

Sometimes a story can sing through the mind like a song, spinning round and around until the details all play their parts and the last chorus fades gently away. A story like that once came to me. There was a former student of mine... she was only seventeen... driving at night... her car stalled... the truck didn't see her. In the following days this story began playing in my mind. It nearly erased all my sorrow. Many days have passed since then. The time has come to write the story down. For this narrative, I have changed her name.

The Celebration

The day was warm and bright and the sounds of life were everywhere, for spring had come some weeks before and all the world was alive with the good news. People heard the call to open doors and raised windows, front lawns and freshly-painted shutters, and drives to wherever. In this sea of life a girl was driving her car while the sun played tag with every last shadow, and as she drove she sang, "Going to the chapel and we're going to get married." The girl's name was Shanda.

The road wound this way and that, and most of it was pretty familiar, but on a day like this roads could go anywhere, and Shanda followed wherever the road beckoned: a turn here, an invitation there, and so it went. She came at last to a well-traveled highway and was moving along when she noticed a country road coming down to meet the highway with a man standing there on the side. He was tall and everything about him suggested confidence and strength, and though the day was already bright, he shone in a way that was hard to put into words. It was something you had to see to understand, something about his eyes and the look on his face. He radiated wholeness and freedom and peace. With no hesitation Shanda steered the car gracefully off the highway and onto the country road.

Have you ever stepped from a busy place, filled with humanity, into a secluded place that breathed the air of quietness. It was a similar feeling that washed across Shanda as she drove around the first bend. "I wonder why I never found this road before," she thought. "It must have been here all along, and it's beautiful." Everywhere the signs of spring were visible, but here the enchantment seemed deeper. There were no houses, but the road kept rising slowly through bend after bend, and the scenery grew more and more inviting. She began to notice the brightness of the colors in the flowers growing in the grass. They had almost a shining brightness. Then a particularly small flower dancing in the sun caught her eye, and she glanced into her mirror as she drove on past, wondering if she could catch one more look. "That's funny," she thought, going by. "The little flower seemed bigger in the mirror."

On she drove, past view after view while the road wound higher and higher. There were more of the little flowers now, but they seemed to be moving... yes, they were. They were growing up right before her eyes, as though they had exploded out of the earth. She would catch one just springing up, and by the time she passed, it was almost full grown. And every so often there were people too, not a lot, but a few here and there, whole and strong and free, just like the one down by the highway.

“This is a truly remarkable place,” Shanda thought, and the joy inside her increased with each passing moment. “I don’t know where I am, but this is where I’ve wanted to be for a long time.” And just then the road made one final turn and rolled onto a wide open lawn of level grass that stretched in nearly all directions for a long, long ways, and there in the middle of the great expanse of green, shining like a jewel on the lawn, was a beautiful, silvery-white chapel.

Shanda was driving now with the greatest freedom she had ever known, and yet she understood with a kind of inner recognition that this was her destination. So she slowed down and rolled gently to a stop not very far from the chapel’s front door. She turned off the engine and sat there a moment, wondering at the beautiful surroundings. There was a kind of expectancy in the air, and a joy unexplainable flowing through her heart.

Stories sometimes have unexpected elements of imagination, so you’ll just have to read this next part of the story in the reverent way in which it is intended. In my imagination I saw the chapel doors swing open, and the one who came down the steps to meet Shanda was God the Father. Light was all around Him, and His smile was warm. There was the feeling of being welcomed, and Shanda felt no sorrow whatever as God came to her door and reached out, opening it for her. As He did, bells rang from somewhere and messages were sent all over the land inviting those who loved Shanda to a great celebration.

The messages caused quite a stir in home after home. People stopped what they were doing, even important things, and they talked with one another, and called each other up, and sat still at times in silence. They dressed quietly, got into their cars, and drove out along the roads which went this way and that, and as they went they spoke softly and a few cried. But each car that was driving found its way along the highway to a place where a little country road came down like a gentle benediction, and there at the corner was a man who stood tall and strong, and everything about him breathed confidence, and those who looked into his face felt a wave of hope as they passed by.

Up the country road the cars came, and it wasn’t long before the unfolding beauty around each bend sounded notes of courage in every heart, and some laughed unexpectedly and a few spoke words of joy. On they drove into scenes they didn’t know existed, and every traveler sensed things deep inside that worked mysteriously in their hearts and feelings, and they felt like they themselves were blooming almost as fast as the flowers that now lined the road on either side. They saw people too, just like the one who stood by the highway, people whom you knew were bold and strong, for their very presence indicated so, only there were more now than when Shanda had driven past earlier. They were gathering flowers in baskets, and everything they did seemed alive with royalty and dignity.

So each car came, and every person riding in them experienced the same transformation, until all arrived at the crest of the hill, and found there the great, green lawn spreading out in all directions, and the chapel shining like a jewel in the sun.

The joy inside the chapel was beyond description. There were flowers everywhere, music and color and light, and a feeling of endless wonder. People embraced each other and laughed, and no one cried all the while they were there on the hill. There came a moment of unspeakable majesty when God the Father came down the aisle, and Shanda, dressed in a magnificent, white robe, was walking at His side. All eyes in the chapel were bright with hope, and every heart knew this was a moment of eternal significance. Shanda came forward, past rows and rows of people she loved, and waiting at the front for her was King Jesus, who took her into His arms, and embraced her. All this time there were no words, only the music of love, and yet each person in attendance felt and knew things they had never felt or known before, and every heart heard what it needed most to hear.

Out on the lawn afterwards, people stayed for what seemed like hours, but there was also a sense of timelessness, for the light never faded at all. A holy joy was everywhere. The children who had come played on the grass while those older talked to one another of peace and freedom. In shining light and rich beauty, Jesus and Shanda made their way around to all the guests, speaking with each one, and the sight of the King and Shanda together was an unforgettable picture in everyone's memory forever after.

There came a moment when all who had traveled to the celebration knew it was time to meet back at the cars, and so they embraced the King and Shanda and waved good-bye with light still shining in their eyes, and there were no tears. They wound their way back down the long country road, past wave after wave of wild and bright, dancing flowers, and past view after view that had cheered them on their way up. At last they came to where the road dropped gently down towards the highway, and there at the corner was one who stood tall and strong, and they smiled at him and waved, not knowing they each shone with a brightness they had never known before.

Out onto the highway they went, and as they drove they passed a father and a young boy walking. The boy turned to his father and asked him, "Why do these cars have their lights on? Is it a funeral?" The father turned. "No, son." he said. "Look at the light on their faces and in their eyes. This isn't a funeral. This is a celebration."

And all the cars drove safely home, and the people went back to their open doors and windows, front lawns and freshly-painted shutters, and their continuing stories unfolded like words on a page. But high on a beautiful green hill another story began for Shanda, and what happened to her and the joy she knew will someday have to be told with stronger and brighter words than these.

Copyright 1997 Stephen Mugglin
Permission is given to make not-for-profit copies.