk to each other in a totally different way played a big part, and so did remembering why we liked each other in the first place. And, of course, date nights are everyone's go-to solution for a reason.

But, at least to an extent, those were things we'd tried (and tried and tried) before – including counseling. And it never made much of a difference. **It definitely did not make a lasting difference.**

And for the first several months after that anniversary counseling appointment, I was sure this time would be the same. He'd make promises, I would too, and we'd both tiptoe around each other until we got lazy and reverted back to our horrible selves. We'd try until it got hard again or we got our feelings hurt. And we'd be back where we began, a little more weary and singed around the edges of our smashed, barely-held-together hearts.

I just knew that we couldn't fix this thing, that short of a real-life, God-given miracle, we were headed for more heartache.

Still, I'd promised to try and he kept going to counseling and trying to change and being kind when I tried changing, too. So we tried. For months we tried. And for a while, it really seemed like things were improving. Slowly, in small ways, things were getting better.

But then something happened.

Something happened, and I blew up. We yelled, and I cried, and we both said things that we'd said hundreds of times before. It was a huge fight, just like every other time.

Except . . . it wasn't like every other time. Even though the hot-button topic that started it was the same and the heated words were the same, *my heart didn't feel the same.*

Sure, I was hurt and he was frustrated. But for once in our lives, we quickly asked, "How can we solve this problem together?" instead of pointing fingers and blame and more ugly words.

That was the day I realized that God had truly erased the hurts of our past.
That was the day I began to look at my marriage as the gift it's been all along.
That was the day I realized that my marriage had been miraculously healed.

Now, don't get me wrong. That wasn't the day we had our last argument or started spontaneously dancing in the kitchen or making googly eyes across the dinner table.

But that was the day I understood, the day I truly believed that miracles can happen.

My marriage is still a work in progress. A redeemed marriage, yes, but also a marriage in recovery. We still have scars and struggles and, at times, short, selfish tempers. But it's so different now. We are, for the first time since our newlywed days, on the same team. *We are for each other*, in every sense of the phrase.

When everything fell apart last spring, I thought my marriage was over. My heart was shattered, and I just knew there was not enough glue in the world to put it – to put us – back together.

In a way, I was right. That old marriage – the one with two selfish people who bickered and repressed and ignored and snapped – is gone. I pray it's gone forever. Because this new one? The one with two selfish people who problem solve and confess and forgive and extend arms and olive branches? It's so good.

And it is a miracle.

Are you in a season or situation that seems hopeless? I can't promise you that anything will ever change or improve. I can't, because I don't know.

But what I do know is this: God loves you even when your circumstances seem stacked against you. And He is why we always have hope.

We don't have hope because of our own determination or strength or stick-to-it-ness; we don't have hope because deep down, we believe that other person is good; we don't have hope because things have to turn around at some point and there's nowhere to go but up and my best friend or my horoscope or that quote on Pinterest said it would get better.

No, we have hope because our God loves us, and miracles do happen.

Cheering for the Same Team

You know what would be awesome? Ending this ebook with a nifty how-to guide on saving your marriage or loving your husband better or finding the man of your dreams (here's a hint: he might be watching the football game on your couch).

That would be totally awesome.

Unfortunately, I don't have seven steps to a happier ever after to give you. I don't have three tips for taking divorce off the table – or even ten ways to kick a romance addiction.

I can't tell for sure what will work in your life, in your relationships – because we're all different. I can guarantee that outrageous expectations and unrealistic definitions of love will mess you up every time. But I don't know the solution for your specific situation.

What I can tell you is what worked for us.

When my marriage – and my heart – hit rock bottom, I flip-flopped between feeling too emotionally exhausted to do anything but cry and sleep and doing everything I could think of that might save us from ourselves.

Basically, I took the throw everything at the wall and see what sticks approach.

I'm not saying that's your best course of action, but in the end, some of those things stuck – and, through the grace of God, worked miracles for my husband and me.

The things that worked are probably what you'd expect: counseling, prayer, writing letters that I never delivered, talking with supportive (and pro-marriage) friends, and forcing ourselves on monthly date nights.

But what changed us most was a lousy counselor and cheering for the same team.

When we decided that we needed counseling, Mark called a practice that our pastor had recommended. After telling the person who answered the phone what our basic issues were, we were assigned to one of the therapists that, presumably, was the best fit for our situation.

At first she seemed nice. But eventually we came to the conclusion that, as a counselor, she was actually kind of terrible.

She asked bizarre questions, focused on the least important part of our discussions, and assigned us ridiculous homework. And each time we met with her, we had to remind her about our background, our problems and our progress.

[Side note: Please don't misunderstand me. I absolutely believe in counseling and know for a fact that a) it works for lots of people and b) our city has many excellent Christian counselors. In fact, my good friend Amy is one of them. But the counselor we got paired with was not.]

[Side note #2: I do realize that I'm not a counselor, despite my very fancy minor in psychology – and that our counselor may have been asking questions that, while they seemed weird or unrelated to us, were actually pertinent to our problems. But without going into personal details, I promise you that some of the things she said, asked and did (or did not do) were inappropriate and unhelpful.]

So the counselor we saw wasn't great. Coming to that conclusion with my husband, though? *Kind of great.*

See, throughout our relationship what has glued us together is the mindset that we're in this thing together, that we're on the same team. And we'd forgotten that.

Being on the same team means we fight together, not each other.

After years of unmet expectations – both expressed and kept silent, disappointments and even betrayals, we'd worked ourselves into a combative relationship. It was me against him, and neither of us was winning.

But when we took time to reflect on our relationship – the good parts, too, not just the bad ones – we remembered that the times we've felt the closest are when we worked together on a project, when we faced a common “enemy,” when we cheered for the same team.

And nothing changed our attitudes about each other and our relationship faster than realizing THE TEAM WE NEEDED TO CHEER FOR WAS US.

At first simply attending counseling appointments and doing our homework together was enough to nudge us into the mindset of us versus the world (and our problems), instead of me versus him.

Then, as we realized that neither of us liked our specific counselor (but we were determined to stick it out and glean what we could from our sessions), we remembered we were on the same team, facing down a weird therapist and a whole host of marital mountains we needed to climb together.

We started talking more, problem solving and coming up with ways we could fix this mess together. **TOGETHER – that was the key word.** The moment we abandoned our posts in the war between us and starting fighting FOR us instead, life changed. WE changed.

I'm not telling you that everything was roses and sunset walks after that. No, it was certainly a process – one that we're still working through – and a strategy that even

now, we have to remind ourselves to use instead of falling back into old habits and turning on each other at the slightest provocation.

We have to remind ourselves which team we're cheering for.

My daughter likes to cheer for sports teams. Specifically, the ones that her dad loves. So anytime she finds him watching a game, her first question is, "Which team do we like? The red one or the blue one?"

It's the same question we have to ask ourselves now, when we're faced with the inevitable challenges and frustrations that come up in a marriage (even a redeemed, restored-by-the-grace-of-God-and-a-terrible-counselor marriage).

"Which team do we like? Who do we want to win? Me? Or us?"

I'm thankful for that counselor, even though she was far from what we initially hoped for. I'm grateful our sessions with her reminded us that we are in this together – and that we are fighting for this, for us, together.

Now I know, that even if my Prince Charming IS watching the big game on the couch instead of mowing the lawn or planning a date night with me, **he's still rooting for the best team in the most important game of all.**

The Story Doesn't End Here

Want to read more about getting rid
of fairy tale expectations and finding a happier ever after?

Join Mary at givinguponperfect.com.