

Marli and Luke

Marli liked boys. There was no doubt of that, not by anyone who knew her.

It seemed at times that Marli could think of nothing else, and she talked about, emailed about, texted about, and wrote on Facebook about boys and to boys nearly every day.

It happened like this: One day when she was 12, Marli barely noticed boys at all, and then the next day, she thought they were the best, most interesting, most exasperating, most fun and funniest people in the world. It was like a light switch had been turned on inside of her, and the bulb seemed to never burn out.

Her friends accused her of being boy crazy, and though she denied it, she had to admit to herself that sometimes she was. But was there something wrong with that?

Luke liked girls, but he didn't talk about his feelings for them much. His friends were hard on him when he talked about his feelings, so he kept them to himself. One thing for sure: He liked Marli and he was determined to do something about it. He couldn't keep silent about it for much longer.

Luke had a math class with Marli last year. He admired her from across the room, but he almost never said anything to her. Sometimes he tried ridiculous stunts to see if he could get her attention—like walking on the chairs in the classroom before Mrs. Marmot came in. He brought his camera into class one day and, pretending to take pictures of his friends, got several shots of Marli.

He didn't really know all the reasons why he liked her and he didn't care. But he knew he knew he needed to act before some other boy took over his territory.

That fall, at the school Halloween dance, Luke found all the sweaty palmed courage he could, came up to Marli and asked her to a slow dance. Marli was glad it was dark on the dance floor so he didn't see her blush, but she was flattered. She had told her parents that she was just hanging out with friends, and went to the dance without their permission.

She didn't know Luke very well but why would she say no to a cute boy like Luke?

Marli and Luke rocked awkwardly on the dance floor. His hands were on her waist, and her hands were on his shoulders. They chatted stiffly about the music and laughed about the weird tasting punch and about Mrs. Marmot the math teacher from last year. Marli found out that they had two friends in common. Luke pointed that out.

"I thought you looked familiar." Marli said.

Then came the bombshell: Luke cleared his throat to make his confession just as the song ended. They were still holding each other though the music had stopped.

"I know you don't know me that well, but I think I know you pretty well. And, I mean, I really...like you. I was wondering if you would do me a favor."

"Sure. What's that?"

"You're the kind of girl that I like. I'm wondering if you would go with me."

"Go with you?"

"Yeah, like going out. Will you?"

"Yeah, sure, why not. I'd could do that." Marli turned even more red than when he had asked her to dance.

Unsure of what to say next, Marli blurted out, "Well, I have to go now." Then she turned and ran toward her friends to tell them the news.

Luke was left standing speechless on the dance floor. Then he smiled, and said, “I’ll call you.” But Marli didn’t hear him or even see him again for the rest of the night. She was so busy talking to her friends that she practically forgot that he was still there.

A few days later, on a Saturday, Marli’s sister Tandi, who came home from college for the weekend, was standing at the kitchen counter. While their parents were out grocery shopping early that afternoon, Marli could not hold it in any longer. She had to ask Tandi if it was right to go out with a boy.

Tandi had graduated from high school the spring before, and was going to Snow College on a scholarship. She had also graduated from seminary, was a star on the varsity track team, and was a senior class officer during her last year in high school. Marli looked up to her sister—she trusted Tandi, and knew she could safely share her secrets with her.

“Were you ever boy crazy?” Marli asked.

Tandi laughed. “Of course I was, Marli. A lot of girls go a little boy crazy when they get your age. I think it’s a normal part of growing up.”

“I know some girls who don’t care about boys at all.”

“Well, they might not be telling anyone about how they feel. That’s normal too, but it won’t last either, just like being boy crazy won’t last. Everyone is on a different clock.”

“What do you mean?”

“Our bodies—everyone’s body—are on a clock. A hormonal clock. The first alarm on that clock goes off for girls usually when they are 11 or 12, but sometimes as young as 10 or even 9.”

“What about boys?”

“Their alarm goes off a little later, but they’re not far behind.”

“Do you just get over it—boy fever, I mean?”

“Well, in one way, yes, you do get over it, but in another way, never. It doesn’t really go away. You just learn to deal with it differently.”

“How do *you* deal with it?”

“I was thinking about taking a walk. Do you want to come along?” Tandi asked.

“Sure,” Marli said.

The sun shone bright that Saturday, but the weather was cold. It was a few weeks before Thanksgiving. The early snows had already melted, and the pavement was dry. Marli and Tandi put on heavy coats against the weather. Tandi wore a headband to keep her ears warm. Marli wore a baseball cap, her ears protected by her long blonde hair.

Marli jumpstarted the conversation. “Why do I feel like this about boys? I mean, they are so dumb most of the time. You can’t carry on a normal conversation with them, they are so ridiculous. Or they act just plain weird. But I still like them. A lot. What’s wrong with me?”

“There’s nothing wrong with you, Marli. Those feelings inside of you are as normal and natural as anything. There is nothing wrong with your feelings. You just aren’t used to them yet. And don’t you think that girls are just as weird to boys as boys are to girls?”

“I never thought of it like that. Used to my feelings? How do you get used to feeling totally upside-down?”

“It just takes time. You’ll like lots of boys in the coming years.”

“How did you know that?”

Tandi laughed and put her arm around her. “I was 13 once, remember?”

“I’ll be 14 in two weeks.”

“Okay, you’re close enough 14. Let’s forget about 13.”

“So what did you do when you were 13? Did you ever have a crush on a boy?”

“A new one about every other month.”

“I’m doing pretty good then. I’ve only had a crush on three boys. And I don’t have a crush on the one who asked me to go out with him at the Halloween dance.”

“What’s his name?”

“Luke. But I forgot to get his last name.”

“You don’t even know his last name?”

“I’ll get it later.”

“What did you say to him?”

“I said yes. I guess that means we are officially going out. I am the last one of my friends to go out with anyone. Are you happy for me?”

“No I’m not, Marli.” Tandi frowned.

Marli stopped in her tracks, turned and stared at her sister with piercing blue eyes. “You’re not?”

“No, Marli. I never ‘went out’ with anyone before I was dating age. And after that, I never dated anyone steady. Not that I couldn’t have. I just didn’t.”

“Why?”

“Because I knew better. I knew what the prophet’s had said.”

Marli didn’t answer. Tandi went on.

“Mom helped me a lot in those days. Do you ever talk to her about your feelings?”

“I don’t think she’d understand. She’d just wag *For the Strength of Truth* in front of my nose, and make me feel bad.”

“She was a girl once, too, Marli. You might be surprised what she knows.”

“What did she tell you?”

“That my feelings were good—that they proved that I was a normal human being!—but that it’s not always wise to blab them all over the place, or to act on them too quickly. All your thoughts and emotions may *feel* right, but what you are feeling can be so temporary, and can go up in smoke without a trace.”

“So what do I do about them? What *did* you do?” Marli adjusted her baseball cap.

“I learned how to enjoy boys and to be friends with them and to just let them be whatever they happened to be. Just because I felt like a liked a certain boy didn’t mean I had to go out with me, or go on a date with him, especially when I was your age. Let’s sit down here.”

Tandi pointed at a bench in a patch of lawn. They sat close together, their breath rising in puffs of steam. Tandi put her arm around Marli. Marli seemed to melt, and put her head against her sister’s shoulder.

“Marli, I know when your freight train is going down one set of tracks, it’s hard to turn it around, and get it going down a different set of tracks, but I think you’ll be happier if you do.”

“But what will my friends say? They’ll think I am a dork for turning down Luke.”

“Did you dance with him? Luke.”

“Yes, once.” Marli avoided Tandi’s eyes.

“I thought mom and dad’s rule was that you couldn’t dance before you were 14. What were doing there, anyway?”

“I was there because I was on the dance committee. But I didn’t tell mom and dad that I was going.”

“And you did anyway?”

“It’s not that big of a deal.”

“It’s a huge deal, Marli. It’s the little fibs and compromises that lead to big trouble. Believe me I know.”

Marli sat up. “How?” she asked.

“Because you see a lot of things in high school, and you make mistakes, too. We all start out innocently, but when we fail to brake at the stop signs and drive right through, we can get side swiped, or hit head on.”

“What do you mean?”

“I could tell you story after story, Marli. I’ll tell you just one about myself. You remember Mark, don’t you? I went out with him a few times my junior year. He wasn’t very active in Church.”

“Yeah, I remember him. I liked him. He was nice.”

“Yes, he *was* nice, but I let him kiss me on our first date. It was my first kiss. It was not just a little peck, but a long kiss. Too long of a kiss. It felt nice at the moment, but later I was scared and ashamed, but I wanted to kiss him more and more. It was like this huge tug of war inside of me. I talked to Mom about it and she gave me some great advice that I wish I had followed.”

“What advice?”

“She told me to not date the same boy twice in a row, to go on another day with another boy or two first before going out with Mark again.”

“Then what happened?” Marli was so wrapped up by her sister’s story, that she hardly noticed the cold.

“I didn’t follow Mom’s advice. I went out with Mark two more times in a row. And we kissed both times. After the third date, I didn’t know how to stop, and I didn’t want to stop. I was stuck. I was struggling but I was still praying. Then a miracle happened.

“A girl I didn’t know walked up to me in the hall at school. It was Mark’s first girlfriend. She told me that Mark was going out with another girl at the same time as he was going with me and making out with her, too.”

“What did you do? What did you say?”

“I confronted Mark, that very afternoon, in the parking lot at school. I asked him if it was true that he had another girlfriend. He didn’t say yes, but he didn’t say no. And I could tell by the look on his face that I had caught him in his own web. He started raising his voice and getting mad at me, but I just turned around and walked away. He was a player, Marli, and I was just a card in his deck.”

“That must not have felt good.”

“No. It felt awful. Do you know what it feels like to throw away your first kiss on a boy like that? I felt so stupid. Marli, can you see where I’m going with this?”

“I think so. You are telling me to do the right thing, to not to rush into things, to take things slow. Is that right?”

“Yes, Marli, that’s part of it.”

“And to follow Mom and Dad’s advice, too.”

“And their advice was just the same as the prophet’s advice, but with their own special guidelines for me. When I realized that, I almost never disobeyed mom and dad’s counsel again. Not in dating.”

“You were smart.”

“Well, I wasn’t perfect, but I learned to set my own boundaries. I haven’t kissed anyone since Mark, except one other time.”

“Uh oh, when was that?”

“One week and three days ago.”

“But who’s counting, right? Who was it?”

“His name is Steve. You’ll get to meet him tomorrow. He’s coming over for dinner after Church. He went on his mission to Paris. And a fine specimen of Mormon manhood he is.”

“I can’t wait to meet him.”

“I can’t wait for you to meet him, too. Hey, I’m cold. Can we go home now?” Tandi stood up.

Marli stood up, too. She locked arms with Tandi. “Let’s get home. I’ve got a phone call I need to make.”

Luke was an only child. His mother was a member of the Church but his father, a college physics professor, was not. He was a good man, and had had the missionary discussions twice, and had even read the Book of Mormon, but still had not been baptized. However, he took the time to understand the Church standards, and supported Luke and his mother in their Church activity.

That same Saturday, Luke’s father came to him in his room with a smile and a question. “I was on Facebook this morning, Luke, and I noticed in the news feed that your relationship status was ‘It’s complicated.’ Will you tell me what that means?”

Luke swallowed hard. His dad hardly ever mentioned Facebook, and had a sudden impulse to go to the computer that minute and defriend his own father.

“Well...” Luke said.

“What kind of a relationship are you in?” his dad asked again.

“A new one.”

“A new one. With a girl?”

“Yes, with a girl.”

“And how long have you been in this relationship?”

“For two days. But I’ve known her for over a year. Or known who she is.”

“Okay, what’s her name?”

“Marli.”

“That’s a cute name. What’s her last name?”

“I think it’s Swenson.”

“You think?”

“I’m working on that.”

“So you have a girlfriend and you are not sure what her last name is. Don’t you think it would be polite to find that out.”

“Yeah.” Luke squirmed. Suddenly, to his great relief, he realized that he was going to help out with Billy Jackson’s Eagle project that morning. “Hey, Dad, I’ve got to go to Billy’s Eagle project this morning.”

“I told Billy’s father that I would help, too.”

Oh, great, Luke thought.

For a time, there was silence in the car as Luke and his father drove the short distance to the canyon where Billy’s Eagle project was taking place.

Luke’s father finally spoke up.

“Is she cute? Marli I mean.”

“Yeah...yeah she’s real cute.”

“What do you like about her?”

“Everything.”

“Well, that’s quite a compliment. How long do you hope for this relationship to go on?”

“I don’t know.”

“That’s okay, Luke.” Luke’s father paused and turned on the blinker for the last turn up the canyon.

“I do have to mention one thing, Luke. Doesn’t the Church have a standard about not dating before you are 16 years old.”

“Yeah.”

“And you are in a relationship with a girl that’s how old?”

“I think she’s 14.”

“So what are you going to do for the next two years if you are not dating.”

Luke did not have an answer. The car was silent again until they arrived at the parking lot at the mouth of the canyon where Billy was installing a new sign and planting trees. As soon as they stopped, Luke pulled on the door handle to make his escape, but his father stopped him. “Luke, I want you to think about what you are going to do with a girlfriend that you can’t date for two years. Let me know when we get done here this morning.”

As Luke dug a hole for the sign post, he thought and thought. He liked Marli a lot and even thought that he loved her. He had thought how nice it would be to walk down the halls of the school holding hands, and even dreamed that he would give Marli his first kiss ever and hopefully her first kiss. But he also realized that he was being held accountable by his dad for what he wanted to do, without his dad and mom knowing it.

He also realized that he had a spiritual feeling that the Church was true, and that the prophet really did speak the words of God to the people. If that was true, and he was going against the prophet’s words by having a girlfriend too early, he was walking on the edge of a cliff.

On the drive home, Luke’s dad said this: “It’s okay to like her, Luke. You can hardly help that. Make her your friend. Learn all about her. But don’t start dating her—or doing anything with her that is part of dating—until you are the right age. It takes self-control, but I promise you that you will be much, much happier in the end.”

“I think you are right, dad. I’ll take care of it.”

Later that afternoon, Luke found out that Marli's last name really was Swenson for sure. He went online and found her parents' phone number on White Pages. When he called her, he was even more nervous than when he was at the dance, but he was determined to say what he had to say.

When the phone was ringing, another call rang in at the same time. He pushed flash, and discovered that the other caller was Marli. "That's weird, I was just calling you."

"You were? That is weird."

"I wanted to talk to you about the other night, at the dance."

"I wanted to talk to you about that, too." Marli said.

Marli and Luke had a wonderful conversation that afternoon. It wasn't easy to talk about it, but they agreed that it wasn't the right time for them to be boyfriend and girlfriend, but they thought they could be friends first by helping each other do the things that will keep them safe and happy.

Marli challenged Luke to read *For the Strength of Youth*. He took up the challenge, and also challenged her to a race to see who could finish first. He would have thought it was dorky to read it before, but Marli helped him want to read it.

"I feel much better now," Marli said.

"If you do then so do I," Luke said.

Marli and Luke soon became good friends. Tandi married Steve in the Draper Temple that spring. And, by the way, Marli and Luke even dated after they both turned 16, and went to prom their junior year.

—Michael James Fitzgerald

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