

Paris is for Lovers

Finding Love After Loss

**BY GAIL CUSHMAN
& ROBERT MITCHELL**

“Oh my Gosh.... I’m 76 years old and twelve months a widow and now somebody I don’t know has asked me for a date.”

Robert and Gail live an unlikely love story, a love between two people, seeking and finding adventure, excitement and passion of young love – not at 20 or 40 or even 60, but rather at three-quarters of a century. Their story is of two people each happily married, deeply loving one person, sharing a full and good life, but suddenly left alone as death and grieving smashed their lives.

“Til death do us part” became a reality.

Through chance and circumstance, Robert and Gail found each other, not in the usual courtship ways of sock hops or malt shops in their youth, but on the modern courtship dance floor of life: the Internet. So, grab a chair while they tell the story of these two Stillwater County 80-year-old residents.

Gail and Robert lived in two different states (Idaho and Montana), with dissimilar backgrounds, (an educator and a rancher/pilot), city and country, a Lexus and a Ford Pickup. They both loved travel and the thrill of discovering and exploring new things, and somehow, they were able to bond to each other’s soul. (How corny does that sound?) Here’s some background.

Gail and Tom had been married 51.8 years, but she always increased it by two years to 53.8 because he was sick for two years, and she said those two years meant extra credit. He was a former Marine and judge, and died with Agent Orange diseases, six if you counted.

Robert and Patty had been married

42 years. She died of colon cancer and lived at home until she passed away. Robert held her hand as she took her last breath.

It was 2020 and COVID was real and rampant: regulations, masks, spacing and fear added to the grim task of trying to get on with life. People who were friends of each drew back because COVID was always on peoples’ minds and sharing time with widows and widowers was not high on anyone’s list. In this isolation, Gail and Robert separately tried to figure out what was next. These are their stories.

Gail’s story

Gail is a writer and was checking out a free dating site to gather background for a book she was writing. A guy from Montana showed up on her online dating platform, 77 years old, widowed, a rancher by profession. He wrote, “You are standing by a lock. What lock? Where is it?”

“Panama Canal. I’ve been through it three times.”

“We need to talk,” Robert started in his next text message. Over the next two weeks, texting between these two consumed a major portion of time. Robert was driving a grain truck for his son-in law in Huntley and drummed out a text every time he stopped, flirting with Gail and laughing at her clever rejoinders. Finally, one late evening he typed, “Do you know how to swim?”

Gail was puzzled. What the heck did he mean? Were they going for a dip in a lake or was he talking about a dating pool. She taught swimming and lifeguarded in her younger days and still enjoyed going for a swim now and then. She typed, “Sure, why? Do you have a swimming pool? I enjoy the water and passed the Marine Corps swim test on the first try.” She thought



Robert Mitchell and Gail Cushman in Paris, where they tied the knot after meeting through online dating at ages 76 and 77.

she might as well get the Marine Corps thing out there, in case he had ideas about drowning her. He didn't answer, but asked another question.

"Do you have a passport?"

"Well, duh. I love to travel," she said. "I just got back from Panama. Besides that, I've traveled to 27 countries, been bitten by camels, ridden an elephant, and been bucked off a dolphin."

"You rode a dolphin? I'm not sure about that, but here is question three. Do you want to go to Paris?"

Was this an invitation, a casual comment, or was he scamming her? She hadn't been to Paris, somehow

missed it on her various trips around the globe, but would gladly go. "Why do you ask about Paris?" she asked cleverly. The phone went silent.

He didn't answer, but said, "I gotta go. I'm almost home and it is past midnight." And he was gone.

Gail's brain was doing cartwheels. Swim. Passport. Paris. Did he want to swim to France? It was a mighty long way, and they would have to cross the Bermuda Triangle. Was he going to throw her off some raft and she'd be on her own? Would he steal her passport and use it to take some chickadee to Paris and leave her in the lurch? There were a lot of questions to be answered.

She was in a quandary. He was interesting, but he had also dropped her faster than a hot potato.

That night turned out to be a rather sleepless night for both of them, 600 miles apart. She was curious about his three questions because she was always on the lookout for a good writing story, and called him early the next morning. She didn't miss any words, "Why did you ask the question about Paris?" She smiled to herself in anticipation of what he would say.

There was a long pause, and she thought he had chickened out and gone back to the Coors silo. After a few seconds, he said in a low, slow drawl, "That's easy: Paris is for lovers."

Oh my, she wasn't expecting that. His answer tugged at her heart, and she anticipated what he would say next. He was an interesting man, for sure. His questions, answers and timing hooked her. He was flirty, funny and romantic. A winning trifecta.

Robert's story

Patty had been sick for three years, and died in December. He arranged for her to be buried at St. Olaf's, but the ground in Montana stayed frozen, and she wasn't buried until April. Those four months left Robert plenty of time feeling lonely, sorry for himself and trying to figure out what came next. He and his grandson, Riley, drove out to St. Olaf's and used Riley's backhoe to dig the grave. As they loaded up, Riley said, "How about a beer at the 307?" That day at the 307 was a turning point.

They parked in the big lot and strolled into the bar, mud on their boots, dirty from working and tired, but it was the first time in months Robert felt alive. Riley said, "We gotta talk, Grandpa." As they sat down, Robert contemplated what his grandson would talk to him about, considering Riley might be planning to send him to "the home". Riley only said, "Grandpa, you need to get out."

"Get out? What do you mean?"

Riley stared at him and started to talk, "Date, Grandpa. You need to date.

Grandma told me before she died that you would just sit in your old recliner and watch cable news all day until you withered away and died. She said you needed to find someone else to share your life. She made me promise to talk to you about it."

Robert started to laugh, "Me? Date? I'm 76 years old. I have a new knee, and lots of other aches and pains. Besides that, I don't know anyone who might be interested in me."

"Internet date, Grandpa. Crank up your old computer and get with it. Internet dating... you know, online dating? There are plenty of sites, like farmersonly.com, silversingles.com and christianmingle.com. Find one you like and register and see what happens. You know how to use a computer. Just try it out."

With that Riley walked out the door.

Riley didn't know it, but his grandpa had already checked out the Costco women who give out samples, which got him thrown out of Costco. He had eyed the several widows at church, but figured dating one of those would be suicide. He wanted a classy lady, and meeting one in a Montana bar was unlikely, so he googled Internet dating and dived in.

Robert had a ball. Online he met all kinds of silver-haired vixens from all over the Treasure State. He even had a schedule of talking to Monica in Glasgow at 7 on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Julie from Missoula on Tuesday evening and MSU professor Wilma later in the evenings.

Then one day while scrolling he saw a picture of a nice-looking lady standing by a set of locks and asked, "Where are those locks?" And that, friends, was the start of something big.

Gail was witty, clever and interesting. They talked about their past, their lost mates, their families. She and Robert both went to college in Texas, Robert to Texas A&M, the boy's school, and she to Texas Women's University, the girl's school. Robert laughs when he teases her, telling the story, "Aggies were supposed to date TWU girls, because, you know, they

understood TWU girls were easy.

They both were Lutherans, both had two children and grandchildren. They also discovered a love of traveling; Gail had been to 27 countries on cruises and Robert had been a corporate aviation pilot and traveled the world working for aviation companies.

This whirlwind courtship really got started after the "Paris is for Lovers" comment. They decided to have a dinner date in Idaho Falls, halfway between Columbus and Boise. Robert thought West Yellowstone was halfway, but he soon found out about Gail's analytical mind when she said, "Halfway is Idaho Falls, 302.1 miles from Boise and 301 miles from Columbus.

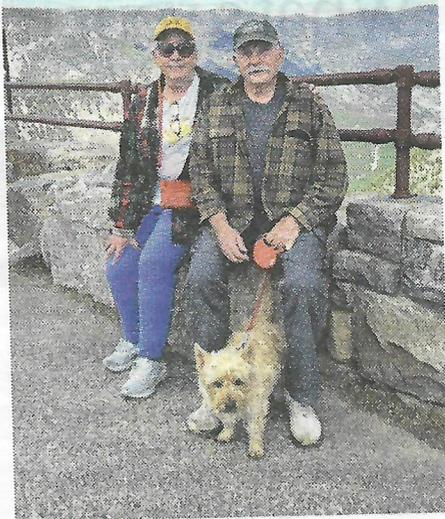
Date number one: Dinner at the Sandpiper Restaurant in aforementioned Idaho Falls, where they spent a couple hours getting to know each other. The server was brand new and asked why they took so long to eat dinner and they told her it was their first date. The Sandpiper comped the dinner.

Date number two: Gail had already purchased tickets for an Alaskan Cruise and invited Robert to go. Her neighbors, kids, grandkids and friends had turned her down. It was during COVID and nobody wanted to go anywhere. Robert said "no," but on the next day he called her and said "yes." No comped meals, but the younger cruisers doted on them, and drinks were on the house.

Date number three: Gail drove to Montana and they went sight-seeing, riding in Robert's red Mustang convertible, ending up on the Beartooth Highway. They went to dinner at The Griz in Roscoe, and, yes, the meal was comped.

They agreed, this online dating thing is A-Okay!

As of this publication, Robert and Gail have been on 6 cruises, traveled to Nome, Alaska three times, took Robert's boat down the Erie Canal, spent many nights aboard the boat Far West at Cooney and other Montana lakes. They have traveled across the



Robert Mitchell and Gail Cushman at the Beartooth Highway during one of their early dates.

United States twice, to California twice and always come back to Stillwater County.

Robert asked and she finally said "yes." They officially tied the knot last year in Paris.

Gail and Robert have written a book about online dating for seniors (Loving Again, available on Amazon under both names Gail Cushman and/or Robert Mitchell).

Gail also writes columns for the Stillwater County News, and manages to write about one fiction mystery book a year, available on Amazon, using Gail Cushman or Helene Mitchell. And she writes at least one blog a week found on Facebook, under her name or Wrinkly Bits. Her many readers say she reminds them of Erma Bombeck.

Robert writes Cowboy Poetry, and is writing a mystery novel of his own.

They are hard to pin down, except every Friday night they are on a date, always!

Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving in a pretty and well preserved body but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming, Wow, what a ride.

Hunter S Thompson