

## Static Cling and Sky Rockets



The story of how a California girl captivated a nerdy Michigan, extra-virgin engineer and they went off to Africa.

Timeline for these stories is approximately 1980 to 1990. They don't try to tell everything that was going on in our lives, just the romance and life of Cathy McDowall and Randy Creswell. These are memories that stand out to me and that offer perspectives on Cathy that might not be deduced by those who only knew her later.

The stories are told from my (Randy's) point of view as I understand and remember them; I don't claim that everyone would always agree on every memory, including how my wife Cathy would have seen them. These are memories that stand out for me.

I begin with series of prequels to meeting Cathy. They can be skipped, but they also may help to explain the dangling threads within some stories. Suit yourself.

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## A Brief Bio of Cathy BC (Before Creswell)

Cathy's mother was Jean McDowall (born O'Hanlon). She was a short, smart, loud, Irish redhead. Jean was born in San Francisco where she grew up, married and divorced before meeting Leo. At some point, she was listening to the radio, heard "The Lutheran Hour," and became an ardent Lutheran, Sunday School teacher, and general pillar of the church.

Cathy's father was Leo McDowall, born to a large farming family that didn't own land but rented or sharecropped in Missouri and Kansas. He was short and quiet. His big break came with WW2. The poor farm boy enlisted and got the best food and pay for the least work of his life. He became a navigator for the bombers and supply planes that "flew the hump," flying from Burma and India, over the Himalayas into China and back.

After the war, they lived in Washington state where Leo became a watch repairman. They had four children, of which Cathy was the fourth, born in 1959. At some point, Jean's drinking increased such that she became an alcoholic spending a fair bit of her waking hours, including driving time, under the influence until she was 60 and dried out.

When Cathy was 12, the family moved to Lakewood California, a pleasant bedroom suburb of Long Beach. Jean became a librarian, a job with salary and benefits and Leo worked out of the house as a watch repairman still.

Cathy was a quiet student who played field hockey and soccer into high school and loved choir and her art classes. One of her friends was Japanese and Cathy loved visiting them and eating Japanese food.

Cathy went to Long Beach City College, studying art and graphics and sang in the choir. She worked at a print shop and other jobs that were art and graphics adjacent. About age 21 or so, she was able to support herself and moved out of the family home. She was friends with Judy Koulikowski in college which led to a fateful meeting.

## A Brief Bio of Randy BC (Before Cathy)

I was born in 1957 as the fourth son in what would eventually be 6 sons. The one smaller than me in the picture is Terry who would drown at 4 years old.

My mother, Jane Creswell, was born Jane Marie Buffinga. She was frugal, hard working, disciplined, and had no problem keeping her boys in line. Later when we were much older she put those skills to work in inner city classrooms as a teacher's aide, where there was no inner city class of miscreants she could not tame. She graduated 2 years early from high school and won a college scholarship, but her family needed her to work, so she started work at 16 as a telephone operator and in 2 years was the manager of the operators.



My father, Donald Creswell, like my mother, had a father who died when he was young. His grandfather, Judge Harry Lincoln Creswell, helped the family out financially and took Donald to the Upper Peninsula most summers from ages 8 to 16 creating idyllic memories he sought to re-create later.

Don and Jane met at Grand Rapids School of the Bible and Music (sometimes the word matrimony was substituted for Music) where he "picked her up" after another boyfriend dumped her. Don proposed 6 weeks before he graduated and she accepted his proposal. Since he didn't have any money for a ring or anything else, he quit school and got a job in a lumberyard. He was never much for planning. After he lost the job at the lumberyard because he wanted a raise, he became a policeman.

In elementary school, I was a poor student, regularly in danger of "being held back" because I was dumb, so I was. In 4<sup>th</sup> grade my teacher decided I thought differently and was really smart, so I was. School held little interest for me as such, but I loved to read, especially biographies and science. From early childhood, I was committed to becoming a missionary so language and culture and geography were of interest to me. I hung out with Native Americans from ages 5 to 13 and learned Anishnabe, studied German in elementary school, Spanish, French, Russian, Hindi and Arabic through high school.

At age 16, I was living on my own in southern Mexico and came to join up with itinerant hay and cane cutters. They worked brutally hard days for a pittance. I conceived and built a hay bailer from a junk engine and scrap which changed the value of their labor immensely. The thought

Commented [RC1]:

came to my head that if I could do that as an ignorant high school kid, I could probably do some really cool, really life changing things if I was an engineer.

With a target in view, I did pretty well in high school, graduating in 1975. Paying for college was a challenge, but I got a small scholarship and then worked to pay my way, first through Grand Rapids Junior College, and later through University of Michigan Dearborn. At U of M D, I worked every other semester full time to pay for it all and usually part time during the semester. While there, I invented a series of solar water pumps.

About this time, a massive-long term drought was creating large scale famine throughout Sahelian Africa. I thought my water pumps might be a help and delayed graduation a semester to make a visit to Mali. That trip and my observations and conclusions set my trajectory, and the small finances I had left over set me up for my encounter with Long Beach Naval Shipyard [\(Prequel 2\)](#).

## Prequel 1: My Worldview

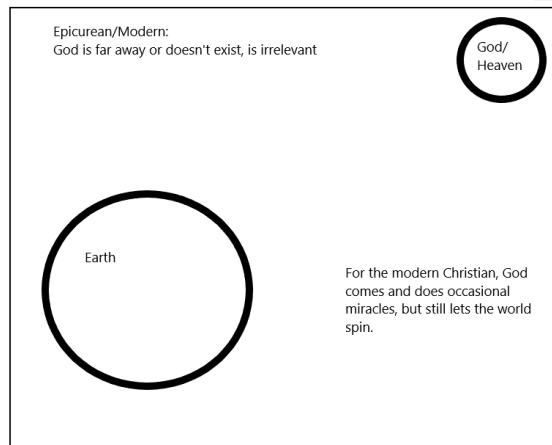
This is my story, at least thus far. It's clear to me that I tell it from my point of view, and with my memories. My story intersects with other peoples' stories but this is not their story. I will tell part of their stories as I see them connect and impact my own, and if they see differently, they can tell it too.

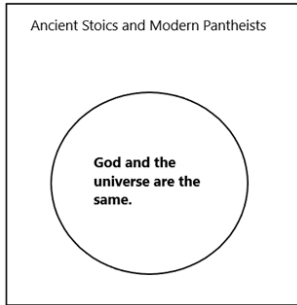
All of us have a worldview, a set of glasses, through which we see the world. Much of our worldviews are unexamined assumptions of which we are completely unaware. Complete immersion in another culture can be quite traumatic but it is as we see what through our eyes is bizarre and incomprehensible in that other culture, and then find the assumptions that make that culture internally consistent, that we find our own cultural assumptions by contrast.

Many of the Westerners I have grown up around, as well as myself, are products of the Enlightenment, whether they realize it or not. They have a modern form of the ancient Epicureans. Very broadly speaking, for Epicureanism, if there are gods, they're a long way away and they don't bother about our world, they don't intervene in our world. Our world just does its own thing under its own steam. In the modern update, Enlightenment popular culture seized on scientific discoveries about how the Earth works to show that, clearly, nothing can be the

result of divine intervention. In other words, you start with a wrong idea of how heaven and earth might work (namely, that God reaches in, does things, then goes away again), and demonstrate that we can't see that process empirically, therefore God can't be involved at all. If you begin with a false picture, then disprove that image, it's all too easy to imagine you've disproved the real one.

I would contend that even when we can give a complete scientific explanation of something by identifying natural causes and natural laws, that God is still every bit involved and active. The categories of "natural" and "supernatural" that we have today are not a reflection of a Biblical worldview.

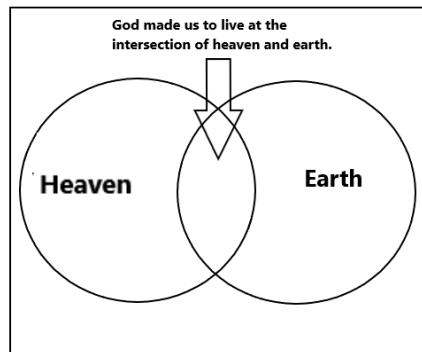




Many of the remainder are post-modern pantheists. They have revived and updated Stoic philosophy. For stoics, the world, including the divine, is all part of one single continuum, so that the gods or God are part of the world and the world is part of God.

Clearly, these are simplifications, but to understand my story, or at least how I understand my story, you need to understand this piece of my world view.

To understand my worldview, start at the beginning. My Bible makes it clear that God created the Heavens (His place) and the earth (our place). On this earth, he placed humans (that's what Adam means) to be His image- that which represents Him. This is elsewhere described as a royal priesthood. We are to manage this place on His behalf and in relationship with Him. He placed us in a garden to work it, guard it, and tend it, and to walk with him in the cool of the evening.

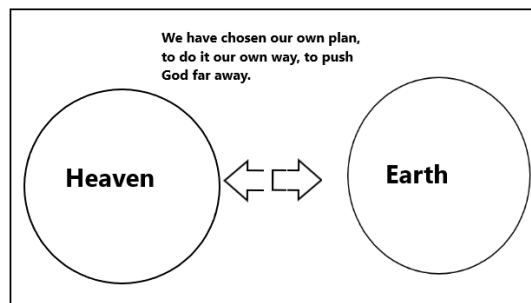


Rather than being mutually inaccessible, these two spaces are made for one another. They are made to overlap. They are made to interlock. They belong together. God's intention is for humans to stand in the middle, living on both spaces at once, difficult and dangerous as it may be.

Jesus is the ultimate example of one who lived at the intersection of heaven and earth, and He calls us to come see and come stay in that space of intersection, which he most perfectly embodies.

Adam made a choice that we all have repeated, to reject His authority and relationship with Him to go our own way. We have chosen exile and separation.

The story of the Bible is of God granting freedom to the images He created and wooing the willing, back to Himself. It is His plan that the



time will come when there will be unity in the cosmos and mankind will become the royal priesthood we were made to be.

This is the worldview, the glasses if you will, through which I see my life, and all of history. I have set out to live my life at the intersection of heaven and earth.



## Prequel 2: How a Michigan Engineer got to Southern California

How and why, I became an engineer doesn't belong with this collection and neither do most of the events of my undergraduate life at U of M Dearborn. Getting to SoCal however does pass through a summer of 1980 (?) spent in West Africa and coming back to a final semester of my undergrad without much funds to pay for things like eating.

It happens that engineering grads were much in demand and lots of recruiters came to campus. I signed up for an interview with some company everyday but always went for the earliest time slot, usually 6 or 7 am. No recruiter ever showed up at that time, so each day the college people serving the recruiters would find me in class, and connect me to the recruiter who would apologize and take me out for dinner at some fancy place and give me his recruiting spiel. I ate pretty well that semester.

One morning at 6 or 7 am I was startled to find a recruiter in the office. He was surprised to see me and asked what I was doing there. "Waiting for my interviewer to not show up..." His response was a quizzical look so I explained my scam. He told me he had been to 6 universities on his recruiting trip and no one anywhere ever signed up for an interview. He was so forlorn and asked if he could interview me. I asked if he would throw in breakfast but he said he didn't have a budget for that. I listened to his pitch which was about a boring job with low pay with a shipyard in Long Beach California. When he was done, he asked if I would like to come and work there and I sadly popped his bubble.

My early morning no-shows continued through the fall semester and I was surprised to find near the end of it that the Long Beach recruiter returned. He found me in my usual morning spot and asked me how my scam was going. Apparently, he had now visited a dozen universities and in all that time, I was the only one he had interviewed. He asked for a round two interview but I told him it was pointless unless we modified the situation. "How could we do that?"

"The work as you present it, is boring and the pay is not enough for a high-cost area, certainly not for someone to move there. The one thing you've got going is its Southern California...life in the fast lane, swimming pools, movie stars. If instead of hiring just me, you hired me with a bunch of my friends, acquaintances, and best students, we could travel together, live together and do it for a summer and have a job with benefits. It will be a break from grad school, we will return in the fall, and if its good, we'll come back." We negotiated details and made it work. I also became the shipyard's engineering recruiter.

That first summer, I came to Long Beach with 7 friends and over the next couple years, brought out around 20. Each summer we put 4 guys in two apartments at a decent place with a pool and found ways to enjoy Long Beach.

### Prequel 3: Church, Dating, and a Gaggle of Girls

One thing I didn't say in Prequel 2, was that many of those I recruited to Long Beach, were engineering students in a Bible study that I ran on campus. Only two of the first seven had any church background at all and the rest were either new believers through the study or non-Christians with some or no interest in Bible matters.

We arrived in Long Beach on a Wednesday, rented our apartments on Friday and got moved in on Saturday, also testing out the pool. Our first Sunday, four of us went church hunting. We had visited on Wednesday a church I had relatives in but they suggested I wouldn't want to go there (!). They get us the connections for our apartments so they were good for something.

The church we decided to visit was Long Beach Grace Brethren. Upon entering the college student area, we were swept off our feet. They had a Greek name "Zeta Chi", it was fast paced, planned like a TV show, and we were welcomed by a bunch of young ladies. There were maybe 200 students in this Zeta Chi and the three friends I brought were hooked in 15 minutes. We became known as the Michiguys.

That evening we were back at church and the Zeta Chi leadership figured out I was a ringleader of the Michiguys and wanted to know my and our story. By the end of the evening, they were trying to recruit me into being a mechanic-missionary and go to the Philippines to help a new single woman Bible translator named Kathy Rowell with vehicle and lots of other issues. I appreciated their interest but told them I thought God had other things in mind for me.

Our apartments became quite the party place on weekends and even the non-Christians thought it was amazing how we could so quickly have so many new friends in a new place, and sooo many girls. They didn't understand the many layers of church, community, and fellowship.

One of the things Zeta Chi encouraged was lots of dating; guys should be asking out, planning great dates and girls should be saying yes to dates (but not to "other stuff.") We got to know lots of girls in group settings, a few in date settings, but probably our biggest attraction was we could fix cars. Girls with car troubles came to see us. Later we worked on a car for Kathy Rowell and taught her basic maintenance and repair. We got to know lots of girls that way, and often multiple girls would hang out with us during repairs, but as a tactic, it did not seem to be a path that led to romance.

One of my roommates, Chuck Brady, was much better with the ladies than I, but one night I heard him moaning that he was in a dry streak. He had been turned down 7 times for dates with different girls. I couldn't really feel his pain since I had been rejected 15 times in a row and that felt kind of normal to me. We hatched a plan to create the best possible date and hunt for 2 girls we were sure had never been asked out and break our streak. We planned carefully and

scouted thoroughly. At the propitious moment, we asked out these two lucky ladies....and were turned down cold. We went off into a corner and began planning our future life in a monastery. When it seemed it couldn't get worse, the two girls found us, told us they felt pity on us and would be willing to go out with us.

Most of the Michiguys had very happy dating lives in Long Beach and a fair number married California girls. After dating around, I became content with my lot. There were a lot of good women, a fair number respected or liked me in a most general way, but I was not likely to be getting married. I was headed for a rugged life in the African bush, living among some of the poorest people on the planet, and that wasn't alluring to anybody I met.

In that church, and in that Group Zeta Chi and its successor group Main Point, I became the serious guy. I ran Bible studies on Friday nights that usually had 50-100 college and post college people in it and was a "father confessor" sort of guy. I still did a lot of car work, and continued as an engineer at the shipyard.

## Meeting Cathy

One evening I was invited by Myron Plotz and the Koulikowski sisters Cookie and Judy to a prayer meeting. I had known Cookie and Myron for a couple of years. Cookie had been around a lot of car repairs. We were on the fringes of each other's groups, and those two were becoming an item.

I don't know to this day if it was intentional, and I don't know if I would believe their claims on the subject, but what I came to that night wasn't a prayer meeting. It was a party (not too wild!) with maybe 6 eligible ladies there and Myron was the only other male. I rolled with it and soon we were playing Uno. Across the table, I noticed Cathy, because she was short. The seating was changed a time or two and she ended up next to me.

I didn't have a lot of experience with Uno, but I noticed that winning seemed fairly random. I could however lose intentionally and help someone else win. Without any table talk, I did that for Cathy, and later she did that for me. I am not sure I would have even remembered her name the next day if it were not for what happened after the party.

She was driving a green 1975(?) Toyota Corolla and when she went out to start her car, it wouldn't. I came over to help and quickly decided it wasn't the battery, Bendix drive or starter motor. When I sat in her driver's seat, I noticed the gas gauge was way below E. I asked her if she might be out of gas and she sheepishly nodded.

I was driving a brown 1975 Pinto and I kept it fairly well equipped for helping. I got a container and tubing, and with Cathy standing over me and watching, I siphoned a couple of gallons out of my tank and put them in hers. With some grinding of the starter we got her up and running.



She said goodbye and doofus that I was and am, I'm not sure how, but I had her name and number on a piece of paper in my hand. She might have had mine also.

Over the next month, we talked a fair number of times. It certainly didn't seem to me like any kind of romance, more like I was a sounding board and father confessor for what she was going through. She was living on her own, being a college student, working different jobs to support herself.

At one point, she lost all her income and with bills to pay, she got an offer for a job that seemed inappropriate in a way I didn't fully understand. What I did understand was her strong response of rejecting it with no other means of support. She said, and the words are seared in my memory "I have finally decided there is no room in my life for compromise with sin." In a few days she saw God's provision for her and became stably employed making signs for Albertson's.

Her declaration and then her praising God for His provision, put her in a different category. In our next conversation, I invited her to come and drink hot chocolate as we sat on a bench by the beach and watched the sun go down. I had forgotten by then what she looked like, other than being short (I told you I was a dufus), but that night on the bench, she looked ravishing to me.



## Favorite Date

I can't give the timing of this date with absolute certainty, but I am sure that fairly soon after hot chocolate on the (sandy) beach came my favorite date. I am fairly sure I did it multiple times. It was lobster on the (rocky) beach.

Both my Coast Guard time, and my shipyard time had me around the working waterfront fairly often. It was there that I met a lobsterman who took a shine to me and felt a need to make his contribution to my not-romantic-enough life. He provided me with abundant lobster tails on condition that I use them on dates. I saw no reason to refuse his help!

San Pedro California was just a few miles from Long Beach and part of it was very rocky with almost cliffs near the shore. A friend showed me a place where you could park and get down the cliffs on a walkable trail that was probably less than a quarter mile. Once down there, the cliffs cut you off from everything but the sun, wind and ocean. The beaches were rocky and devoid of most humans and it became an ideal date place for me.

I took Cathy there, eager to share with her this spot and lobster. I packed everything needed in a backpack and we hiked down to it. We quickly gathered driftwood for a fire and got it started. The lobster tails were wrapped in aluminum foil with butter and lemon and put in the coals. I then oiled up a wok and cooked up veggies and rice over the fire. We drank sparkling apple or grape juice from goblets while it cooked and then ate from China plates (from Goodwill!) as the sun set.



It was wonderful to have her to myself with no distractions and to get to know this fascinating woman.

## First Kiss

Well, this was new territory for me. If you count the hot chocolate on the bench and the lobster on the beach, I've had 2 dates with the same woman. We also had lots of phone calls even before I asked her out. I was really liking her and she seemed OK with that.

I remember Cathy coming over one day to work on her car. She seemed to really like learning and doing "guy things" like mechanical things on her car. Later I taught her to weld with a small 120v AC buzz box and she got better at it then me.



I found her eagerness, competence and confidence to be quite alluring.

One Saturday after working on her car I remember she went in to my 2<sup>nd</sup> floor apartment to wash up while I put away the tools and cleaned up outside. Done with clean-ups outside, I went to the base of the stairs and saw Cathy coming down....



To my complete surprise, coming down the stairs, she kissed me on the forehead. In shock I said "A little lower please" and she kissed me on the lips. Skyrockets!

Over the next year and some, Cathy introduced me to a new contact sport-kissing. I had no idea what endorphins and oxytocin could be unleashed by lips in contact with skin. We kissed often and long, whenever and wherever we could. I remember one night we were kissing in my Pinto, parked on a quiet street with our windows fogged up. A policeman knocked on our windows...we hadn't noticed the rotating red light... greeted me by name.... and told us we needed to move along.

Our clothes stayed on and hands stayed in public places. To some that may sound constrained and boring, but I can personally assure you I found it exciting and sexy. If that seems hard to believe, review some movies done under the Hayes Code. I think Jimmy Stewart could make very powerful sexy themes without needing to show skin or talk dirty.

Somehow in all this, Cathy figured out that I was not gay



## I Find her A 'peeling

Sequentially, I am not sure exactly where this came in our growing relationship, but I am sure it was quite early in it. It also seems to me a story that in telling, might be easily misunderstood but was important to me and stays in my memory.

Cathy came over to my apartment...that happened much more than the reverse. My apartment was a place a lot of people, including my friends and the homeless came to. As we were hanging out, she was fidgety and uncomfortable which was out of character for her. I asked her about it.

Cathy told me that a few days before, she had gone to the beach with her friends and gotten quite sunburned. It was peeling and itching, driving her crazy because most of it was on her back and out of reach.



After a pause she asked if I would be willing to help her. Well, I was willing but didn't really know what she wanted. She said she would lay down and take off her shirt and would I be willing to take off her peeling skin? With some trepidation, I agreed.



I kneeled over her and as carefully as I could, peeled her back. When she thought they were in the way, she released the bra straps. I worked carefully to make sure that my fingers, eyes and mind didn't go any place they shouldn't.

I don't know if this will make sense to anyone else, but it was really important to me that Cathy would trust me like this and I wouldn't violate that trust for anything. Also, her trust was very alluring to me.

I remember asking her why she didn't ask one of her girlfriends for help and she seemed to think they would be more judgy. I don't understand that at all but I do know that in all the succeeding 40+ years of our relationship, I never saw her in a swimsuit.

## The ordinary becomes thrilling

Over the next year and a half or so, our relationship deepened. We did some things that might conventionally be thought of as dates, but they weren't the usual conventional things. We did some repeats of the lobster on the beach, went for walks, and were always talking and listening to each other. We never did a "movie and dinner" kind of date. That just didn't seem relational and connecting to me nor to Cathy of those days.

Much of what we did was to "do life together" things. We did our grocery shopping together.



When you recognize the small things, even chores feel like a team effort, bringing you closer daily. We worked on cars (ours and others) and welding. We went to church and singing together added to the joy. As that Bible study leader I mentioned in a prequel, I spent a lot of time prepping, and now I spent it prepping with Cathy. Typing was much more fun when she was on my lap and my arms were wrapped around her. Doing life together infused the ordinary with endorphins and oxytocin that made the ordinary thrilling. Folks started seeing us as a case of static cling.

I found that this relationship with Cathy made me more creative and energetic in my work at the shipyard and in my activities at church and in thinking about my African future.

A solid bond isn't the result of luck or finding someone flawless—it's built step by step. The little things matter more than big, flashy gestures. A quick laugh together, a kind word, or simply showing up can mean more than any grand act. Those simple acts build something real over time. Love lasts when care and commitment become a daily choice.

One time I remember us driving in my Pinto and Cathy went quiet. I often felt in synch with her thoughts and asked her what she was thinking. When she said "oh nothing really" I said that I

thought she was thinking about what life would be like if we were married. Since I was thinking about that too, how about if we do it out loud so that we can make wise decisions when the time came. She agreed that she had been thinking along those lines and that we could and should talk about it.

We envisioned our future as something we were building together. We talked openly about our practical goals and the dreams we wanted to achieve.

About 4 months into this relationship, I was ready to tell my family about it. I was living in California, they were in Grand Rapids Michigan, and I was coming home for Thanksgiving. I was wondering how to bring it up when my mother just asked me about it, something subtle like "Are you going to tell us about your girlfriend?" I gladly told her and my father all about her but was curious how they guessed. Afterall, girlfriends had not been much of a part of my life to that point. My mother said I walked differently.

Life and our relationship continued. The elephant in the room was the fact that I intended in the somewhat near future to move to Mali, West Africa and live in the bush as an engineer-missionary-NGO guy. I had been there before and had some idea what I was heading for. I felt like if I asked her to marry me, Cathy would say yes. I felt like she might even mean that with all her heart but have no idea what that might entail. We would live among the poorest people on the planet, in one of the hotter places on the planet, and be closely connected to a radically different African Muslim culture. I could not ask her to marry me under those circumstances.

The plan we evolved was that I would go to Mali ahead of her, with no strings or commitments from her. I even explicitly told her that I would understand if she found someone else in the mean time that I would understand. When the situation was ready, I would ask her to come and she could see the realities for herself and then I could ask her to marry me.

One thing we did in the meantime was take a marriage prep class through our church, Long Beach Grace Brethren. There was a workbook, a counsel couple, and a group of soon to be marrieds. The leader of the class commented that he had been doing this for 15 years and never met a more thoroughly prepared couple.

## The Interregnum

In June of 1984, I left for Mali with 2 friends and co-workers, Cliff Bonzo and Paul Abbot. Later, my father joined us, coming for 4-5 months each year. What happened during the next year plus in Mali is not immediately germane to the story I am telling but as in the prequels, may provide some background.

We established a legal entity known as CEFAIKO (a French acronym) as the Malian side of our American 503(c) organization known as Cornerstone Enterprises. We took up residence in the village of Kouroukoula, in the northwest of Mali, about 30 km east of the city of Kayes.

We each became adopted sons in polygamous Muslim families, learning Khassonke and Soninke languages and culture. As sons in the family, we worked in the fields and ate with the family, and slept in huts they provided (though the goat pen turned out to be cooler and nicer). We established a school, CEFAIKO teaching village appropriate skills (Carpentry, mechanics, health worker, and agricultural services) so that our students could establish their own village-based businesses. We also made literacy in mother tongue and gardening part of the curriculum. Over the next 10 years we taught 250 students, and at last count (2022) 249 were still in business.

It was physically rugged, with malaria and dysentery hitting us often and parasites taking up residence. At one point a gas cylinder exploded on and over me burning a lot of my body. Cathy and I communicated by letter (4-6 weeks one way trip) and I wore out her letters reading and reading them with sweating fingers.

Over time we figured out how to improve our conditions and survive better. I was named Cheickna Sissokho. The Sissokho clan has a totem animal the West African monitor lizard, and also most commonly marries into the Socliba clan. I talked with my African family about Cathy coming, and they worked out where she should stay and that her name would be Hawa Socliba. (Hawa means Eve).

In the fall of 1985 (cool dry season in Mali) things seemed as ready as they were going to be and I asked Cathy to come. When I got her flight information, I left the bush and came by train (which could be pretty rugged) to the capital Bamako. As I moved towards the somewhat civilized world, I began trying to see things through the eyes of this delightful woman who spoke no French and had travelled very little even in the US. I particularly feared for the unspeakable chaos of her initial arrival right at the airport. The overwhelming noise, smell, crowds pushing with packed bodies, rampant thievery, well I had to be there to get her through that. I couldn't have her go through that alone.

On the appointed day, I checked with the airline and got the arrival time. It was Sabeena, at the time, the most reliable service to Mali. I arranged for a taxi to take me there (the airport was 18

miles out of town), I had a place for her in the GMU guesthouse and everything I could think of was taken care of. I relaxed in my own room at the GMU- luxury, it had a bed, clean sheets and a fan.

I was stirred in my reverie by a knock at the door. Sabeena called the GMU and told me that the arrival was hours early and would be landing in a half an hour. My plans falling apart, I ran out of the guesthouse looking for a taxi. There was nothing, not even much car traffic let alone a taxi. I kept running and hoped I could hitchhike. No luck.

Folks of European descent were known as toubabs and they seldom walked anywhere. The sight of a toubab running must have been really bizarre. It was strange enough, that a bus stopped and asked me what was wrong.

There was no regular bus service as you might think of it. This was a bus for the female employees of a government factory. I think it was the matches factory. I briefly told them my soon to be fiancée was arriving at the airport in just a few minutes instead of its usual time and I was trying to get there to help her through the arrival chaos.



The women shouted to the bus driver that this was a romance like a TV show. When he protested, they shouted him down and got him to floor it to the airport. Along the way, they asked me all about Cathy.

At the airport, the bus pulled up at a barricade manned by soldiers who said I couldn't proceed. The women poured out of the bus and shouted down the soldiers, walking over past, over and through the barrier. We came to another and once again the soldiers said we couldn't go further but the women would not be held back. They stayed with me till Cathy was in my arms and shouted at the various officials to not make any problems. They didn't.

## Proposal in Kayes

Cathy survived the airport in Bamako, got her long-term visa, and endured the train trip to Kayes. By this time, we improved our transport somewhat with the purchase of an old Peugeot 404 pickup, AKA the bachet (pron. "Bash-ay"). For a hood ornament a desiccated toad was glued to the hood. My friends met us with the bachet so that we wouldn't have to use any of the worse alternatives.



I was amazed at how quickly she adapted to village life, hanging out with the women, entertaining the children and old men. In the village, she needed to wear dresses or skirts, definitely not her preferred jeans. Village life and culture did not permit us to be the static cling when we were with them, but all the expats for 50

miles around invited us around and then we could speak English and be clingy.

There was a piece of Cathy's past that I urged her to keep hidden, at least for now. Cathy had always been artistic, studying art, graphic design, and adjacent things. Then she paid her way through nursing school as an artist. It was the nurse part we needed her to keep secret. When there are no medical services for many miles around, a medical person can be in constant demand, and Cathy, bless her tender heart, would not know how to set boundaries she could survive.

That worked for a while, but then one day, there was a little boy crying with a skinned knee. She couldn't harden her heart and resist. She cleaned up the wound and bandaged it and immediately gained the title of "Doctor." Everybody had medical issues and all the people and all the issues became Cathy's.



It was a crushing load and it very nearly asked too much of Cathy.



The nearest city to us was Kayes. In the French colonial times, a railroad was built that connected Dakar, Senegal (a big port on the Atlantic) through Kayes, roughly a midway point, to



Bamako on the Niger River which was navigable. The French also built the Hotel du Rail at Kayes. This was the only restaurant in the western sense of the word. To the left you see a sort of cleaned up version of the hotel and restaurant. They have installed new doors and air conditioners that might work. If running water works on the second floor than pipes will burst in other parts of town.

Below you can see the same building on a dusty day... could be anywhere from January

till June, and the wall that tries to hold back the realities of African city life.

The manager at the Hotel was a friend I'd made named Maiga. He was a gentle giant who had befriended me when I was robbed on the train and was always looking out for me. I told him that I was going to propose to Cathy, that I had a ring. Cathy didn't know it but she had transported the ring in her baggage when she came. Maiga did his best to have the restaurant clean and prepared for us on February 14, 1986.

So, on Valentines Day, I took Cathy into town and we ate at the restaurant. The menu was steak, fries, and green beans with soda. After Maiga made



sure that everything was as good as he could make it, he chased everyone out so no one would bother the toubabs. I was a bundle of nerves and at one point blurted out a request "Would you be interested in a name change, to Mrs. Cathy Creswell?" That might not have been an Instagram worthy proposal, but its what I could manage, and she agreed and put on my ring.





With that settled for life, I excused myself, and went out and barfed in the bushes. I just made a lifelong commitment connecting everything I am and have unreservedly to another person. I don't know that anyone else may understand, but that was my "for better or worse" commitment made in the bushes. I meant it then and every day since.

We made plans to split up again. Cathy went back to California to plan a wedding. I stayed to build us a house outside the village of Kouroukoulou by our school grounds that was becoming known as Kouroukoulundi (Little Kouroukoulou). Our house had a little water tower for a gravity fed shower and sink, a small stovetop and oven that ran off bottled gas, and solar panels that provided electricity for lights, radio, and a fan. All the luxuries you can imagine. I also designed a different sort of bed, to try to have some of the "give" like a mattress, but not all the heat trapping insulation of a mattress. It was sort of like a sleeping trampoline.

I won't spend much time describing the wedding. There are books of pictures from it. Cathy planned it well and paid for the parts that weren't donated. Many people contributed to the wedding. Friends from church, our families, co-workers from the shipyard all came. My father sang at the wedding the old Irish song "Be thou my vision." I was there, the pictures prove it, but I was in kind of a zombie state. I am sure the only thing I did well was kiss the bride which was something I really like doing, and I had a vague idea that I would get to do more, a lot more, soon.

Our honeymoon took place in two parts, the first few days in American hotels and then a flight to England where we spent 6 weeks. We had British friends that arranged it because they knew on the one hand, we were both Anglophiles, and on the other, they were afraid my ideas of a honeymoon would involve a mud hut. We were given a nice place to stay in Birmingham, a car was made available, and whole milk in glass bottles was delivered to our door each day.

The milk was not homogenized, so cream rose to the top. On my honeymoon I learned something that has been true for most of our married life. We were not on the same sleep schedule. Cathy thought that wherever possible, mornings were for sleeping. You don't have to be on the same sleep schedule as your partner, but finding a rhythm that works for both of you matters. The key is respecting each other's habits—it's a simple way to show you care. The immediate lesson was that "The early bird gets the worm" does not apply to cream.

While we were there in England, we bought an army surplus Land Rover (heavy duty shocks made for parachute drops) and a surplus trailer. We filled the trailer with spare tires and fuel cans, and some bits of furniture for our house in Mali. The back of the Land Rover we filled just enough to level it out and put a mattress on. The plan was to cross over into France, drive through France and Spain, cross at Gibraltar, and cross the edge Sahara near the coast into Mali.

Crossing Europe seemed like an extension of our honeymoon and I still associate different cities with honeymoon memories that are well worth remembering (Paris!) but not the sort of things I will tell the rest of the world. But Barcelona! That night curled toes and steamed the wallpaper!

## Of Love and Barf

This is a love story, maybe even a romance. I will take a break from the story line, to write a brief essay about love, and the way I think it can and should exist in marriage. I would like to explain, if that's possible, why I barfed after I proposed to Cathy, and why I think that detail is not embarrassing, but is significant.

Love includes "Sky rockets and static cling." I have been dropping comments about this up to now, and there are more to come. This part of love is always for a particular person and their particular features. Sometimes these qualities are easy to describe; sometimes they seem inarticulable. The endorphins and oxytocin are intoxicating and wonderful.

The early days of a relationship are all about the thrill—holding hands, stolen glances, and that can't-stop-smiling kind of excitement (we all do that). But over time, marriage shifts things. The fiery passion doesn't disappear; it just settles into something much deeper. It's the kind of love that feels like home—the kind that doesn't need grand gestures to prove itself.

Real love goes beyond "sky rockets" and includes actions. My least favorite philosopher is Friedrich Nietzsche who makes this point when he claims: 'He who promises to love forever or hate forever or be forever faithful to someone is promising something that is not in his power.' Nietzsche's idea is that while we can predictably hope that our love will last, we cannot promise it because we can promise only voluntary actions, and love is not that. The most we can promise, Nietzsche continues, is that: for as long as I love you, I shall render unto you the actions of love; if I no longer love you, you will continue to receive the same actions from me, if from other motives.

Nietzsche limits love to the skyrockets but makes the actions of love a consequence. I would say that the Biblical view of love includes actions because (I Corinthians 13) ***"4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. 5 It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 7 It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.***

So, love includes neurochemical feelings and concrete actions that define and describe love. Beyond that, love is an absolute, no holds barred, unconditional guarantee, commitment. When I proposed marriage to Cathy, there was an unforeseeable future to which I signed the blank check of everything I am and have, and would be and would have, and gave it to the present and future Cathy. I couldn't foresee depression or heartbreaking times but I committed in advance to all of them (and the good times too).

This was a promise I made to Cathy, to our friends and family in our wedding, and to God. At various times Cathy, or family and/or friends, suggested that a divorce might be the thing but it was never on the table for me.

I felt the weight of that commitment when I proposed; and I barfed. I have not regretted that commitment.

## Crossing the Sahara



**Geography Notes- Our trip from Gibraltar to Bamako was about 4500 miles. 1500 of those miles were roadless sand, and 1500 of it was dirt roads of the “two ruts” variety. The path Google drew here is not exactly the same but as ours, but it is now paved and there are more towns or stopping places shown the existed 40 years ago.**

We entered Africa from Spain, crossing on a ferry at Gibraltar. In Morocco we distributed some items that were needed by friends but not welcomed by the government and continued south. To our dismay, we were not permitted to go further south and enter Mali by way of Mauritania. The Kingdom of Morocco was seeking to annex Spanish Sahara and the Sahraouis were not happy about it.

We were required to retrace our path back north and drive along the Mediterranean coast and then enter Algeria where we hoped on plan B to cross the central Sahara. Morocco and Algeria weren't getting along so the Algerians made us unload everything in the Land Rover and trailer in an unshaded place, open every bag and suitcase for inspections by soldiers at a not busy border. Unfortunately, we were the most exciting thing available so no-one was anxious to get rid of the entertainment. That took nearly 2 exhausting, sunburning days.

We proceeded to Algiers and then south. At the end of the paved road and the beginning of the desert sand, we took a break at the last hotel before we would undertake the Sahara. There was 1500 miles of sandy Sahara ahead but about 1000 miles in there was a place we could rest and get water and fuel. Fuel was cheap in Algeria and I had enough in the diesel containers to make it to Kayes, and water for 2 weeks. We thought we could drive 25 to 40 mph and so get to the 1000-mile mark in 2 ½ to 4 days.



As rested and prepared as we could figure, we set out. In the sand we could often see places where others had been before us. Not continuous tracks, but marks covered and uncovered by blowing sand, and when in doubt, head south. What totally slammed us were places of particularly fine sand, almost dust. We would easily sink in and 4-wheel drive couldn't get us out. I would dig and Cathy would drive and each "stuck" could take 1-3 hours. In our first 24 hours, on our best calculation, we made only 25 miles and were completely exhausted. There was no way we could do 1500 miles like this. If we weren't so exhausted, we would have been ashamed, but we went back to the hotel for a rest and re-think.

On the way back, we didn't get stuck at all. After a day's rest and rehydration, we decided if we were carefully alert, we could avoid the dust spots since they looked slightly different. We needed to be alert with calibrated eyes. We also found the hood of a Deux Cheveaux (an ugly French car) and kept it with us to help get us out when stuck.

Round 2 went much better. We couldn't drive at night because we couldn't distinguish the trouble spots, but by being constantly alert and careful we hardly got stuck and we started averaging 30 to 40 miles an hour. We drove as long as we could and then ate a simple meal, rehydrated and climbed into the Rover to sleep.

Daytime temperatures were ferociously hot, but when the sun went down, it got cold fast. Snuggling up felt good on many levels. The second day we got up hydrated, ate and got going.

We were making good time again, 30-40 mph when at mid-morning we found trouble. Driving on high alert, we saw a dust patch just ahead. I was driving and spun the wheel (no power steering) to avoid it. The Rover tilted sharply and almost went over, but stayed upright. The trailer flipped while staying attached to the Rover. The furniture was shattered, the Jerry cans of fuel and water went flying, and tires went rolling down the dunes.

**We sat in silence for a moment in the Rover, and then Cathy spoke the most loving words I could imagine. She smiled and said "I think I'll get the tires and bring them back." No complaints. No recriminations, no "if only's."**

With the help of a jack, and a sledge I got the trailer untwisted, reloaded, and we



got back on our way. In all those 4500 miles, she never complained. **Every time I remember this, I fall in love all over again.**



It's not a pleasant memory, but I think I would be unfair to Cathy if I didn't mention what happened the next day.

We came upon a surprise habitation of sorts. A borehole had been drilled and perhaps 15 or 20 men, Arabs, Berbers

and Fulani were scattered about the place. They heard the roar of the Land Rover and waved us over. They invited us to have some cool water from their well. I washed my face and hands and was instantly refreshed by the evaporation. As Cathy went to do the same, I asked advice about the desert ahead. I did not see what happened next. A moment later Cathy came to me and told me that while she was getting water, a man fondled her breast.

I made the wrong response when my first words were "Is there any chance there was a misunderstanding?" Cathy was angry now with me and the man and wanted me to be a movie hero and beat up the guy (a Fulani). I saw the crew of men gathering, looking sullen, and thought we should try to leave the place alive. We made it back to the Rover and got out of there.

That evening we made it to the official outpost of the Algerian government where we could spend the night. I told the officer in charge about what happened and he said he knew exactly which man it was. The next day he told me the Fulani was dead and wouldn't bother anybody anymore.

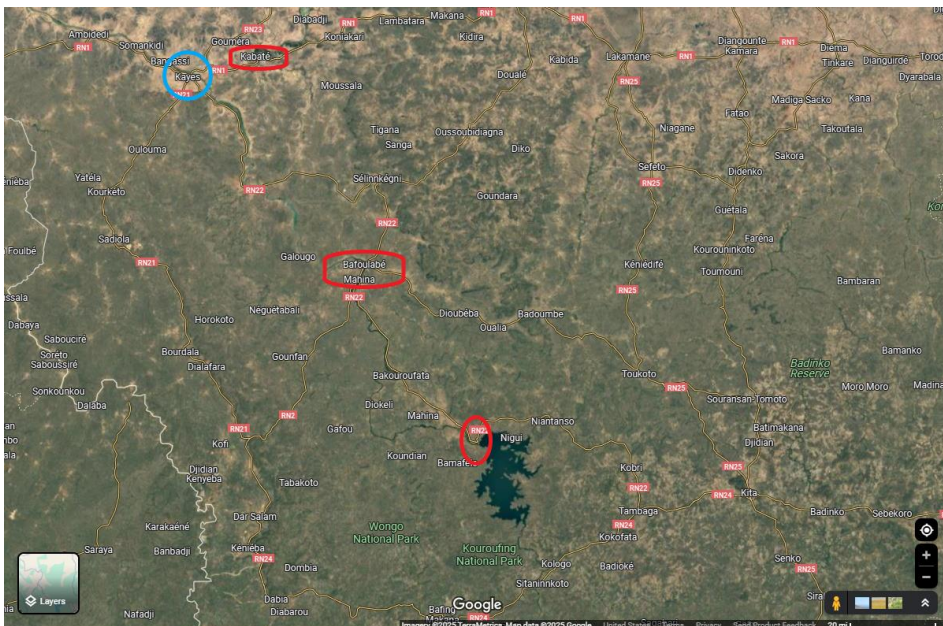
After all the work we put into the trailer and its contents, we lost it somewhere in Northern Mali. We drove hundreds of miles on a bone rattling, Rover rattling hardpan and during a dust storm, the trailer rattled off the hitch without us knowing where or when. We considered looking for it but the ideas of finding it seemed miniscule and worse possibilities abounded. We hope the Tuareg who would find it would find ways to benefit and we proceeded to the comparative green of Timbuctoo and Mali.

## Welcome home

The next few years rolled on in a contented buzz. Like other newlyweds we worked on how we make decisions, sex, money, and work-life balance. We probably didn't get everything (Maybe anything?) right on the first try, but we were making progress and life was good, and marriage was a terrific improvement. Being in a good relationship doesn't mean constantly staying together. Spending time apart can build trust and keep things exciting, even reigniting sparks in a relationship.

There was an American missionary we lightly knew named Mike Mansfield who was living and working near what became the Manantali Dam project (that's the Lake on the map below, made by damming the Bafing River). He went home, experiencing an illness which turned out to be an inoperable lung cancer. After the diagnosis, he wanted to return and pack up sell off, and terminate his ministry in the area. There was no one from his mission, family or friends to help him. Our team discussed this and we decided that Ben Chin and I would go help him.

Our village of Kouroukoula is located in the upper red marked area roughly 120 miles NNW of



his location. There was a dirt road from near our village to Kayes (blue circle) and a train that went from Kayes to Bafoulabe (middle red circle). That was also the only place one could cross the river without swimming. There were no roads worthy of the label in between us.



This is not the story of our adventures getting there or while helping him. While we were there we were in once-a-day radio contact with Cathy and our team in Kouroukoulou. One thing Mike needed to do was get rid of his diesel Massey Ferguson tractor and trailer and agricultural implements. For a modest price we bought them and inherited the adventures of getting them back to Kouroukoulou. That took a week of bush work, during which time we were out of communication.



The diesel engine of the tractor was able to be heard well before our arrival so our students and staff began to gather and shout a welcome. One person ran past them and could be heard above the rest. I threw my hat at her.

The look on her face was fierce and loving in an indescribable way. I stopped the tractor and ran to her. She dragged me into the house where we rapidly showered together. That night the moans and howls weren't all coming from the African bush.

## Qaddafi sends a terrorist for Cathy and I

One of those things that happened in the post marriage years was that Cathy developed a reputation. She delivered a lot of babies, stopped an epidemic or two and began the training of health workers. Later, we used other trainers, but her first student, "George" (yes- that's what he was called!) has bragging rights decades later of being her first student. She had a lot of status and visibility in the eyes of all the Malians around us for fifty miles or more.

At this time, Colonel Qaddafi was a tyrant running the Petro-state of Libya. He took great pleasure in spending his money creating mayhem around the world. The Lockerbie bombing was his shenanigan best known to Americans but he was glad to blow African planes up or fund multiple sides in Sierra Leone's civil war. In 1986 Ronald Reagan, decided he had enough and had US warplanes bomb Libya attempt to hit his palace (among other targets) while he was in it. They didn't get him or permanently constrain him, but they did manage kill a wife and daughter of Qaddafi's. That's certainly a good way to calm a man down.

Qaddafi was in no position to fight a pitched war with the US but he used asymmetrical attacks on targets he considered "soft" or undefended. About 1988, it appears that Cathy and I came up on his radar as suitable. We were a long way from any army or police or even telephone so I think we were considered undefended. We of course knew nothing about that.

We were part of a radio network, operated by MAF in the capital Bamako. They gave a quick call each day to check that folks were OK and more extended messages could be made to them or other parts of the network after roll call. One day they said they had a message for us and to stand by.

When they came back to us, they said they had a message from the US embassy that a Libyan terrorist was on his way to kill us. I had never heard a message like that before and was stunned. My thoughts raced faster than I can explain them to you. My thoughts went along 3 lines:

- I didn't think that the Embassy had a skillset or language set to find out such a thing. They hardly spoke French let alone Arabic or a Malian language. I should ignore this message.
- Maybe somebody dropped that just to see who would run, to get a propaganda or some sort of victory on the cheap.
- What if I didn't know anything and it was true and I ignored it?

I clearly didn't know what to do so I stuck my head out of the "Grand Tibo" (big hut) where we had the radio, and called whatever African friends were handy to come and talk.

Five guys answered my call and within 2 or 3 minutes of the call we had a quick conference. Their thoughts ran parallel to mine. We only concluded that we would be watchful and more

careful with strangers. It was only 5-10 minutes since I got the message. We left the Grand Tibo together and as we walked around it; we were shocked by what we saw:



We never got Arab visitors and there was Cathy, not 10 yards from us, walking with an Arab. He had apparently asked to meet me and Cathy was bringing him to me. She hadn't gotten the message yet!

The 5 guys with me, sprang into action jumping on the Arab and crushing him under their weight. I ran at the same time to get between him and Cathy and get Cathy out of there. When I came back from getting Cathy into the house, house the guys were busy pounding him into the ground.

I got them to stop by bringing up the hospitality code. If he had stayed the night before with a family, then he was under their protection and if we hurt him, it could be a nasty feud. This needed to be adjudicated by the village chief, Sega Sissokho.

As we were bringing him to the chief, the Arab fell a lot, probably assisted on his way down by my friends. He also yelled a lot, that he was a good Muslim and a righteous innocent man who would never do such a thing. He was kind of a stuck record. Along the way we picked up 50 kids attracted by the excitement.



When we got to the chief the Arab continued yelling the same things and the chief worked hard to get him to shut up. Sega asked me to explain what was going on, and so I started from the radio messages and him walking with Hawa (local name for Cathy) down to bringing him to the chief.

Sega realized that the first question was whether this Arab had a “djatigi” in the village; someone who gave him hospitality. The chief sent these kids out to check every compound in the village. In a few minutes the answer came back that he had spent the night as the guest of Djime Daniokho. Djime was a big man, the village hunter, and a friend, so I am glad we didn’t get into a feud with him.

I told the story again from the messages and a second point became relevant. The Arab clearly hadn’t done anything, but did he intend to, or was he an innocent traveler? These folks didn’t have any rules about illegal searches so Djime went and looked at the baggage that was left by the Arab in his compound. In the baggage was found a Kalashnikov semi-automatic rifle, ammunition, and C-4 plastic explosives. These were destroyed. The Arab did not seem like an innocent traveler so Chief Sega Sissokho made his decision.



“By your own words you will be judged. You know that Allah protects innocent people and if you are, then you will be under His protection. You will go straight north, without a water bidon. We will pass word to every village that as long as you head north, no one should harm you. But if you turn aside to any direction, the hand of every man will be against you, and you will have declared that you know you aren’t innocent and that Allah will not protect you.”

The Arab was escorted north maybe a mile from the village and then left.

Djime went hunting that afternoon and we all heard his shotgun, but everyone was surprised that he didn’t bring back any meat. He did not have a reputation for missing or wasting shotgun shells.

## Subsequently

There came a time when Cathy's depression made life in the Malian bush to be untenable. We returned to the US, had three more kids (the first was born in Mali) and a much typically American life.

Time softens some expressions of love while deepening others. The early days of a relationship are all about the thrill—holding hands, stolen glances, and that can't-stop-smiling kind of excitement (we all do that). But over time, marriage shifts things. The fiery passion doesn't disappear; it just settles into something much deeper. It's the kind of love that feels like home—the kind that doesn't need grand gestures to prove itself. Love can refill the gas tank, do the dishes without being asked, fix what's broken, and remember small details. I don't expect that spark to be exactly the same as when we first met, because we're not the same people we were back then.

Much has changed but I am still enamored of Cathy. She has more gray in her hair and more fine lines on her face than when they met, but I think she's stunning. Her body is a map of everywhere she's been, all the children, heartache and victories we've shared.

There's nothing more beautiful than getting old together. We are in it for the long haul. I love every version of her and every version that's still to come.

