

Romance at 7 or 77

By Lillian Reinertsen and edited by O'Brien

I had come from Illinois to Wisconsin to attend a memorial service for my 39 year old cousin Cynthia. As I was entering the church a tall, handsome white haired gentleman came toward me with a broad smile and his hand outstretched saying "Lillian, how good to see you again". I greeted him with a handshake and a quick "hello" wondering "who in the world could this man be?" Then it dawned on me, he was Erling; someone I had known when we were children. My cousin Cynthia was also the granddaughter of his eldest sister Signe. As I learned later, Erling was an accomplished musician and had come from Florida to honor a dying request of Cynthia's that he play a cornet solo at her service.

The last time I had seen Erling was at the wedding of his sister Signe and my cousin Andy in 1934, some 69 years before. At that ceremony he had been the ring bearer and I was the flower girl. How could he have recognized me after all this time? My heart seemed to skip a beat at this surprise encounter, but as the lovely service filled my mind I thought "we will never meet again".

My thoughts proved wrong, however, since the following month Erling visited some relatives who resided in Fairhaven Retirement Center in Rockford, Illinois. I had moved into Fairhaven a year earlier following the deaths of both my husband and mother for whom I had been caring.

Erlings' relatives were part of a group of old friends of mine who had been members of the same church for many years. It was our habit to gather often for dinner, and thus I saw him several times during his visit. The evening before his departure for Florida I entertained the group and, following dinner, we went to nearby Sinissippi Park to hear a concert by the Air Force Band. When the concert ended the group began the long walk back to the cars. I was moving gingerly since I had hip replacement surgery six weeks previously and Erling, being aware of this, lingered to walk with me. It was the first time we were alone together, and, as we walked up a hill he extended his arm to steady me. My heart was touched by this caring gesture and by his gentle touch.

After his departure I found an old wedding picture from 1934. There we stood together, a seven year old boy and a five year old girl. As I looked at the picture my mind drifted back over the years and I thought of how most of the participants in the wedding had remained in Chicago with its large Scandinavian community. They lived closely together, speaking the mother tongues of their parents, associating mainly with one another, and attending churches where services were conducted in their own languages.

It was in this community that Erling, the ring bearer, grew up. As a young man he served in the Army in World War II, after which he returned and married Lois Anderson, a young Swedish girl. They were raising two sons, Charles and Richard, when, in 1957, they decided to move to Florida where Erling joined Lois's father in a building contracting business. Another son, Jeffrey, was soon added to the family. After the deaths of Lois's parents they settled in New Port Ritchie where Erling continued in the contracting business and where they raised their three sons. They later relocated to Central Florida where Lois died after a long illness.

I was the one member of the wedding party who left Chicago.

My father died suddenly just four months before Signe and Andy's wedding in 1934 and my mother had to find work to support us. Mother's sister Bertha, who lived in West Orange, New Jersey, was concerned about both her sister and her five year old niece being on their own in Chicago. . Aunt Bertha made arrangements for us to move to New Jersey and for Mother to get a live-in job as a cook/waitress with the family of a Colonel Lewis. There we lived on the third floor of a beautiful house where I could now come home from school each day and find my mother at work in the kitchen. It was a safe and secure situation for us.

Three years later my mother married a widower with two daughters. With this new family I grew up and went through school.

After completing my education I married my childhood sweetheart, Augie Ramsland. Together we raised two children, David, and Ellen. For many years we lived in Portugal where he served as a minister. Eventually we returned to America to live again in the Chicago area.

After reminiscing over all these things, I finally put the old wedding picture away.

After Erling had returned to Florida for about a month I received a letter from him thanking me for the dinner and the pleasant evening we had spent. Much longer than the usual thank-you note, the letter went on to apologize for not having walked me down the aisle at the wedding. He also asked about my experiences as a widow for five years, leading me to think he might expect a response. I wasn't sure of what I should do.

If I respond to this letter will he think I am encouraging him to write again? How will I handle it if he does? Am I really interested in reestablishing a relationship with this old acquaintance?

I decided to ask a dear friend to read the letter and seek her advice on whether or not to respond in light of my questions. After our discussion she advised that I write back, but wait two weeks or so before mailing the letter to think about what I really wanted to do. I wrote, waited, and mailed my first letter to Erling.

A month passed before I received another letter in which he enclosed a picture taken in 1945 of himself in uniform with his mother and my mother. He wrote that he had been stationed in Washington D.C. at the time and had met his parents and my mother on a visit to Brooklyn, New York. I then returned a letter thanking him for the picture and explaining that I had no recollection of my mother ever telling me about that incident. Thus, our correspondence began.

Later, my son David and his family came from California to spend Christmas with me and to later see me through the second hip replacement surgery that year. While they were visiting a beautiful basket of fruit arrived for the family, and when David read the name "Erling" on the accompanying card he asked "Who is this guy?" I explained that this was an old friend from Florida.

After the surgery beautiful flowers arrived with a note that said "Let's walk soon." That certainly motivated me to do my therapy diligently! Cards and letters came regularly and almost every evening there would be a telephone call. Finally I received a call saying that it was time for us to talk face to face.

I was concerned. A long distance relationship carried on by letter and telephone was one thing. Renewing an old friendship seemed pretty safe, but what would happen if he came? Would I want to see him again? Was I ready to take this relationship to another level? After caring for my late husband through his long illness I had firmly maintained that I would never marry again.

Meanwhile, at his home in Florida, Erling had held a dinner party for his three sons and their wives to inform them that he was planning a trip to Wisconsin and Illinois. His reasons for the trip, he said, were to attend his sister-in-law's 80th birthday party, visit his three sisters in Wisconsin, and, incidentally, to meet with a young lady (at 75, two years younger than he). His family questioned him about the trip and he told them that he had been invited to play at his sisters' party. "Nothing romantic" he said. His son Rick later told me "The more he tried to justify his motives, the deeper in he got."

His plan was stay in Rockford for a week with his family, visit his sisters in Wisconsin for a week, then return to Illinois for a third week. Early that first week Erling spent a day with me, a day to get reacquainted. "Where have you been and what have you been doing for the last 70 years?" we asked each other. It was like beginning where you left off with an old friend. On the morning of the fourth day of his visit he called to ask if he might stop by to talk with me. He had hardly slept the previous night and was eager to tell me that he loved me. I responded "I think I love you too." It was my heart speaking while my mind said "What are you saying?"

At the end of that wonderful week he left for Wisconsin giving me time to think and pray. We agreed that when he returned the following week we would discuss all the things that were on our minds and in our hearts.

Meanwhile, his sons Charles and Rick had come to Wisconsin ostensibly for the birthday party, but really to check out this “young lady” of their dad’s. I was then invited to Wisconsin to meet Erling’s family. They welcomed me with a pot luck dinner at which Chuck and Rick presented a funny sketch about their senior sweethearts. Chuck, the oldest, then read a humorous poem he had written for the occasion titled “He ain’t what you think he is.” I was made to feel very welcome and we all shared lots of laughs.

I had traveled to Florida in April to meet the remainder of Erling's family and to receive a beautiful diamond ring. Plans were then made for a wedding in a lovely hidden garden at Fairhaven on May 29th, 2004, which was convenient for both families.

Neighbors and friends helped prepare the garden with lovely flowers and an arch, but rain on the wedding day changed our plans and moved everything indoors. The ceremony was held in Fairhaven’s chapel where almost 90 relatives and six friends joined us for the uniting of our hearts and lives. Oh yes, the family poet, Chuck, wrote another poem for the reception titled “Now you’ve gone and done it.” But we believe, as the pastor reminded us during the ceremony, after 70 years GOD DID IT.

We just smiled and sealed it with a kiss.