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*Why am I discouraged?*

*Why so sad?*

*I will put my hope in God!*

*I will praise Him again—my Savior and my God!*

PSALM 43:5

Something was up.

Evelyn knew it from the moment Herb Evans knocked on the door to pick her up for their date. He usually rang the doorbell, but this time, he announced his presence with a snappy rhythm.

Herb was nice . . . but snappy?

She opened the door and found him grinning at her, holding a bouquet of yellow mums. "Hi-ya, Evelyn."

She drew in a breath. "Hi, Herb."

He shoved the flowers toward her. "These are for you."

"What's the occasion?"

"Oh, nothing."

Just the way he said it told her it was something. And her first inclination was to push the mums back into his arms, keep pushing *him* out the door, shut it, and flip the lock.

How odd.

Herb bounced twice on his toes. "Ready to go?"

*I have a headache, a backache. I have to clean the oven. . . .*

For the first time, Herb's face clouded. "Evelyn? Is something wrong?"

Evelyn was saved from having to answer by the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs. "Hi, Herb. Where you two heading?"

"Hi, Piper." He put a hand on Evelyn's shoulder. "It's a surprise."

She was doomed.

Piper gave her a questioning look, letting Evelyn know she wasn't hiding a thing. If only she didn't have such a transparent face.

"Can I steal her away from you a moment, Herb?" Piper slipped a hand through Evelyn's arm.

"Sure . . . I guess."

"Have a seat in the parlor. I'll get her back to you in just a minute." Piper led her away. Evelyn had rarely felt such relief and would have been content if the minute would be extended tenfold. Or a hundred.

They entered the kitchen. Piper made sure the door was shut before she spoke. "Okay. Spill it. Why the look of total panic?"

It would sound dumb because it was. It didn't make any sense at all.

"Evelyn . . . you're acting like you don't want to go out with him. You've been dating Herb for nearly eight months."

"Has it been that long?"

Piper let out a sigh. "Evelyn . . . what's happening?"

She moved to a chair and sat. Piper joined her. "He brought me flowers."

"How dare he."

"He's smiling."

"A sure sign of a scheming man."

Evelyn's left hand found her right. "He's not a scheming man. He's a nice man."

"I figured as much, or else you wouldn't have dated him so long."

"He's . . . he's serious about me."

"Of course he is. You're both in your late fifties, Evelyn. People your age generally don't date around. They're done playing the games of youth."

Evelyn felt herself being studied. She didn't like it.

"Have you been toying with his affection?"

"No!"

Piper's right eyebrow raised.

"I didn't mean to."

Piper sat back, looking at the kitchen door. "Do you think he's going to propose? Is that what you're afraid of?"

That was it. "I don't know, but when he showed up today, my entire body started vibrating—and it wasn't from anticipation."

She leaned toward Piper, whispering. "I wanted to run."

Piper shook her head. "Oh, Evelyn . . ."

"I know. What should I do? I don't want to hurt him."

"I'm afraid there's no way not to."

"Oh dear."

"Surely this isn't a total surprise. Surely the idea of marriage crossed your mind at some point these last eight months."

Evelyn rubbed the space between her eyes, wishing all her thoughts and feelings would become clear. "I suppose it did. But I never let it get past the idea stage."

"Do you love him?"

She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it. "I like him a lot. I like being with him. I like . . . I like having a man tell me I'm pretty. Aaron never did that."

"Herb fills a need."

It sounded so callous. "Well, sure. I guess. But I think I fill a need in him too."

"Obviously. But now he wants more."

So simply said. "He wants more."

They shared a moment of silence. "He's waiting."

"I know."

"What are you going to do?"

Evelyn sat up straight. "Maybe he won't ask. Maybe I've read the situation wrong."

"But maybe you haven't."

She had a thought that contradicted the rest, and yet was very strong. "Maybe I shouldn't fight it."

"What are you saying?"

What was she saying? "What would be wrong with me marrying Herb?"

Piper's hands filled the space between them, fending off the idea. "What just happened here? One minute you're scared he will propose and now you're thinking about saying yes?"

"It might be nice to be married again."

Piper sprang from her chair and began to pace. "If you love someone, Evelyn. *If you love him.*"

Love. What was love? "But like you said, Herb and I are in our late fifties. Maybe the type of love we're supposed to experience in order to be married has changed. Maybe there isn't supposed to be . . . passion."

Piper stopped pacing and gawked at her. "Don't you dare say that."

"Companionship is good. It's nice."

"Enough with the 'nice.' If you want nice, be his friend. You're thinking of this all wrong, Evelyn. You don't marry someone as an antidote to eating alone."

"But maybe you do."

Piper shoved her hands on her hips. "Fine. Go marry him. Go settle."

*Settle.* It was an awful word.

The kitchen door swung open a few inches. It was Herb. "Evelyn? Is everything all right?"

Piper also waited for her answer. Two against one.

Evelyn stood. "Everything's fine, Herb. Let's go."

"Good," he said. "'Cause I have a real nice evening planned."

Evelyn felt Piper's eyes on her back even after the kitchen door swung shut.



Piper poured herself a glass of milk, cut herself a brownie—a monster brownie—and sat at the kitchen table. Comfort food was essential to a good pity party.

It's not that she begrudged Evelyn her dates with Herb. She was sincerely thrilled for them.

*But what about me?*

Ah. That was the bottom line. Herb and Evelyn had been dating eight months, the same amount of time that had elapsed since she'd broken off with Dr. Gregory Baladino. Piper lost a man and Evelyn gained one. Not fair. Not fair at all.

Especially since she'd given up Gregory for God. Not that she'd given up all men for the Almighty, but she'd broken off with Gregory because God was very specific in His instruction not to be "unequally yoked." It was like connecting two different animals to a common yoke. They wouldn't pull the same, or with the same strength and purpose.

So it was with people. A believer in Jesus like herself was not to become romantically involved with someone who didn't believe, because without that common bond, they wouldn't pull the same, with the same strength and purpose. Marriage was about complementing each other, sharing everything. But it wasn't enough to like the same movies and food, want the same number of children, or want to be with each other every moment of the day. It was important to share the spiritual side too, because in the end, in the dark times and the bright, faith would be needed to see them through.

Breaking up with Gregory had been the hardest decision Piper had ever made. And Gregory, who'd grown up not believing much of anything in a house divided between Catholic and Jewish, had actually praised her for standing up for her beliefs, for obeying her God's instructions.

Then why did she feel so empty?

Piper took a bite of brownie and heard the front door open.

"Yoo-hoo? It's me."

Me was Mae. Mae Ames from across the street.

"Back here," Piper said.

Mae appeared holding the handle of a measuring cup with both hands. "I've been sent for macaroni."

"By whom?"

Mae swept one hand through the air, rolled her eyes, and took a seat, seemingly in a single motion. "My dear Collie has decided he wants homemade mac 'n cheese. Can you imagine?"

"What's wrong with the boxed kind?"

"Exactly. And since my kids and I OD'd on the cheapy food after Danny left us, I vowed I'd never eat the stuff again." She placed both hands flat on the table as if bracing herself. "Get this: he even has a recipe for it."

Piper gasped in mock horror.

"I know, I know. He's over the edge."

Piper laughed. "You're getting quite domestic."

"Shh! Don't tell anyone. It will blow my image." She noticed Piper's brownie. "Ooh. Point me to one of those."

Piper pointed to the pan on the counter.

Mae got one the size of a piece of bread and helped herself to a glass of milk. She took a bite as she returned to her seat. "I saw Evelyn leave with Herb. They're a cute couple."

Piper answered with a sigh.

"Uh-oh. What's wrong?"

"Nothing. They are a cute couple."

"Mixed vibes! Mixed vibes. Fess up."

"I'm not sure if I'm distressed or relieved that you can read so much into my sigh."

"Hey, it's a sister's job to read another sister. Sister sighs are almost as telling as sister moans."

Piper suddenly felt tears threaten.

Mae's hand was on hers in a second. "You thinking about your mom?"

Piper was appalled to realize she wasn't. And her mother's death was certainly something to cry about.

"It's only been three months, Pipe. It takes a long time to deal with the death of a parent. How's your dad doing?"

She was glad to talk about someone else. "He's doing okay. He's getting involved in church again. That helps. I'm having dinner with him Thursday."

"Collie wondered if your dad plays golf."

"Not well."

"Perfect. I'll have Collie give him a call."

"That would be nice."

They ate another bite in silence. Piper felt Mae's eyes on her and wished she could deflect some of the sister radar.

It didn't work.

"Have you seen your handsome doctor lately?"

Bingo. "He's not my handsome doctor."

"Which is the real problem before us this evening, isn't it?"

Piper downed her milk so she'd have a reason to get up from the table, pretending to want more. "The book's closed on Gregory and me. You know that, Mae."

"Zounds, sister. I see pages turning, practically flapping in the wind, trying to get to the next chapter."

Piper leaned against the refrigerator. "You're reading way ahead."

"But if he does get with the program . . ."

Piper had to laugh. "I've never heard that phrase used in conjunction with becoming a Christian."

"An oversight, I'm sure." Mae patted Piper's place at the table. "Sit down and tell Auntie Mae all about it."

Piper returned to her seat. "There's nothing to tell."

"Gracious Gobstoppers, Pipe, you still love him. That's plenty to tell."

"I keep praying God will take the feeling away."

"Why? Love's a good thing."

"Not when it can never be fulfilled."

"Never tell God never. Maybe He's working on Gregory's heart this very minute."

Piper shrugged.

"Arghh! I swear I'm going to the legislature to get shrugs banned." Mae grabbed the measuring cup and headed to the pantry. "You are a most frustrating woman."

"Frustrated."

The phone rang. Mae was closest so she picked it up. It must have been Collier because she said, "My, my, you are hungry, aren't you? Hold your tootsies, Mr. Husband; I'm on my way." She hung up, found the macaroni and poured the cup full. "Don't give up on love, sister. Look at me. It was nearly thirty years between Danny and Collie."

"If you think that's encouraging . . ."

"Ah, but it should be. If God can find a strange bird like me a good man, He most certainly can do the same for a nice girl like you."

"I'm not a girl anymore, Mae. I'm thirty-five."

Mae paused at the door. "Yeah, well . . ."

Exactly. What could she say?

Mae backtracked for her brownie, balancing it on top of the cup of macaroni. "If you feel like some company later on, come on over. Collie's starting a new puzzle." She made a finger circle by

her ear. "It will be another rip-roaring evening at the Ames residence."

When Mae left, as the silence of Peerbaugh Place tucked around her, Piper cut herself another dose of chocolate.



Evelyn was running out of conversation. Keeping a stream of banter going throughout dinner was exhausting, and yet it was the only way she could think of to prevent Herb from popping the question.

She could tell it was getting to him. His brows were in a holding position, nearly touching. Could she blame him? She was annoying even herself. But what choice did she have?

"Heddy is moving out this weekend because she needs a larger place for her sewing. Catherine's Wedding Creations is a huge success, and she and Audra have weddings booked way into July."

"Speaking of weddings . . ."

She sped ahead. "So you see I'm in the looking-for-tenants mode again. Already have one empty as Gail moved out a couple weeks ago, all nicely reconciled with Terry and little Jacob. Sure, we're sorry to see her go, but we're happy for her too. It's always nice to witness happy endings."

"Or live one."

Evelyn felt herself redden. She dabbed her mouth with her napkin even though it had been ages since she'd eaten a bite. Her mind was suddenly blank.

"Well—" Herb put his fork down—"I finally said something that shut you up."

"Herb!"

"I'm sorry, Evelyn. But you've been going on and on all evening making it impos—"

"I was only sharing my day with you, Herb."

"Your day, Piper's day, Audra's day. . . I didn't take you out to dinner to get an update on the world."

She knew an apology would be appropriate. "Not the world. My world. Peerbaugh Place. If you don't like—"

"If I don't like it, what?"

Did she just pick a fight? "Forget it. Let's move on."

"How nice of you to finally give me a turn."

"I was just trying to make conversation."

"Conversation is two people talking, not one person giving a . . . a . . ." His forehead contorted as he searched for the word. She wasn't about to help him. "A monologue. That's it. Monologue."

It was better than *diatribe*.

"I thought you were interested in my life."

"I am. But I'm more interested in our lives. Us. Together. Plural."

Was this how it was going to play out? A proposal in the middle of an argument? This isn't how she wanted it to happen. Yet she didn't want it to happen at all. So maybe the argument was a way out. Maybe it was a blessing in disguise. Maybe it—

Herb was studying her. Did he see her inner battle? Obviously yes, for he suddenly turned around, looking for the waiter. "Check, please!" He turned back, pointing at her leftover pasta. "You want a doggie bag for that?"

"No thanks."

Oh dear. She doubted she'd ever eat again.



A peck on the cheek and away he went. Evelyn stood on the front porch and looked after him until his truck turned the corner. She had the awful feeling her one chance at happiness had just driven away.

She hadn't let him see her in, much less join her for a cup of

decaf as was their habit. When she'd seen the light on in Heddy's room, she'd set her feet on the porch, not wanting to venture farther. She didn't want to face her friends. Face Piper. She didn't want to explain her evening—not that it was easily explained even to herself. Exactly what had happened?

She detoured to the porch swing. A few golden mum heads poked their way from the front border through the railing as if peeking at her. The swing's chain was cold in her hand, but she held on anyway. Any feeling was welcome to break through her numbness, to draw her into reality and away from the nightmare she'd just experienced.

The front door opened. Heddy stuck her head out. "I thought I saw Herb's truck, but then you never came in."

"I wanted to sit awhile."

"Uh-oh." She closed the door and took a seat in the wicker rocker. "Piper told me about Herb's intentions. What happened?"

"I think the question is what didn't happen."

"He didn't propose?"

"I didn't let him."

"Why ever not?"

"Because I'm not sure I want to marry him. So I stopped the question before it had a chance to come out."

"How did you do that?"

"I kept talking, not letting him get a word in. Then I made him angry." Her laugh was bitter. "Yes, indeedy, not only did I succeed in boring the poor man, I picked a fight with him."

Heddy wrapped her sweater tight around her torso.

"I thought you liked Herb."

"I do. That's the point. I like him but I'm not sure I love him."

"Oh." She sat back. "Love is important . . ."

Evelyn was relieved to hear it—especially from Heddy, whose main goal in life was to have a husband and children. "I always thought so."

"But is it always possible?"

Heddy had lost her. "You're saying it's okay to marry without love?"

"Maybe . . . maybe . . . sometimes a person doesn't have a choice."

"Then maybe that person shouldn't be married at all."

Heddy's eyes flashed with panic. "But I want to be married! Is that such a bad thing?"

It was an old discussion that had occupied many a summer evening among Evelyn, Heddy, and Piper. Though Evelyn's thirty-one-year marriage to Aaron had been far from perfect, at least she'd had a husband and a son and a home. Piper and Heddy—both in their mid-thirties—had experienced none of these things.

There was no make-it-all-better answer. God's ways were often unfathomable, yet in hindsight, perfect. For instance, though Aaron's death in a car crash was tragic, it had led to a new, stronger Evelyn opening her home to boarders. Through Peerbaugh Place she had met many wonderful, lifelong sisters she would not have met any other way. But hindsight was the key. Now, coming up on two years after the fact, Evelyn could see the good out of the bad. But that was hard to explain to Heddy or Piper who were planted in the midst of the struggle, their minds ripe with questions.

Heddy stood and moved to the railing, looked out into the yard, and asked the question she'd asked before. "Why does God give marriage to some people who could care less, and withhold it from people like me and Piper who are aching for it?"

"I don't know."

Heddy sighed deeply and turned around to face her. "I'm sorry. I'm a broken record. And this isn't about me; it's about you. Do you think Herb is very hurt?"

"Wouldn't you be? I ruined the evening."

"Do you think he'll ask you out again?"

Evelyn stopped the swing. "I don't know."

"Do you want him to?"

"I don't know that either."

"So what are you going to do?"

She looked out at the black night. Across the street the light in Mae and Collier's bedroom went to black. Mae had found true love in her fifties. Maybe Evelyn . . .

She stood. "I'm going to bed."

"You're avoiding the question."

"As long as possible."

## A Note from the Authors

Dear Readers,

The Peerbaugh saga continues. And the sisterhood expands. We are eager to hear about Sister Circles that have been established all over the country. And if you haven't started one—now's a good time (don't force us to sic Mae on you).

What's a Sister Circle? It's a small gathering of women. It's not intended to add another meeting to your schedule, nor be something that drains you. It's an opportunity, a chance to get together for some bonding. Meeting in a Sister Circle is a time for you and your friends to read a book, share some thoughts, and maybe indulge in comfort food, but most importantly just be together. No formal agenda, no pressures. You don't even have to clean house if you don't want to. Just call up a few friends (or we have invitations you can print up at the Sister Circle Web site at [www.sistercircles.com](http://www.sistercircles.com)), gather together, and share.

The key to a Sister Circle is that it can be whatever you want it to be. Perhaps it will start out as a means to discuss the Sister Circle books (questions are in the back of each book or on the Web site, but it can evolve into whatever binds you together: quilting,

movies, preschoolers, cooking, traveling. . . . The key is to bond, hopefully, for life. “A triple-braided cord is not easily broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12). So braid yourselves together, ladies!

In truth, our dream is Tessa’s dream—that Sister Circles will spread throughout the world and provide women of every nationality a way to gain strength from each other. And who knows where it can lead? The world *can* be changed one woman at a time. A great activity for any Sister Circle would be to find a local charity that provides an opportunity to be personally involved in helping other people.

Until next time . . . there’s one more novel coming out in spring 2005. And with that book, with His blessings, we’ll all find *A Place to Belong*.

*Vonette and Nancy*

P.S. If you’ve had some wonderful Sister Circle experiences, we’d love to hear about them. Post them to the Sister Circle Web site ([www.sistercircles.com](http://www.sistercircles.com)) or write to us in care of Tyndale House Author Relations, P.O. Box 80, Wheaton, IL 60189-0080. Or if you have comments about the books, feel free to e-mail a note to [nancy@nancymoser.com](mailto:nancy@nancymoser.com).

## Discussion Questions

### CHAPTER 1

1. Evelyn rejects Herb's affections when they get serious. Is she doing the right thing? Would staying with Herb be just "settling"?
2. Mae says, "It's a sister's job to read another sister. Sister sighs are almost as telling as sister moans." Do you think women are more adept at reading each other than men are? Name a time when you've read the mood of a friend.

#### *Faith Issue*

Piper gave up Gregory because of God's instructions to not be "unequally yoked" to an unbeliever. What do you think about this instruction—and Piper's sacrifice?

### CHAPTER 2

1. Lucinda Van Horn lives in the past. In some ways we all hold on to some glory day in our past. What are you holding on to?
2. Evelyn believes there are different levels of love for different times of life. How does love change? Or does it?

#### *Faith Issue*

In the movie *Shadowlands* C. S. Lewis says (in regard to grief and love), "The pain then is part of the happiness now. That's the deal." Do you believe this is what God had in mind? Why does love have to hurt?