

Swept Off Your Feet by John P. Foppe



Being born without arms, I often wondered if I would ever find someone to love me. I certainly experienced my share of dating failures and rejections. Despite each slight, however, I tried to maintain a positive attitude.

I rationalized that I had a good life. I pretended to be content. I admitted that dating was a struggle, but I kept trying. Though I might have looked OK on the outside, inwardly, I experienced moments of deep frustration, resignation, self-pity, anger and impatience. As I watched my friends and younger brothers marry, I felt like the hunchback, Quasimodo; I felt weak, ugly and powerless as the world of love left me behind. One August day, three years ago, however, my Esmeralda walked in and turned my life upside down.

I was the guest speaker for a local organization's fundraiser, and several of my family members attended. My brother Jim's fiancée,

Emma, invited her girlfriend and roommate, Christine, along to hear me. While people mingled during the cocktail hour, I sat off to the side with a pen and paper in my toes, putting the final touches on my speech.

My brother Ron sat down beside me, gently poked me, and whispered, "Check out the good-looking girl who just walked in with Jim and Emma." I looked up from my notes and spotted a tall blonde in a sleek ruby-red summer dress. Meg Ryan just walked in the door, I thought. Her wavy gold hair glided across her sun-drenched cheeks as she gracefully turned to shake someone's hand. In a smoked-filled room of gray suits and dull

dresses, she radiated a confident, sexy aura of femininity.

"I bet Paul flirts with her," Ron quipped under his breath.

Obviously, she was closer in age to me than she was to my younger brother Paul. I was miffed that Ron didn't see me as a contender for her attention. But, thankfully, Ron's comment irked me into action. Otherwise, I would have hesitated, allowing her beauty to intimidate me, fearing she wouldn't be attracted to a guy without arms.

"Not if I get there first!" I said.

Defiantly, I sprang up and walked across the room to meet her. I remember the gleam in her piercing blue-green eyes as I introduced myself. She told me that she had heard about me through her job and that she had always wanted to hear me speak. Flattered, I thanked her for coming.

Though I have been speaking to groups for 15 years, the speech I gave that night was like no other I have delivered before or since. I was nervous but not for all of the usual reasons a speaker gets nervous. I could see Christine clearly from the podium, and I wanted her to enjoy what I said and to respect me for saying it. As I spoke, all of the other audience members faded.

"You're a funny speaker," Christine said afterward. I asked her if she wanted to go out for a drink. We all went to a nearby lounge, and I, of course, sat next to Christine. We talked effortlessly.

Christine was different, comfortable to be with. I felt no need to impress her. I didn't feel guarded. The cynicism and fear that usually clouded my head and hardened my heart were gone.

When it came time to say goodbye, Christine invited me to a pool party she was

hosting the following weekend in St. Louis, where she lived. Though I was delighted, I felt uneasy about going to a party where I wouldn't know anyone. Then I remembered that Emma and Jim would be there, which was reassuring.



Jim and I went to the party together. I met Christine's entire family, and we visited over a meal of hot dogs and hamburgers, which I ate with my feet. What were they thinking?

I debated internally whether or not to go for a swim. I knew that once I took off my shirt and exposed my stubs, Christine's nieces and nephew would ask all sort of questions. But, this was a pool party. Christine said she loved the water. It would have been easier to have muscular arms under my shirt, but long before that day, I had come to terms with the fact that my disability would never change. I had been down the self-pity road before, and it was a dead end! I needed to take the higher road, to show her confidence. And kids' questions were a good way to break the ice. So, I sat on a lounge chair, pulled off my shirt with my toes, and jumped into the pool. As

I suspected, the kids asked their questions. I answered matter-of-factly.

Before I left, I asked Christine if she would like to go out to dinner Saturday night. "Yes," she said, without hesitation. As my one-hour drive home from St. Louis sped by, her "yes" played over and over in my mind. Happiness spread down to my toes.

As the new week began, I couldn't stop thinking about her. I counted the days until Saturday. With only two days remaining, on Thursday afternoon, I had to go back to St. Louis for an appointment. I realized that I would finish my meeting about the time that Christine got off work. I am driving all the way over to St. Louis, and I will be close to where she lives, I thought. I'd really like to see her.

Often, when two people first begin to date, an invisible "person" visits them in the form of a voice in their minds, speaking to their insecurities and past hurts. Sometimes it starts to strategize and calculate the next move for them. "Is this the right time to call?" it asks. "Maybe it's too soon." Sometimes, the voice simply

prevents them from enjoying the moment, asking sabotaging questions like "What is she thinking?" and "Does he like me?"

By Thursday, the insecure voice in my head was running amuck, asking all sorts of questions. I called Jim and explained my concerns. "Everything is already set up for our date on Saturday," I said. "I don't want to come on too strong. Maybe I should leave well enough alone?"

When I finally finished, there was a long silence on the phone. Finally, Jim spoke in his monotone voice. "You're plotting, but not about how to see Christine," he said. "You're wondering how to protect yourself from getting hurt." The voice of truth!

How many times had I been hurt before? In high school, some girls slighted me in favor

of hooking up with my athletic buddies. In college, my Spring Formal date cancelled at the last minute with some lame excuse. In my early 20s, a young lady stood me up and left me standing in a restaurant parking lot for over an hour. And, there was the woman who fell asleep on my couch while I cooked her dinner. And now, could I trust Christine?

Through the line, Jim's voice brought my thoughts back. "Get out of your head and into your heart," he said. "Be authentic; tell her that you want to see her."

Jim helped me to see that I had developed a deep wound of rejection. Over time, a scab of fear had grown over the injury, and now it was exuding frustration and resignation. Just removing my shirt at a pool and pretending to be confident was not going to do it. Healing meant stripping myself of something else, of my deeply held belief that no woman could love *me* – a man without arms. I had to be truly open to the possibility that Christine might like me.

I took a deep breath and called Christine.

I simply told her that I would be in the neighborhood and that I'd like to see her. I proposed that we get a cup of coffee. She agreed.

We met at Borders and talked about the happenings of our week. A couple of hours flew by.

On Saturday night, Christine answered the door wearing a stunning short black dress. Her gold hair was drawn up into big, alluring curls. We went to Bar Italia, a sophisticated restaurant in St. Louis' cosmopolitan Central West End district. On the wrought-iron-fenced terrace, we dined over a delectable meal of veal and red wine. We talked about our families, friends and religion. We laughed about past dating misadventures. There was never an awkward silence. That night, the hesitant, insecure voice in my head kept silent.

Depending on the formality of a restaurant, I sometimes take off the sock covering my left foot when I eat. I hold the utensil in my toes. So after dinner, I reclined in my chair resting my bare foot on my knee under the table.

While I was sharing a story, I felt the warm, tender touch of Christine's hand holding my foot. The gleam in her eye was stronger than ever. No woman had ever expressed such intimate affection to me before. I instantly knew I could trust her.

I was swept off my feet! Several weeks later, after 54 days of dating, we were engaged.

In the end, Christine says it best: "You can't control who you fall in love with." ■

About the Author

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