



T H E  
C O U R S E  
O F

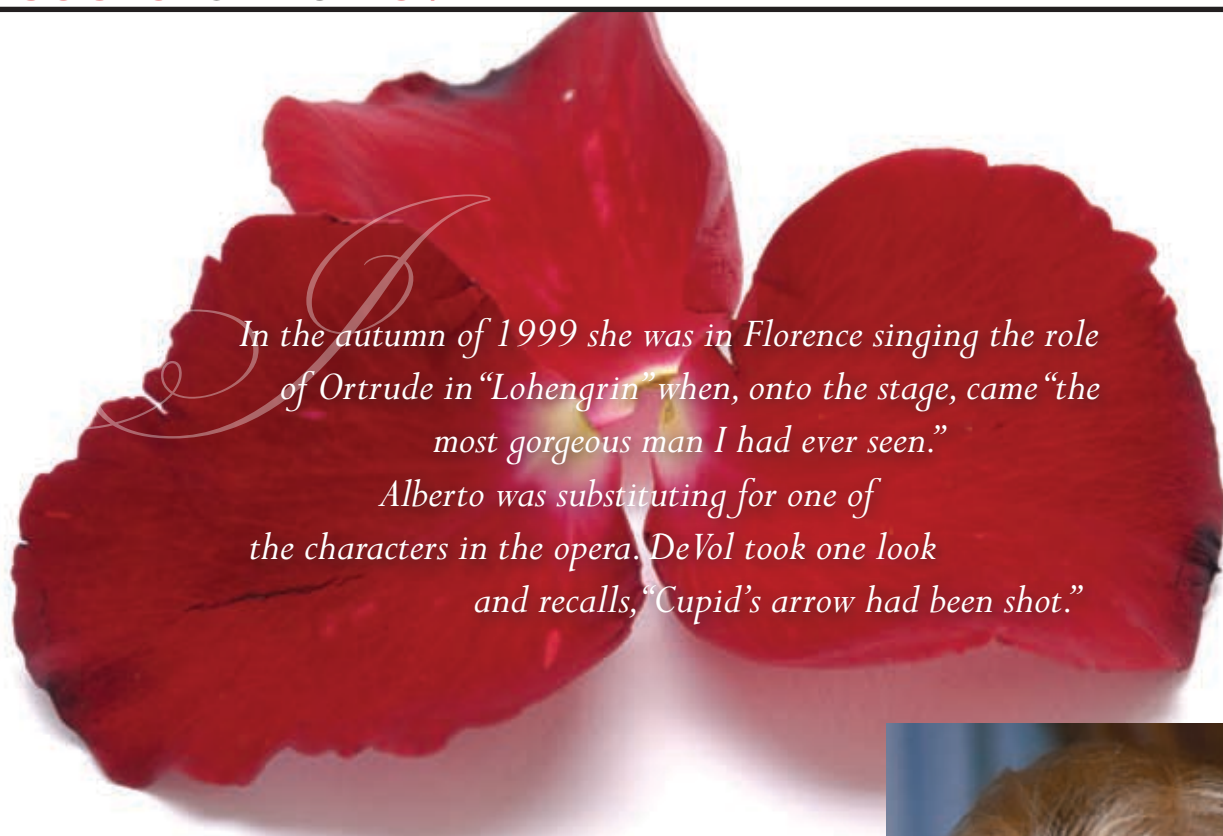
# TRUE LOVE

BY ELLEN STERLING



Shakespeare said, "When love speaks, the voice of all the gods makes heaven drowsy with the harmony." Erich Segal said, "Love is never having to say you're sorry." And a lot of other people have said lots of other things about love. What all the stories and words and experiences teach us is that we cannot define love and all we do know about it is that every love story has an ending that, at the outset, we cannot predict. Some are bittersweet; some are sweet. Some—works in progress—are open-ended.

Here, in celebration of Valentine's Day, is one of each.



*In the autumn of 1999 she was in Florence singing the role of Ortrude in “Lohengrin” when, onto the stage, came “the most gorgeous man I had ever seen.”*

*Alberto was substituting for one of the characters in the opera. DeVol took one look and recalls, “Cupid’s arrow had been shot.”*

**FIRST, THE “BITTERSWEET”**

Las Vegas resident Luana DeVol is an opera singer who has sung myriad roles at all the fabled opera houses: Milan’s La Scala (“It’s amazing. You can feel the ghosts of all the great singers.”), at the Bayreuth Festival in Germany and in Italy and Spain. She made her debut with New York City’s Metropolitan Opera in 2006.

In the autumn of 1999 she was in Florence singing the role of Ortrude in “Lohengrin” when, onto the stage, came “the most gorgeous man I had ever seen.” Alberto was substituting for one of the characters in the opera. DeVol took one look and recalls, “Cupid’s arrow had been shot. He smiled at me and that was the beginning. We began with coffee, it turns out he was a widower. He took me on first date by car into the mountains of Florentine and we visited a monastery.”

From the beginning their biggest barrier was language. Her Italian was limited to the parts she had to learn for opera and the basics. His English was practically non-existent. But, she says, “We understood each other beautifully. He’s a fabulous artist, a great sculptor.

“During the rehearsals we would go for coffee. He took me to his villa on the outside of Florence. He is a count—Florentine royalty—and retired military. He has two

daughters. One was married and one lived with him. We discovered that our senses of humor were similar, but it was a visual thing because we couldn’t really converse.”

Despite that, DeVol says Alberto was “very romantic — tender and strong. On our first date, we were driving and passed a circle interchange. All of sudden he went around the circle, stopped, parked the car and got out. He had seen some roses and he picked them for me. On our dates he always made sure there was always something beautiful to do. He took photos or had passersby take them of us and he made a couple of albums for me.”

Listening to Luana DeVol talk about this Italian idyll it is clear that as beautiful as it was, it was also difficult.

“We were together a couple of months. I could say, ‘Hello, Alberto,’ but I couldn’t tell him what I had been doing and he couldn’t tell me what he has been doing. It was really two different worlds. He was very conflicted as well. It was his first romance after the death of his wife.”

While she says there was “definitely a very, very strong connection and romance, staying would have meant giving up a thriving career. His world is in Florence. Our lifestyles are completely different. I had to make the decision whether to get on the plane and leave



or to stay. It made me physically ill.”

She ultimately decided not to stay. “Alberto drove me to airport when I left. The day was terrible. It was dark, windy and stormy. And he said, ‘You see, even Florence is crying because you are leaving’.”

Looking back, she says, “I never believed in love a first sight but I was shaken to my core when I looked at him. It was just ‘POW!’ and it was returned.”

She and Alberto stayed in touch, exchanging birthday and Christmas cards. “The connection, that thread, is still there. I felt bad I missed his birthday last year so, this

year, I called him.

“When I called a woman answered the phone. It wasn’t either of his daughters and it wasn’t the good friend whom I knew. So I just hung up.”

#### NEXT, THE “SWEET”

Las Vegas resident Ursula Carco and Tom Gruenewald met at a club in Milwaukee in 1969. They’d been dating for a year when Tom received several hundred dollars in settlement money from a car accident. He was feeling flush. That night, they went to the elegant Pfister Hotel’s showroom to see Joan Rivers.

After the show,” Ursula recalls, “we were talking and mentioned the fact that Joan Rivers is from New York. Tom asked if I’d ever been there. I hadn’t and he said, ‘Let’s go.’

“I was thinking, ‘Okay, we’ll go sometime.’ He was thinking, ‘We’ll go tonight.’ He dropped me at my apartment, told me to pack and said he’d be back to pick me up in an hour or so. He was always quite the spontaneous guy, but this was amazing.

“When we got to the airport, the only available plane to New York went via Detroit. We got to the airport in Detroit late and missed our flight. They told us there was one more flight, but we’d have to hurry to catch it.”

They did catch it and found they were the only passengers on the aircraft. “It had been held over in Detroit for repairs and the scheduled passengers were put on another flight,” Ursula explains. “They moved us to first class, gave us champagne and good food and we were invited into the cockpit to watch the pilot fly the plane.”

The couple arrived in New York at about 2 a.m. and Tom immediately took Ursula to a bar called Noah’s Ark.

“I remember that because there was a picture — a print — on the wall that I liked and Tom talked the bartender into giving it to me,” she says.

They checked into the George Washington Hotel, a somewhat seedy place with a checkered past including being a brothel, a bootlegger’s haven and a 1930’s home to writer Christopher Isherwood and poet WH Auden. The early architectural plans for the World Trade Center were drawn there.

At any rate, Tom and Ursula stayed there for three days. “We shopped,” Ursula says. “I remember that he bought a Gucci tie. We didn’t take sightseeing tours. We just spent time walking. We went to the Village, Little

Italy and to Maxwell’s Plum. We took a hansom cab in Central Park. In the hansom cab, the driver handed Tom a lead pipe, saying, ‘You look like you can handle this if something goes wrong.’ The trip was wonderful.”

They returned to Milwaukee and dated for six months. “We had lots of adventures but, in the end, he was just too spontaneous for me and I broke up with him.”

They each married someone else. Coincidentally, Ursula’s husband was also named Tom. They stayed in touch and, by 1993 they were both divorced. They were married in 1994 and, in 2000, decided one thing they didn’t want to do any more was deal with winter in Milwaukee, so they moved to Las Vegas. It was not a spontaneous decision.

Ursula and Tom Gruenewald still have the picture the bartender in Noah’s Ark gave them.

#### FINALLY, THE “WORK IN PROGRESS”

Cara Roberts was born in Nebraska and moved to Denver. When she was working for the local government in public relations in 1997 she was assigned to Denver’s G8 Summit. There was an item she wanted to place in the local paper so she called the *Rocky Mountain Daily News* and asked to speak to the appropriate reporter, Norm Clarke.

“Then,” Roberts says, “I ran into him in a bar and introduced myself.”

She adds that Norm tells another story. “He remembers that around December, 1998, I’d just come from a party in downtown Denver and was on the Sixteenth Street Mall Shuttle Bus. I looked out the window and there was a guy standing buck naked in a phone booth.

“Right after that, my friends and I went into a bar where I saw Norm. I told him about the guy in the phone booth. He wrote an item

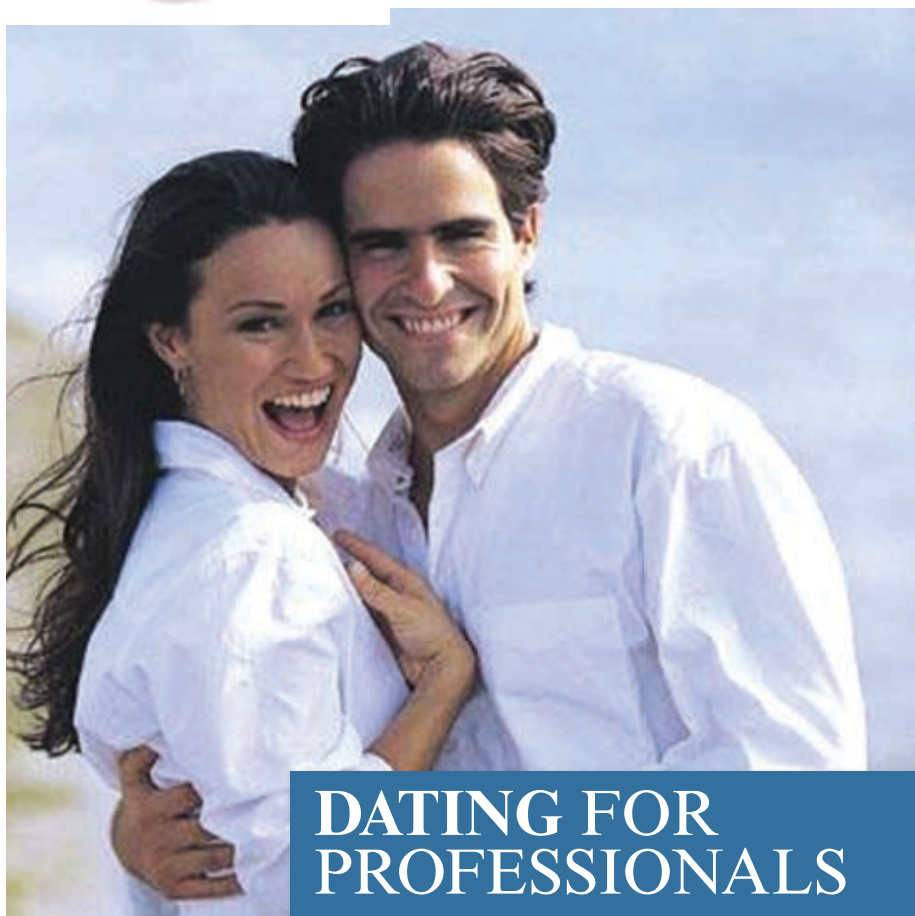


*“They moved us to first class,  
gave us champagne and  
good food and we were invited  
into the cockpit to watch  
the pilot fly the plane.”*





*He put the box with the necklace in a bag and tied the bag to helium balloons. Then he tied the balloons to our dog, Rumor, and put the dog in the bedroom.*



## DATING FOR PROFESSIONALS

Since 1996, we have been introducing successful singles to each other in Las Vegas. Our consultants carefully and systematically screen, evaluate and select candidates for membership.

**InterActions**

*providing the solution*

7391 W. Charleston Blvd. Suite 130  
Las Vegas, NV 89117 • (702) 262-9600

[www.interactionsdating.com](http://www.interactionsdating.com)

about it with the headline 'Cold Call'."

Norm moved to Las Vegas to begin writing "Las Vegas Confidential," his daily column in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. In 2003 Roberts came here for a bachelorette party. She emailed Clarke before she came. "He responded right away. We met at Nine Fine Irishmen at New York New York and we knew."

Roberts moved here in 2004 and she and Norm have lived together ever since. She's now the Public Relations Director for the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce.

"He's very romantic," she says. "He surprises me with flowers out of the blue all the time."

But, since the course of true love never does run smooth, there is the occasional glitch along the way.

"Last Valentine's Day Norm had gone out and bought me a heart necklace with diamonds. He was very excited about giving it to me. He had a big plan—he put the box with the necklace in a bag and tied the bag to helium balloons. Then he tied the balloons to our dog, Rumor, and put the dog in the bedroom.

"The dog was completely freaked out by the balloons and, when I got home and he opened the bedroom door the dog was frantic. I didn't even realize there was a present because I was just trying to calm him down. The dog needed therapy."

She adds, "Once the excitement had died down, he took me to Nove Italiano at The Palms. Our table overlooked The Strip and it was beautiful. To cap off the evening, there was a celebrity sighting. George Clooney and his then-girlfriend came in."

It was a lovely evening, a perfect Valentine's Day. We're still together and Rumor has a canine companion named Scandal. "You see," Roberts says, "there's always a rumor for Norm to chase and wherever there's a rumor, there's a scandal. So the new dog is named Scandal." □