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## Enjoying My Two Shrimp An Urban Family Begins

*“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”*

– Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*

When I see our neighbors out walking their large dogs, I wonder how they keep dogs happy with no yard. I feel sorry for pets kept inside an apartment or small urban house with no space to run. I was raised in the country, where it is rare to have a large dog as an indoor house pet; we had plenty of outdoor pets, but no indoor pets. When I expressed my concern for big dogs living in the city—that it is like prison for them—my husband looked at me ruefully. “That’s how most people view raising children in the city,” he said.



I had always wanted to live in a city. My younger sister and I sometimes talked over plans to share an apartment in a big city as two singles. I pictured myself helping underprivileged children—volunteering with an after-school program, teaching children to read, and forming bonds. I would devote my life to mission work in a city while, of course, working my day job.

We started on our dream by beginning a Bible club for the children living in government housing apartments in our closest city. We drove the children out to our Mennonite school building and conscripted our friends as teachers and helpers. Some of the girls at church would slip away when they saw me coming; some said no before I even opened my mouth. I managed to recruit only six people to help me each day: an older woman in her sixties, a few of our teenage friends, and my younger siblings. We were in charge of fifty to sixty children. I was sixteen years old, my sister fourteen.

We ran the Bible club for two weeks that first summer. It was possibly a disaster. I had no preparation or training and had no idea what I was doing. The children were loud and did not follow directions, and my voice grew hoarse from trying to be heard in the large school gym. They ran around, and we did not have nearly enough helpers to corral everyone. Each time we sang, I felt like I was singing a solo. The children did not know the songs and could hardly hear me, and the helpers were busy reprimanding children.

We told each child to ask their parents' permission before they got in the vans, but not all did so. One day when we dropped off the children, we were met by the police and an angry mother. How dare I kidnap her little boy and take him off without her permission! The little fellow claimed he had asked his father for permission to go. Since the parents were estranged, his mother had not gotten the message. I had no paperwork to prove anything, no waiver forms or guardian signatures. The police were understanding and let me off with a warning to get my paperwork together. We came the next afternoon armed with permission slips. No child was allowed on the vans unless their paper was signed by their guardian.

I learned by trial and error, and when we ran the club again the following summer, it went much more smoothly. We involved more helpers and organized them into categories: snack people, Bible verse people, craft people, Bible story people, song people. We divided the children into smaller groups and never let them all be together in the large gym.

The first summer, we had set out open boxes of crackers or cookies for snack. Children took fistfuls. When questioned, they always had a plan for their extra snack. "It's for my little brother." "It's for my grandma." "It's for my dad." We began to ration snacks, never letting the children see the containers. One napkin with two cookies per person. No extras ever, for any reason.

We still had behavior issues. One time a few of the boys disappeared when it was time to take them home. We found them in the cornfield next to the school, eating raw corn off the cob. We informed them it was not sweet corn, and they might

get stomachaches. By the time we dropped them off, they were groaning. A couple of us girls walked to their apartments and explained what had happened.

We brought stories into our classroom, but we did not announce them. We were busy with a craft when my twelve-year-old brother came rollerblading into our classroom. He was a heavysset child with big thick glasses, happily awkward. I still remember the gasps and cries as he stumbled and fell, his glasses falling off. My other brother and a friend entered right behind him, pummeled him with their fists, and ran out of the room with his book bag. The children were yelling now, telling us teachers to go grab those bad boys.

You know what happened next. More young people came in and helped my brother up, bandaged him, and carried him out of the room. The children had never heard the story of the Good Samaritan before. It created waves of discussion and questions. What does it mean to help others? Who is my neighbor? They talked about it the rest of the day.

Our Bible club was the start of something big, something that would take off and grow. After I moved away the following year, my mother and a few couples at our Mennonite church took over, running after-school and summer Bible school programs for the same children, getting to know the children and their families. When those children grew up, many became Christians and joined their local churches. They got married. Marriage was rare in their community, but my mother still receives wedding invitations from the young men and women who went through the Bible programs. The blessings have been passed on and handed down.



That was before I met my husband. While I dreamed of the city, Nathan was already living there. His parents had moved into inner-city Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, when they married, and Nathan was born and raised in the city. He has known no other life. For him, cities are the only place he would consider living. He cannot even envision another way of life for himself. He is quite literally allergic to country air, since he gets stuffed up and sneezes incessantly after being around grass, hay, or dust. Cities are both where he is called by the Lord and where he feels comfortable making his home.

We met in a “chance” encounter obviously engineered by God. I was with a Bible school choir on a mini-tour of just a few churches. One of the churches we sang in was Nathan’s parents’ church, on a Friday evening. Nathan was living in Baltimore City, Maryland, but he had come home to visit for Mother’s Day weekend. I wore a scratchy dark green dress with a turtleneck collar that felt like it was choking me. Dark green was required, and it was the only dark green dress I had. Dark green is Nathan’s favorite color, but this would be the only time he saw me wearing that uncomfortable dress.

After the program, a few girls were assigned to sleep at church families’ houses while the rest of us were sent to a large discipleship center with bunk beds. A quiet man from the church drove us there and parked the van, and we all sat there waiting and whispering. Word spread that we were waiting for the man

in charge to show up. A van braked quickly beside us, and the driver jumped out and took control of the situation with energy and vigor, telling all of us where to go. Little did I know this was my future father-in-law.

The next morning we gathered back at the church for brunch. The two girls who had stayed at Nathan's parents' house came to me brimming with excitement—they had met someone just perfect for me! They pointed him out as he entered the sanctuary holding his brunch tray. As I sat eating, other girls came to talk to me about him. Word was circulating fast that we would be a great match, unbeknownst to Nathan, who quietly focused on his third helping of potatoes.

As I went to return my meal tray, the girls' bathroom line blocked my way to the kitchen. As I waited I felt, rather than saw, someone beside me. Nathan. All conversation ceased outside the girls' bathroom. All eyes turned to us.

Nathan had no clue of the attention we were getting. We talked as the rest of the girls emptied out of the line, whispering to each other as they left for the bus. We talked until finally the last girl came running back inside. "I'm sorry, Faith, but the bus is ready to leave." Her eyes apologized for ruining my great opportunity. I ran for the bathroom to brush my teeth. She followed me in.

"Do you like him?"

"Well, of course," I said. "But I can't ask for his phone number, so it won't go anywhere."

When I came out of the bathroom, Nathan handed me his card with his name, phone number, and email address. My stomach flipped. Wow. This was really happening. Would this be a something? Would he be a someone?



“Is this okay?” he asked. “I would like to stay in contact.”

Okay? Sure thing. With the entire busload of forty people waiting on me, I bent to write my name and email address on the back of one of his cards. My fingers shook, but I tried to smile and act calm, as if I gave out my contact information to boys every day.

We emailed back and forth the whole summer. Our emails became longer, more frequent. They became daily occurrences, something I looked forward to when I woke in the morning. We shared our testimonies and our dreams. He wanted to always live in a city. That was just fine with me.

Although Nathan was living in Baltimore City, we often met at his parents' house in Harrisburg on weekends so we could be chaperoned there and go to his home church. He borrowed his parents' car to take me on dates, since he had no vehicle of his own. Living in the city, he didn't need one. He was an expert on the Baltimore City bus lines. He brought me flowers; red roses were my favorite. The entire time we dated, I was teaching full-time. One of our dates began with him helping me grade my students' papers. Sometimes that year seemed to go so fast I could hardly catch my breath and enjoy it, but we had beautiful times together we will always treasure.

After we got engaged, I joined his church and began planning to move to the city myself. I still looked at the city through rose-colored glasses, excited by the opportunity to live there. We were married one year from the day we met.

It has taken me some time to acclimate to cities. I was raised in midwestern Ohio on five acres of land surrounded by fields of corn and soybeans. On our large U-shaped driveway,

I rode scooter with a bag slung over my neck, pretending to be a newspaper delivery girl. My sister and I played house in the barn loft for hours. We had a huge weed garden behind the shed with flattened walkways and “houses” to play in. We collected nuts and berries for our playhouse kitchen, cooking over pretend fires. To relax and get away from the noise of the house, we climbed to an old treehouse in the maple at the end of the driveway—really just a flat platform, but special because my brother had built it.

After Nathan and I got married, I moved into his cute renovated row house in a transitional neighborhood in Baltimore City. According to local Baltimoreans, the neighborhood was on the wrong side of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. There are different types of neighborhoods in Baltimore City, just as there are in all cities. Upper-class neighborhoods are called *gentrified*. They have predictably low crime rates, higher education levels, and cared-for houses. Gentrified neighborhoods are stable and have been for twenty years or more. Then there are transitional neighborhoods, moving slowly toward gentrification, improving over time. Vacant properties in transitional neighborhoods are bought up, causing rapid change as more retail stores and restaurants move in, safety increases, and property values double over a ten-year period.

I doubt Nathan’s neighborhood could even be properly called *transitional*. Maybe *pre-transitional*? It was scary for me to see drug activity right at our front door. People lounged there all hours of the day or night, staring at me as I went in and out. Rats ran boldly through the streets and alleyways, too commonplace to bring a scream to anyone’s lips. The smells were strange and

terrible, a combination of urine, rotting garbage, and drugs. We didn't go to sleep until after midnight because the street was too noisy to bother trying before then. We had to sleep with the windows open since there was no air-conditioning. Nathan's only yard work was to occasionally trim the weeds in the city's vacant lot next door and to smash glass outside to keep the rats away, since he had heard that rats don't like broken glass. I never spoke more than two words to any neighbors there. I was terrified of the neighborhood, almost in a state of shock.

Nathan took me to Hollins Market, near his house. It smelled like fish—not a nice fish smell, a rotten, decaying fish smell. Sticky floors, crowds of pushing people, sweat sticking my clothes to my skin. Big fans blew the hot, revolting air over everyone and everything.

We went to Lexington Market, which was ten times worse. My shoes made a *shwick, shwick* sound on the sticky, filthy concrete floor. Thefts took place around me, loud voices, back slaps. Elbows poked me. Hot breath wafted down my neck as I waited in line. Why were they standing so close to me? I ordered the Chinese shrimp fried rice. There were two shrimp in my whole meal. The lady in front of me yelled at the worker, "More shrimp! More, put more shrimp in. Another!" I was too scared to ask for more, so I got the token two. But the rice was filling, and the two shrimp tasted good. I savored each one.

At the end of the summer, we sold the house and headed south to Knoxville, Tennessee, in a rental truck, with my husband singing Southern songs the whole drive down. He had gotten a full-time job teaching at the University of Tennessee. We were excited. A Southern city is quite a different style than