

Who Has
Your
Heart?

The Single
Woman's Pursuit
of Godliness

Emily E. Ryan



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To Jason:
*I know God has our hearts,
because in His infinite wisdom,
He decided that they
belong together.*

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Part One

UNMARRIED

Chapter 1

The Urge to Merge

On the Verge of the Urge

My first “fiancé” was Mr. Rafa, and he was a beautiful man. I met him during evening rehearsals for *The Nutcracker* when I was cast as a Ginger Child and he as the Rat King. Despite his infamous role in the ballet, as long as he wasn’t rehearsing in full costume (rat costumes are not attractive), he was mesmerizing to watch. Perhaps it was because he had jet-black hair and blue eyes which, combined with the tights, reminded me of Superman. Or maybe it was that he could dance like Baryshnikov. Whatever it was, when he was at rehearsals, I was the best-behaved six-year-old in the entire cast.

It wasn’t long before I decided that I was going to marry Mr. Rafa someday, and I wasn’t shy about my decision either. I told everyone: my mom, my dance teachers, and the other Ginger Children. I even told *Mrs. Rafa* (she was not amused). Of course,

my naive belief that I would grow older and Mr. Rafa would stay the same age was ill founded, and my first schoolgirl crush ended without incident.

Since then, there have been countless more “fiancés”—men, boys, movie stars, or pizza delivery guys—about whom I’ve day-dreamed and secretly planned our weddings. But Mr. Rafa will always hold a special place in my heart as the first. I admired him from a distance, and looking back I can safely say that he was proof that the Urge to Merge hit me very early in life.

The Urge Emerges

The Urge to Merge hits us all at different times. Some of you are lucky; you didn’t get the urge until your thirtieth birthday was circled on the calendar and the celebration invitations were mailed. You didn’t think about marriage, much less worry about it, until you noticed an unshakable noise ringing in your ears and realized that it was indeed your biological alarm clock screaming its wake-up call.

Others of you have been pressing snooze on your clock for years. You were the ones who, while in elementary school, bought a red lollipop ring, put it on your ring finger, and (in between licks) paraded it around as an engagement ring. Slowly, you wised up in junior high when you learned that your red candy ring could produce an undesirable (and sticky) result when you ran your fingers through your hair while wearing it. And so you graduated from the sweet fantasy to a more dignified approach to love and life as you played the “What will my future name be?” game. This meant that your book covers in school were transformed into working scratch pads as you practiced writ-

ing your first name with the last name of every hunky football player or good-looking track star to ever grace the classrooms of fifth period with his presence. (Though this habit, unlike that of the lollipop ring, some of us never outgrew.)

Submerged in the Urge

It was August 8, 1988—better known as 8/8/88—and I remember it like it was yesterday.

I was only eleven then, and I was vacationing with my family in Wimberley, Texas, at my aunt and uncle's house on the Blanco River. After a long,

lazy afternoon of tubing
down the river and getting
scorched by the summer

The Urge to Merge hits us
all at different times.

sun, I dragged my prune-shriveled body to the house and collapsed onto the sofa to revel in the wonders of air conditioning. I closed my eyes and sunk deep into the couch, tuning out the reporters on the evening news and wondering how many close calls I'd had with giant garfish in the river that day (countless, no doubt).

After a long commercial break and the last weather forecast of the program, the anchors ended the newscast with an eye-opening human-interest story. Because of the date—8/8/88—the number of weddings performed on that particular Monday outnumbered even the average for weekend weddings. It seemed many couples had chosen that special calendar-friendly date for their weddings in order to make them more memorable.

I scooted to the edge of the sofa and leaned forward to get a better look at the images of the couples that flashed across the

screen. I thought about how lucky those women were—they were almost guaranteed wonderful presents on their anniversaries simply because, with a date like that, it would be impossible for their husbands to forget it.

The news blurb ended with the anchors explaining that the next time the dates would align so perfectly would be on September 9, 1999. I immediately began calculating. How old would I be then? Would it be possible for me to plan my wedding on that easy-to-remember, sure-to-get-presents date?

My heart sunk, however, when I realized that I would be twenty-two years old! And though I spent the next commercial break considering it, I finally concluded that the possibility of postponing my future wedding for the mere sake of having a memorable anniversary date was simply not worth it. I wouldn't—I *couldn't*—wait that long to get married! I'd just have to think of some other way to make my wedding date special.

You can probably conclude from the fact that you're reading this book that 9/9/99 came and went without so much as dinner and a movie, much less a proposal or a wedding. As did 01/01/01, 02/02/02, 03/03/03, and many other dates that I longed to circle on my calendar and decorate with doodled hearts and bells in the margin. Instead, these dates were filled with life-changing events like "Get oil changed" or "Pick up dry-cleaning."

When we have a time frame, an agenda, or a particular date in mind, the urge seems to get stronger, doesn't it? The pressure increases and the drumming of our fingers grows louder and louder as we watch impatiently as our ideal date or perfect bridal age comes and goes without a hint of white to cover our darkened desires.

Maybe you have made similar wishes as you thumbed through

the pages of your leather-bound planner or clicked the stylus of your PDA, inputting everyone's special events but your own. Weddings. Lingerie showers. Housewarming parties. Bachelorette parties. Rehearsal dinners. And the ever-so-dreaded, why-are-you-doing-this-to-me event: the couples shower. If the urge has hit you, any of these events, along with a myriad of others, can trigger you to set yet another hopeful but meaningless deadline as you long for your day in the limelight to begin.

Then again, some of you didn't have to set fake deadlines, because there was once a time when you *did* have your wedding date circled on a calendar. The church was booked. The dress was beautiful. And weekly manicures became a must to highlight the huge rock that sparkled from your left hand.

However, a few months, many fights, and one broken engagement later, you found yourself right back where you started. Your calendar looked like a tic-tac-toe game, as the circle on what would have been your wedding date became an *X* instead. Your beautiful dress went to the back of the closet as you prayed it would still be in style by the time you needed it for real, and your now bare and dull ring finger mocked you with its sudden nakedness.

For those of you with a broken engagement in your past, you have a different viewpoint of the unrealized and unmet deadlines. Yours was not one of mere "wishin' and hopin' and thinkin' and prayin'" that could easily be erased and forgotten once it became but a speck in the rearview mirror of life. It was an actual deadline that involved real people and resulted in very real consequences.

But however real or fabricated the deadlines are that come and go with no avail, the disappointment that follows cannot

be denied. Unmet deadlines can create panic and can easily lead to another cycle of misplaced hope, the cycle of the If . . . Then statements.

This variation of the deadline response to the suffocating urgency is the manifestation of the hypothetical syllogism. For those of you who never took Philosophy 101, that's the nerd term for the If . . . Then statement. For example: *If* Andy doesn't ask me to dance by the second verse of Richard Marx's "Right Here Waiting," *then* I'm going to go ask Cliff to dance instead. *If* I'm really "sweet sixteen and never been kissed," *then* I'm destined to be an old maid. *If* I don't have a date to my senior prom, *then* I'll never leave my room again.

These grandiose declarations may seem harmless enough when we're still wearing training bras and braces, but they inevitably culminate into establishing a very rocky mindset as single adults. The statements that start off small and silly can evolve into weighty internal fears:

- If I'm not married by the time I'm x , then . . .
- If I don't get my *Mrs.* degree in college, then . . .
- If my father dies before he gets to walk me down the aisle, then . . .
- If I have to wear one more tacky bridesmaid dress, then . . .
- If I end up being a thirty-year-old virgin, then . . .

I'll admit that I was guilty of thinking about every one of these fears plus many others. They crept into my thoughts, set up camp in my mind, and lingered like unwelcome houseguests. During high school and college, it was easier to suppress the fears and disappointments because I could hide behind masks of

busyness or prior life commitments. But when the post-college years began to add up like the bridesmaid dresses in my closet, doubt began to creep in. Perhaps I wasn't pretty enough. Maybe I wasn't "marriage material." Maybe God had simply forgotten about me.

The Urge Surges

And then, *it* happened. The ultimate If . . . Then situation came to be. My sister, Meghan—four years younger than I and only nineteen at the time—became engaged. Her first date with Ryan was to the movies, and by the time that same movie was released on video, she was sporting a beautiful new engagement ring and picking out china patterns. A word of advice: Don't ever say, "*If* my little sister gets married before I do, *then* . . ." because not even sugar can sweeten the taste when you have to eat *those* words.

I was shocked. This was definitely not how my life was supposed to work out. I was the older sister. The type A personality. The one who *made* things happen. I was supposed to be the leader in all of life's new ventures and milestones: college, marriage, first homes, babies. She was supposed to learn from *my* successes and failures, not the other way around.

Of course it didn't help that Ryan was perfect for her. He was a Christian, played in the church orchestra, got along with our brothers, and was just finishing up his last year of dental school. I was happy for Meghan. Really, I was. She deserved all of these wonderful blessings plus many others; I just selfishly wanted her to receive those blessings *after* I did.

Needless to say, there's nothing like catching the bouquet at

your little sister's wedding to demolish all deadlines and fears and make the Urge to Merge *surge!* I felt like God had forgotten about me. Like the fulfillment of my dreams and desires passed me by and landed on other people. God was raining down marriage blessings like manna, and I was the only one under an umbrella.

Have you experienced an event that caused your urge to surge? Maybe you were casually flipping through the Sunday socials section of your community newspaper when you saw

God was raining down marriage blessings like manna, and I was the only one under an umbrella.

her picture listed under "Engagements": the exasperating girl whose artwork was always chosen for display all through elementary school, stole two of your junior high boyfriends, and then secretly

sabotaged your laboratory experiments in freshman chemistry class. "How can someone love *her* when no one seems to love me?" you ask yourself as you fold the paper and realize that you just found the perfect lining for your pet parakeet's birdcage.

Or maybe you were blindsided by your postman one day when he delivered an unexpected off-white envelope to your mailbox. You threw your bills to the side and ripped into the envelope to find your ex-boyfriend's wedding invitation enclosed. What made it worse was that the inner envelope was addressed to you *and Guest*, reiterating the fact that he had found his lifelong *and Guest*, and you couldn't even muster up a date to his wedding.

The Urge Diverges

For me, it was my sister's wedding—The Year of Meghan—that made my urge surge. And the more that the urge surged, the more my faith wandered. Instead of persevering down the safe and promising road of trust and hope, I casually meandered onto a path that diverged from the main road. A trail that was so shaded I could no longer see the Son. A path headed straight to Bittersville.

I didn't notice my thoughts and attitudes changing during The Year of Meghan, but in hindsight I can see that they did. They say that if you're going to cook a frog (not that you're going to), the best way is to put the frog in cold water and slowly turn up the heat until it reaches a boil. The frog will not notice the gradual change in temperature and will allow itself to be boiled without protest. This is how bitterness works. It doesn't surprise; it creeps. Bitterness is like getting a sunburn on a cloudy summer day: You don't notice the heat, but you certainly can't deny your tomato-red skin the next day. "Each heart knows its own bitterness, and no one else can share its joy" (Proverbs 14:10).

The funny thing is that I actually tried *not* to become bitter. When I heard myself make a snide comment or snap at someone who asked an innocent question about my love life, I tried to cover it up or laugh it off. That's when I rediscovered an old monologue from my college drama days that seemed to express my innermost thoughts better than I ever could myself. It's called "Non-Bridaled Passion" and is taken from a musical revue entitled, "A . . . My Name is *Still* Alice."

In this humorous monologue, a young woman in her thirties approaches a bridal registry consultant of a major department store to register for gifts. The consultant asks the young woman when she is planning to get married, and she explains that she has no fiancé and no wedding date in mind. She is frustrated because she has been buying gifts for all of her friends who are getting married—in her opinion, they are not the only ones who should be receiving gifts. The following monologue ensues in response to the confused objections of the bridal registry consultant.

Woman: This voice inside my head started screaming at me. It said, “Why do you keep buying presents for people who have already found everything they want?” Or words to that effect. I don’t remember exactly. I do recall that the voice sounded resentful. And I had to agree with it. I mean, isn’t it enough that they were lucky and found each other? That they fell in love and made a commitment? That they’ll be splitting the rent and filing jointly? They’ve found someone who’ll give them a *foot massage* whenever they want! They’ve already won the sweepstakes, why do they get the door prizes too? Why do they get to register for things like . . . like . . . like a cookie jar shaped like a giant eggplant, or a set of “really good knives”? THEY’RE BECOMING A TWO-INCOME FAMILY, WHY CAN’T THEY BUY THEIR OWN KNIVES???!!! Now then. I need things. I am not getting married and I need things. I need better towels. Matching luggage. A pasta machine. And sterling silver candlesticks—put me down for two pair. Come on,

just do it! You registered Ann and Deena, Lisa, Jane and Cindy, *I insist* on registering too! . . . I *know* I'm single; I confront that fact every day of my life. It's fine! I accept it! But I'm not *staying* single without the same material goods as my married friends. *My ship is coming in if I have to tow it myself!* . . . Do you really want to know when the happy event is? It's a week from Saturday. I'm throwing a shower for myself, officially announcing a life of singlehood. And the beauty of it is, I won't have to return anything if it doesn't work out!

It was about the time I started thinking that throwing a shower for myself might actually be a *good* idea that I realized I wasn't becoming bitter anymore. I *was* bitter. And wouldn't you know it, bitterness was *not* a pretty color on me. But slowly my eyes adjusted to the darkness around me, and I could see again. *So, this is what bitterness looks like.*

Maybe you're reading this book because you feel yourself becoming bitter too. Perhaps your apartment has become the launching pad for engagements, none of them your own, as roommate after roommate passes through your life on their way to marriage leaving you with nothing but mismatched silverware and a pile of dog-eared bride's magazines laughing at you from your coffee table. Maybe family gatherings have become awkward for you, as suddenly all of your siblings have found love and marriage, leaving you to eat alone at the kiddie table with your nieces and nephews.

It's scary to realize how easily bitterness and discontentment can sneak into our thoughts. But thankfully, bitterness is like the tick of a clock in the silence of the night. Hours may pass

with the sound ticking by unnoticed, but the second someone asks you, “Do you hear that noise?” it’s suddenly all you hear. Once I realized I was bitter, it was all I could think about.

Purging the Urge

Because of my oldest-child, type A personality, I realized that I had to *do* something. The bitterness had to be conquered, and the urge had to be *purged*. And so I began doing what was natural for me: I read. I read books about being single. Books about preparing for marriage. Books about dating. Books about *not* dating. My library became full of books regarding the single life written from just about every angle possible.

Some of them were really good, but inevitably I’d turn to the back cover to read the “About the Author” section and find the same trend over and over again. *Mrs. So-and-So lives in Such-and-Such Town with her loving husband of twenty-something years. Together they have 2.5 impeccably well-behaved children, an adoring poodle named Fluffy, and a perfectly engineered white picket fence that surrounds their flawless home in the suburbs.*

For some unexplainable reason (probably the bitterness again), once I learned that the sources of these scripturally based opinions were married, I would immediately disregard all of their pearls of wisdom. *Of course they believe all that*, I thought. *They get to greet their husbands every night after work with a hot home-made dinner and an even hotter welcome-home kiss. It’s always easy to trust God in hindsight.* (For a note about my own personal marital status, please don’t throw this book down without reading the introduction first!)

Then there were the books written by other singles, but again,

I felt like the connection stopped just short of a closed circuit. Either the author presented an, “I am woman, hear me roar,” type attitude that made me feel like I was being treacherous to my gender just by desiring a husband, or they presented a Super-Christian, hyperspiritual viewpoint that made me feel like I was neglecting God Himself in my desire to be married. I felt like I was caught somewhere in the middle of the single-life spectrum, and I couldn’t seem to find an author that spoke to my *heart*.

The Urge Converges

“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). It’s funny how sometimes the most obvious and simple answers are right in front of us, and we don’t even realize it. Perhaps it’s a blessing that I didn’t fully connect with any of the authors I read before. It forced me to turn to *The Author*, which is something I should have done in the very beginning.

It may seem that your longing to have a husband and your desire to trust God’s plan are tearing you in two different directions. But find peace in the fact that there *is* one place that those two repelling forces can converge, and that’s in the arms of our Father. When I finally turned to Him with all my anger and beat His chest in anguish that my life was not as I had hoped, He didn’t stop me from pounding. He simply wrapped His arms around me so tightly that, in time, I finally stopped fighting on my own.

My prayer for you as you read this book is not necessarily that you will connect with me, the author, or that you will agree with everything I have to say. My prayer is simply that this will point you back towards your heavenly Father. This is not a book about

dating. It's not about preparing for marriage. And it's definitely not a book about how to be single. For if our search is merely to discover who we are in our marital status, we've missed the ultimate quest, which is discovering who we are *in Christ*.

For if our search is merely to discover who we are in our marital status, we've missed the ultimate quest, which is discovering who we are *in Christ*.

Together we'll look at a girl in Scripture who can show us who God wants us to be in Him. We won't learn her name, for she remains unnamed. We won't meet her husband, for she is unmarried. But we will study her character, for she is unshakable.

And she's not simply a godly woman who teaches how to be single. Rather she's a single woman who teaches us how to be godly.

The Urge to Merge will not go away, but my prayer is that the source of your attraction will change. Rather than longing to merge with a faceless man known only in your dreams, I pray you'll long to merge with our God and Creator instead.

Your Urge to Merge

1. The Urge to Merge hits us all at different times. Looking back, when would you say the desire to marry first entered your thoughts? Who are some “fiancés” you’ve had since then, and who was the first?
2. Most of us set arbitrary deadlines for ourselves regarding love and marriage, whether we realize it or not. What are some of your own deadlines and expectations for the ideal time to marry? What makes those time frames ideal?
3. Read the story of Jacob and Rachel in Genesis 29:14–30. In verse 26, what does Laban give as the reason for delaying Jacob’s marriage to Rachel? How do current customs and cultural trends affect your own thoughts about marriage?
4. As we go about our everyday lives, there are always factors that seem to trigger the Urge. Of the following triggers, which ones cause your Urge to surge, and which ones do not affect you? What are some triggers of your own that are not on the list?

Holidays

Weddings

Parental Pressures

Loneliness

Sexual Desires

Desire for Children

Birthdays/Age

5. When our self-made deadlines pass us by or when the Urge is triggered yet again by one of the factors listed above, sometimes shades of bitterness can creep into our thoughts. Rate the bitterness level in your own life on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being “I don’t even own a map to Bittersville” and 10 being “I’m the Mayor of Bittersville.” What does Ephesians 4:31 say we are to do with bitterness?
6. Read Lamentations 3:19–23. Now focus on verses 22 and 23 and name at least three truths that we can call to mind when bitterness creeps in.
7. This is not a book about a godly woman who teaches us how to be single but rather about a single woman who teaches us how to be godly. Knowing this, what do you hope to gain from reading it?
8. **Memorize** Hebrews 12:2: “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.”