

Meeting My Wife

by

Paul Marks

“Will you let me kiss you?”

She smiled shyly back at me and shrugged her shoulders. “I guess so.”

I gave a teasing smile, “You guess so? That doesn’t really build my confidence.”

She smiled wider. “Yes.” There was a bit of breathlessness in her voice. “You can kiss me.”

I know that there are moments of importance in my life, moments where my destiny takes a twist that I otherwise would not expect. I did not know then, as I kissed Janelle for the first time, that I was living in one of them.

When Janelle and I first met, neither of us realized that we had just met the love of our lives. Far from it, in fact. I believed that Janelle was some sort of neo-hippy due to her appearance and the way she seemed to be continually annoyed by my attempts at humor. Janelle, in turn, believed that I was ...well...the annoying, egotistical ass that I am.

Destiny had to step in to bring us together.

Destiny already had its hands full getting us in proximity to each other. I had spent my entire life (aside from vacations) in Jackson, Michigan. Meanwhile, Janelle had moved around the country, finally going to high school in New Mexico. And yet we both met in Alaska. That, however, would turn out to be the easiest part of destiny’s plan.

While part of the reason that I went to Alaska was to get away from all of my friends and have a chance to reinvent myself, I quickly learned that a major effect of this choice was that I had no friends to look to for support. Instead of allowing myself to suffer in isolation, I immediately went around my dormitory and introduced myself to as many people as I could. This resulted in a circle of friends, people who at least made an effort to share meals with each other. The cafeteria rested a distance downhill of our dorm, and it was comforting to take that walk with group of people and have enjoyable conversations during meals.

“Who did you bring with you, Rob?” Rob was probably my closest friend in Alaska. As I would become more isolated from everyone, Rob was the one who made the largest effort to stay in contact with me. Shorter than the average man and wearing an ever-present baseball cap to cover his long, thin blond hair, Rob was probably the most out-going of us. At the time, I only knew him as someone Chris knew, who I met because he knew Jason, who was Wes’s roommate, who was the first person I met in my dorm.

Rob had joined our table that afternoon with a woman we didn’t recognize. “This is my lab partner, Janelle. Janelle, everyone. Everyone, Janelle.” Janelle’s large, circular glasses made me think of a librarian. Her t-shirt with a sunflower on it, long straight hair, and lack of makeup made me think she was a hippy. Her natural shyness made me think she was stuck up. In short, I quickly dismissed her as not being dating material.

“I saw her sitting by herself and asked if she wanted to eat with someone,” Rob explained. Rob, who subscribed to his own version of chivalry, would never leave a woman in distress.

Everyone politely greeted her as she took a seat at the long cafeteria table. We were not unaccustomed to women joining our group for meals as Shawna and Mary, whom I had met at our dormitory's "get to know people" party, would often sit with us. When it was obvious that Janelle would not be forthcoming as a starter or sustainer of conversation, our talk turned to the normal topics. She seemed content to just sit and listen.

Honestly, I gave very little thought to Janelle joining our table that week. I was preoccupied with the upcoming Starvation Gulch. Since the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF) has no football team, it uses the Starvation Gulch ceremony in the place of a Homecoming. A tradition from the time of the miners, Starvation Gulch represented the last big party before the passes closed. While most activities were similar to find during any Homecoming week, the big event was the bonfire competition.

The moment I set foot on the UAF campus, I had decided to take a role in school government. My determination to meet as many people as possible had made me a (very) minor celebrity in our dorm. Most people knew my name. I decided that I would build on that by taking part in building the bonfire for our dorm (a competition we would win), running some of the smaller Starvation Gulch activities in our dorm, and getting my floor's resident assistant (Rhett) elected as king – without him knowing. Considering the classes I was taking, it was a busy week.

While I normally spent my evenings with my friends, all of my normal spare time was swallowed in preparations for the weekend. Thus, I only saw my friends during meals. Because of this, I was only peripherally aware of some of the drama going on with my friends that week.

Rob's invitation of Janelle to our group was causing a bit of a stir. Instead of just eating with us on occasion, Janelle was joining the group for every meal. Yet she hardly said anything; she just sat there listening. Some of the other guys believed that she was only staying around because she had a crush on one of them, and that she was planning to ask one of them out to the Starvation Gulch dance. Being as busy as I was, I was not privy to their growing paranoia. The only time I saw my friends was when Janelle was also present, and they were obviously reluctant to discuss the topic then.

Janelle's motivations for staying with us were quite different from anything Rob or the others believed. She had been abandoned.

Janelle's roommate, Carrie, was involved with a student on collegiate exchange from Florida State University. His name was Desmond and he would later become my roommate, and even later, my best man. Desmond's first month at UAF ended with a terrible sore throat. The condition made him drink less and less until he was hospitalized for dehydration. There in the hospital, Desmond had his tonsils removed. That in itself should have not been a big deal, but the antibiotics given to him allowed a yeast infection to grow at the site of the surgery. He had to return to the hospital only a day after being released from it. Carrie, meanwhile, spent all of her time at Desmond's side, and Janelle was left to eat alone. Thus, when Rob invited her over, she gladly took the opportunity to be with people.

Both Janelle and I, then, were surprised to find each other alone at dinner on the day of the Starvation Gulch dance. The bonfires were going to be built the next morning and lit the following night, and I had been running around all day getting things set up. I was shocked to

notice that Janelle was eating alone at our normal table. I didn't really know her, but I supposed that everyone else was running late and I hate eating alone, so I joined her.

"Hi, there."

"Hi."

"Do you mind if I join you?"

I had teased Janelle, and every other breathing creature I've come across, from time to time, but she decided to nod anyway.

I looked around. "Where is everyone?"

She shrugged, "I don't know."

"You haven't seen them?"

"No," she shook her head.

"Huh."

We ate our meals in silence for a little while before the lack of conversation got to me. With no common ground to work from, I tried to draw her in with discussion of her food and eating habits.

"Do you always do that?"

"Do what?"

"Organize your tray that way?" I indicated the way that she had arranged her plates, glasses, and silverware. "You have more than one kind of drink, but you only drink from the glass on the right, even if you decide to drink something else."

She shrugged, "I guess."

"What would happen if I switched them?" I then proceeded to do so.

She gave me a reproachful look and switched them back, and then took a drink from the glass on the right.

“Do you think that you could drink from the cup on the left?”

“I don’t want milk right now.”

“So drink the juice,” saying that, I switched the glasses again.

She gave me a glare and then pretended to ignore me, focusing on her food. I waited patiently for her to take a drink. Without thinking, she switched the glasses before picking up the glass to drink the juice. I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Are you laughing at me?”

I nodded, chuckling. “You couldn’t do it. You had to switch glasses before drinking.” I then switched them back again.

“Stop it.” She switched them back.

Never knowing when I’m taking things too far, I waited until she started eating again and then switched them back. She glared at me.

“Don’t you have something else to do?”

I shrugged. “Not until the dance tonight.” Out of simple curiosity I asked, “Are you going?”

Janelle shook her head. “I don’t think so.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t really know anyone who’s going.”

“You know me.”

The look she gave me told me that she considered that a strike against going rather than an incentive to go.

“Hey, I’m not all that bad. Besides, everyone else should be there too.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Don’t think, just come.”

She smiled. “OK. Just leave my food alone.”

“Deal.”

While I suppose that conversation would technically count as the first time I would ask her out, my thoughts on the dance were on a very different track. There was an exchange student from the Philippines whom I had taken an attraction to. I hardly knew her, having only met through the “get to know people” party over a month ago, but I was hoping that would change at the dance. I allowed Janelle to finish her meal without further torment and offered to walk her back to the dorms. She accepted and during the walk I made certain she was going to hold to coming to the dance.

While Janelle’s dormitory was part of the same three building complex that mine was, she did not have access to the building that my friends and I shared. I left her at the entrance to her building and went to my own. I was only on the fourth floor, so I tended to take the stairs rather than the elevator. Reaching my room, I noticed that Wes’s door was open. I walked over and was surprised to see almost all of my friends sitting on the beds.

“Where were all of you? Why weren’t you at dinner?”

Jason looked at me earnestly, “Was Janelle there?”

I was immediately confused and suspicious. “Yeah.... Why?”

“He thinks that Janelle is hot for him,” Wes snorted.

“Why do you think that?”

Rob chimed in, “She’s been hanging around us constantly. She has to like one of us.”

“Weren’t you the one who invited her to eat with us?”

Rob looked a little guilty. “Well, once. But now she eats with us all the time. She doesn’t leave us alone.”

“So you think that she’s going to do what exactly?”

“I think she wants to ask me out,” Jason replied. “That’s why I didn’t go to dinner.”

“Really?” I was tremendously amused. “Are you playing hard to get?”

A couple of them snickered at this, but Jason remained adamant. “I’m telling you, she wanted to ask one of us to the dance.”

I laughed outright. “Oh, it sucks to be you, then. I just talked her into coming.”

I laughed even harder when I saw their faces pale.

“You’re kidding, right? Tell me you’re kidding.”

I had to dry my eyes a bit. I could understand why they might doubt me. “No kidding. No one else was at dinner, so she and I talked and I convinced her to go to the dance.”

Jason indicated that he threw in the towel. “I’m not going now.”

“Oh, come on. She didn’t even ask about anyone. I really don’t think she was planning on going to the dance until I asked her.”

“I can’t risk it. She still might ask me to dance.”

And so it was that only Dan and I attended the dance that evening. Dan, being a part of the exchange program and thus knowing Desmond, had met Janelle before Rob brought her to

our table and didn't feel threatened by her. Shawna, Mary, and a few other girls with whom I had a passing acquaintance were there. Janelle showed up and I felt a stab of pity knowing that there were men cowering in their dorms at the thought of dancing with her.

She had dressed up for the event. A tight, black denim skirt and a black top made up her ensemble. Her hair was pulled back, showing her normally covered ears in a fashion that she still doesn't understand how much I like. She had on makeup, but it looked like she had been uncomfortable applying it. Overall, while I was not overtly, physically attracted to her appearance, I was struck by her determination to make a good impression considering her obvious discomfort at being there.

“Where are all of the guys?”

While I would later tell her the entire humorous story, I was too concerned at the time that I would damage what I now recognized was a rather fragile self-confidence. “It turns out that most of them are afraid of dancing.”

The woman I was waiting for never showed. I figured that she was probably hiding from me the same way Jason and some of the other guys were hiding from Janelle. In truth, I would find that the dance tended to attract more freshmen than anyone else. Older students would find other ways to party.

Due to the lack of guys, I found myself dancing with several women, but I ended up dancing with Janelle the most frequently. I have to give recognition to anyone who is willing to still slow dance with me after seeing me dance to the faster songs. I say “dance” when I actually mean rhythmically flail. Still, Janelle was willing to join me on the floor no matter how badly I danced to the song before.

Two other men pulled Janelle away from the wall over the course of the dance. In the mother of all coincidences that still makes me wonder if my life is a *Truman Show* type of program, one of the men was Chuck, one of the two men from Fairbanks who worked with me in *Chicken* the following summer. Honestly, the producers of the movie about my life had run out of actors and had to double-dip that year. Both men would ask her out the next week, and thus Chuck would be one of the first men that Janelle would have to turn down.

As the night wore on, our bodies got closer and closer as we danced, and we began to talk more. We stayed until the last song, and I invited her over to my building to hang out with the gang. Either my friends had been somehow forewarned that she was coming up, or they decided to turn in early. Instead of spending time with a group, Janelle and I spent it with each other. After getting to know more about her, I would ask her to kiss me and she would say yes. Destiny had won.

Only later, as Janelle opened up more around everyone else, would the guys discover exactly what they missed. Only later would they realize just how lucky I was ... and am.