

*When
is My
Forever*

BY

Aileen Friedman

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*Thank you Lord Jesus
for your love and mercy
and for blessing me
with my family whom I love so much.
I am truly blessed.*

*Phil 4:13 'I can do all things through Christ who
strengthens me.'*

1.

Driving past the pick-up-and-go for the fifth time, I was quickly losing my patience. Dena, my mother, was supposed to have been there waiting for me. According to the person who had answered the phone at the information desk, her flight had landed forty-five minutes ago – yet there was still no sign of her. This was typical of her, so allowing myself to get irritated over her actions made my annoyance even greater.

The fact that I had to fetch her from the airport was unusual. Her fancy Mercedes Benz S-Class was at the workshop after it had broken down five meters from our house that morning, almost making her late for her flight to Johannesburg. I'd had to get up at four o'clock to drop her off whilst being forced to listen to her high-pitched whining for the entire thirty kilometres. It was no wonder I'd been in a bad mood the entire day.

On my eighth round past the pick-up-and-go station, just as I had had enough and was about to leave, there she was. I almost waved and drove on, but my conscience kept me from doing so. Standing with her arm outstretched, she signalled to me as though I were a taxi and as though I would miss her.

One couldn't miss Dena. She was an attractive woman of fifty-five. With her bottle-blond hair and all the immaculate grooming that money could buy, she looked at least ten years younger. Her lengthy high heels added height to her already tall frame. She had an aura about her that demanded attention the minute you set eyes on her, and she looked like she would easily devour anyone who was not careful to treat her as she expected.

She took her gracious time getting into my car while another car waited patiently for the spot we were in. Not that this concerned her at all; she was of the opinion that life was always all about her.

'Why are you late?' she accused me before she'd even greeted me.

Glaring at her, I struggled to contain my anger. I snarled through my clenched jaw that I'd been around the airport eight times and asked her what on earth had taken her so flipping long. She calmly told me about someone she had met on the plane and how they had enjoyed each other's company so much. No doubt it was a man, and, not wanting to hear any further details, I told her to keep it to herself as I was not interested. We drove in silence for the rest of the way home, thank goodness.

Dena had raised me with a nanny, Josie. My father, I had never known. Apparently he'd left us when I was two years old, and, quite frankly, if my mother had been the way she was now, I can't say I blamed him. Since he had never bothered to be a part of my life, I was not bothered to find him or find out about him. Dena was hard enough to deal with.

I had been told that I looked more like him than Dena. I had natural blonde hair, which I never missed a chance to remind Dena of when she was in one of her spiteful moods. I had green eyes and strong, rather unfeminine features. The only trait I seemed to have inherited from Dena was my height.

I completely understood that she'd had no husband to help her while I was growing up, but she'd had no shortage of partners throughout my life, too many that I cared to remember.

It had taken her a quick two years to gain a senior position in the investment company in which she worked, and it was another four years until she was director and a member of the Board. That put me at about eight years old when she became Miss Most Important Selfish Person in the World, even more so than she had been before.

When Josie finished work at five o'clock, I would go home with her to her house until my mother would eventually pick me up on her way home from work. When I was about thirteen I started staying at home on my own rather than go to Josie's, but I always kept the phone by my side with Josie's number on speed dial.

Every moment that Dena wasn't at the office, she spent either working from home, at beauty parlours, or at social events that suited her needs. When I did not want to go with her for a full day of people touching me and putting creams and smelly stuff on my face, she would throw a tantrum and accuse me of never wanting to spend quality time with her. It was no use accusing her in return or reminding her of the many, many hours I had spent alone in the house, or of the important events in my life that she had just not bothered to show up for. No, I quickly learnt that the best way to handle her outbursts was to leave the house. Most times I would go to Josie's to escape my mother's wrath.

Our relationship was a volatile one and we were never close or loving towards each other. It was merely one in which we went through the motions; Dena always terribly concerned about what others thought. Since I could remember, I would endlessly dream of one day being as far away from her as possible, happy and with a family of my own – the complete opposite of what I had known all my life.

Arriving home from the airport, Josie, who had become our maid in later years, was there to greet us. She was my surrogate mother, my confidant, and she greeted me with a curious smile which I knew translated into, 'How is her mood, must I tread on eggshells or not?'

I smirked and Josie knew I meant, 'Yep, stay away.'

I had never wanted for anything materialistic in my life. I went to the best school money could buy and always had the most fashionable wardrobe in comparison to all my snobbish school acquaintances. Of all the designer outfits hanging in my closet I preferred jeans and T-shirts. I had been the first in my class to get a car and it hadn't just been any car, it had been a Mercedes Benz and yet, I had never been an overly happy child. I would spend every free moment I had in my room or with Josie and her daughter, Patty, who had always been a real friend to me, more like a sister.

After giving Josie a hug I immediately retreated to my room and to my books once again to finish the assignment that needed to be submitted in two days' time.

After graduating from school, everyone, especially Dena, had assumed I would go to the best and greatest university and get a degree in something Dena wanted me to study. The application forms were shoved in my face on many occasions along with a string of threats and tantrums. I did not budge. I found myself being stronger than Josie, Patty or I had ever imagined I could be in resisting Dena. I got my way on the condition that I went to work for a company she recommended and that I studied investment banking part-time.

I did both for a year, then resigned and started with an Events Management diploma. I cannot explain or describe the scene that took place that night. I only really remember that it would have made an award-winning scene from a movie and that I had walked out and gone to a hotel for a few nights until she had calmed down.

My room wasn't just a room but a cottage on the side of the house. It had a quaint feel to it with a thatched roof, wooden floors and large sliding doors in every room rather than windows. The lounge, kitchen and dining room were open-plan. There were two bedrooms; mine an en suite and the other had a guest bathroom between the two bedrooms. I used the spare room as a study since I never really had guests.

I had wanted to move into a place of my own when I started working at Luxous, a furniture manufacturing company in Somerset West. But, when Dena suggested renovating the house for me I was touched as this was very out of character for her. I could come and go without ever having to enter the main house, which suited us both.

Josie lived with her husband Marco, and Patty, in a small house in the Strand area. I was convinced that Josie could have found employment elsewhere and have a better employer by far, but she loved me like a daughter and I would be forever grateful to her for sticking with us – without her who knows how I would've turned out.

Patty and I made our way through the crowds and crowds of people mingling about at the annual car show that always took place at the Aerodrome in the Cape Town city centre.

Patty loved cars, bikes, planes and anything that had an engine. Josie constantly joked that she should have been born a boy. She always preferred to be with her father, Marco, either at his workshop or at home working on their car in the garage with him.

Once she finished school, Patty went to work with Marco at his workshop, where, besides doing the usual car repairs, they also renovated vintage cars.

She was a tomboy but an elegant one at that. Josie had fought hard and well to nurture a little princess in Patty throughout her early youth, but to no avail. Perhaps this was why Josie had always been so fond of me – I did all the girly things with her that Patty just wasn't interested in.

Patty was almost as tall as I was, with dark hair and eyes that her Spanish genes provided through her father.

Dena's famous words to Josie on many occasions were, 'Why doesn't that daughter of yours do something with her appearance? She could pass as a lady instead of a common girl.'

It would infuriate me but Josie always said, 'Take it from whence it comes and just ignore her.'

Marco and Patty had both been slightly jealous, even if they'd never said as much, of the Mercedes Benz I'd received from Dena when I'd turned sixteen. But I'd hardly ever driven it – Patty always had the honour of driving it every morning when she dropped me at my school on the way to hers, and when she picked me up in the afternoon on her way home.

As soon as I was able to, I'd sold it and bought myself a small Golf convertible. Marco, Patty and my mother were horrified; Josie gave me a high five.

As we walked through the show, Patty gave me a detailed description of every car we past or stopped to look at, even

those that I never even knew existed. I merely listened without putting anything she said to memory. Naturally Patty knew a lot of the people at the auto shows, having been to most of them, so, in between stopping to look at the cars, we stopped to chat to a number of people. I tagged along beside her, trying to look as inconspicuous as possible. Often I would be asked for my opinion and every time I would see Patty freeze, fearing how I might reply. It gave me great pleasure to tease Patty because she knew this would happen and she knew I would answer with a load of rubbish. Sometimes she would cut in before I had a chance to reply and inform the poor person that I did in fact not know anything and that I was only there as her best friend. On the odd occasion though, I made her pay for dragging me around for hours amongst cars, cars and more cars and all their spare parts.

‘What do you think of the new V8 compared to the last model?’ the young enthusiast had asked me.

‘Well, it’s certainly a different colour this time and I’m pretty sure the last one also had four wheels so then I guess there is not much difference,’ I had replied smiling at Patty.

‘Don’t take any notice of her! Vanda, stop it please!’ Patty had hastily taken my arm and dragged me along to the next car.

I did enjoy going with her, we always had fun wherever we went. As we finally sat down to have something to eat at the tables in the middle of the food court, I noticed that some of the lads Patty had been talking to earlier were approaching our table, and I told Patty as much.

‘Oh please Vanda, don’t speak about anything car related please, please?’

I smiled at her; it was always such a pleasure to see her beg me to keep quiet. She never knew if I would keep my word or not. They joined us and spoke to Patty about the cars and the show. I looked around and amused myself watching the different shapes and forms of so many different people pass by. Whenever I was asked a question I shoved some of my burger into my mouth so that I had an excuse not to answer. On any other subject though, I spoke without hesitation.

I noticed that Patty seemed particularly interested in talking to a certain lad called Liam. When I excused myself to go to the ladies' room, Patty remained keenly in conversation with Liam.

For the rest of the car show we wandered around as a group. It was surprisingly pleasant, even though I was the only one not learned in the automotive world. The people I had just met were well-mannered and full of laughs. Not what I had expected at all.

As Josie always told me, 'Do not judge a book by its cover, beneath the dusty covers lies a body of feelings.'

I would always reply, 'That means Dena's book is the shortest story in the world,' and she would giggle and tell me not to be nasty.

Somehow amid all the chaos and other people, Marco and Josie managed to find us, and, after a quick introduction, Marco was talking and comparing notes with the young enthusiasts and they were in awe of his knowledge, hanging onto his every word.

Josie and I grabbed the opportunity to escape and get some ice-cream and talk about anything not car related. After buying our ice-creams we linked our free arms and wandered, without any sort of direction, between cars and groups of people.

I stiffened for a second and gripped Josie's arm tightly, dragging her in another direction. Josie, not at all expecting such a sudden motion, stumbled as she tried to firstly, figure out what had happened and secondly, to correct her footing.

'What are you doing?' she scolded me.

'I'm so sorry, I just saw one of my bosses, the nasty one, and I really do not want to be anywhere near him.'

We picked up our pace, still with our arms linked, and found our way back to our group.

The rest of the day we spent amongst the cars and people and I nervously watched out for Trey. I found him to be a despicable person, rude and arrogant and with no regard for anyone but himself.

Alongside the car show and starting at eight o'clock that evening, our favourite local band was performing. As the time drew closer, we excitedly made our way there after saying goodbye to Marco and Josie who did not share our enthusiasm for loud music and screaming fans – they elected rather to go to a restaurant for some quality time alone.

Patty and Liam could not be separated; I had never seen Patty so eager to remain in a male's company since I'd known her. Liam was the same height as Patty, with ginger hair and deep green eyes. He had sharp but kind features, a soft voice and a seemingly gentle nature.

The band struck the first few beats and the frenzy began. We danced, we jumped, we screamed at the band, we screamed at each other – sometimes just for the fun of it and sometimes to actually try and say something above the noise. With our new group of friends we were ten and here on mutual ground it felt as though we'd known one another forever.

After the show and several encores, we were not ready for the night to be over, and so off we headed to a restaurant-type bar that always stayed open until about three o'clock in the morning. Naturally Patty and Liam sat together while I sat opposite them, enjoying the rest of the conversation while even enduring the occasional car chatter.

Finally Liam said he had to go otherwise he would not get up in time and the rest of the group agreed with him.

'What have you got to get up for? It's Sunday tomorrow,' I asked, curious.

Liam looked at me in surprise as he answered, 'For church!'

Thursday was the day we had our meetings. An odd day on which to have them, but since the boss, Mr Drake, wanted them on this day we did not dare argue. Though on many occasions, the sales staff pleaded to have the meetings moved to another day as they needed to see clients on Thursdays. We all requested the weekly meeting to be moved to a Friday but this interfered with Mr Drake's personal life and was therefore not approved.

Trey was his usual awful self, yelling and demoralising the sales staff. It was no wonder the staff turnover was so high in this company. I, for one, couldn't see myself staying on much longer. Trey seemed to think that because Mr Drake was such an awful boss he should emulate him or be worse. I had seen grown men get up and walk out of the meeting, crying, never to return because of Trey.

After an hour of our bosses complaining at everyone's performances and lack of targets being met, we left the meeting to go back to our respective offices.

This is almost your last year, just get your diploma then you can leave, stick it out Vanda, I kept telling myself.

The urge to hand in my resignation was so overpowering at times that it took an immense amount of self-control and willpower, and also a lot of convincing from Josie, for me to stay. Fortunately, I was just a junior employee and therefore not in the monster bosses' firing line and so I managed to hold out.

I got home, threw my bag on the chair in my room and was busy taking off my shoes when I heard Dena knock on my door and enter without waiting for me to respond, as was our habit. I was usually a bit more cautious entering her house than she was mine, because I was never sure whether she would be alone or entertaining a male "friend".

'I have an event you can do for your diploma on the tenth of March. One of the junior bankers is having a surprise party for her parents' fortieth wedding anniversary and when I told her that you're studying event management she agreed to speak with you.' Dena sounded impressed with

herself and at the same time I heard, ‘You can’t do this without me,’ in her voice.

‘Thanks Mom, I appreciate it, I’ll call her tomorrow.’

I was grateful for the opportunities I got via Dena’s contacts. I knew very well I would not have been able to do the practical side of this course on my own, especially when it came to the quality of events I had been fortunate enough to organise. I showed my appreciation every time, even when the deal did not go through. But, when out of spitefulness she would tell other people that I could not do it without her, she really got my blood boiling. It was an endless tug of war that existed between the two of us, a constant battle of malice and resentment.

She put the contact details on the kitchen counter and left. I picked up the note, and, reading the name whilst opening the fridge to look for something to eat, I felt excited. I really did enjoy this line of work and I knew the choice I had made to change my career had been the right one.

I phoned Patty to tell her and she was as happy as I was. I was chatting to her and was about to sit down on my bed, when suddenly I heard thunder roll and lightning strike so loudly that the glass doors of my cottage shook viciously. I got such a fright that I missed the bed, falling to the floor with a thud and rolling over onto my side with the momentum, my legs, arms and the phone sent sprawling in different directions. When I had untangled myself and found the phone Patty was still on the other end calling my name. I burst out laughing, trying, between guffaws of laughter to explain to her what had happened. In Strand, a few kilometres away, Patty was experiencing the same wild weather as Somerset West and she just laughed at me.

When we finally calmed down enough to have a decent chat, she told me that Liam had contacted her and that they were going out on an official date. She did not seem to be nervous, but was more anxious as to whether she should get dressed up or not. They were going to the same restaurant we had gone to after the rock concert, so she couldn’t decide.

We spoke for at least an hour before hanging up. I was so happy for her, she was a stunning woman and deserved nothing less than a man that would treasure her. The fact that Liam was a petrol-head and had already been introduced to Marco, made him even more of a perfect candidate. I couldn't wait to visit their home the next day, well aware of how Marco, Josie and I would tease Patty to bits. She wouldn't mind though, we all loved a joke and often teased one another.

On my way to work in the morning I phoned Marlette to arrange a meeting. As there was only a month and a half until her parents' anniversary, she was eager to meet with me that same day, and hurriedly I agreed to meet during lunch.

Marlette was punctual and very much to the point. I could see why she was in banking. She never smiled, wanted to discuss business and leave; which she did after a single cup of coffee and twenty minutes of my time.

'She definitely works with my mother,' I snickered to myself.

Josie and I sat on Patty's bed while she got ready for her date with Liam. We tried really hard to make her nervous but the more we tried the more relaxed she became. Not exactly the reaction we were hoping for and not exactly a normal reaction when anticipating a first date. But, Patty was special that way. She giggled, jumped up off the bed after finally putting on her shoes and announced that she was ready. She looked lovely; casual but elegant at the same time, wearing black pants with a blue long-sleeved shirt, a denim jacket and a scarf.

We made our way from the bedroom to the living room where Marco was comfortably nestled on the couch in front of the TV. Josie was tripping and skipping behind Patty, squealing at Marco to look at their daughter ready to go on her date. Marco looked sideways, gave her a long stare and turned to the TV again as he casually said, 'Josie, lock the door, my baby girl stays a baby girl. No dating allowed.'

Patty sat next to her dad and cuddled up to him, ‘Just think Daddy, there will be another man in the house, sort of evens things out here a bit, don’t you think?’

She put her arm around him. I loved the affection that so spontaneously swung around the house. It was a home, and once you were in it you never wanted to leave. It’s not as if this was Patty’s first date, we had both dated less than most but more than a few times, but this was the first time I had seen Patty so comfortable with someone. It was as though she knew this was it, the last of the enduring dates searching for the perfect partner. As for me, I was far from nearing the end, or so I thought.

Before long, there was a knock at the door. Patty wrestled herself from her father’s arms and let Liam in, who was smartly dressed in jeans and a casual brown shirt. He greeted everyone politely and after a few pleasantries they left.

There was no way I was going home – I was definitely sleeping over so that I could get the low-down from Patty the minute she walked in the door; I didn’t care what time it was.

Josie and I sat in the kitchen nook and she helped me plan the anniversary event. Fortunately I had been given a reasonable budget to work with. We went through my trusted checklist, googled venues and caterers and had our usual bag of laughs with coffee and popcorn. We enjoyed recording Marco snoring obscenely while fast asleep on the couch, with the intention of using the video as a weapon against him one day. By eleven o’clock Josie was exhausted and made her way to bed, dragging Marco with her. I made myself comfortable on the couch to await Patty’s return.

I must have fallen asleep because suddenly I woke up to the sound of the front door being opened. I could hear Patty whispering her goodbyes to Liam and then the door clicked closed. I sat up like a bullet.

‘So, tell me!’ I urged without wasting a second.

Much to my amusement, Patty squealed as she took a few steps back. I giggled and had to cover my face with a

cushion to stifle my laughter for fear of waking up Marco and Josie.

‘Wow, you gave me such a fright!’ she said as she flopped onto the couch next to me.

For the next two hours I got a detailed, comprehensive, almost step-by-step re-enactment of how the evening had gone. She was glowing, clearly completely and utterly smitten and I presumed so was Liam. As expected they were meeting each other the next afternoon after lunch. Liam was first going to church and then to visit his parents before picking her up. She wasn’t sure where they were going and was not exactly bothered as long as she was with him.

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