

Fish Stories

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Although it had never been formally declared or written in cursive on a piece of parchment, Jolene understood her place in the family hierarchy. She was right there between the ancient golden retriever and the cat. She had chosen, at an earlier date, not to be a recalcitrant complainer but to bask in the reflected achievements of her husband and sons. Their job was to perform on the world's stage; her job was to sell popcorn, pom-poms, and programs and cheer loudly from the stands. Okay, she could do that. That she consumed a little too much of her products—candied popcorn, cookies, cakes, amazing garlic mashed potatoes, and an endless variety of soups and stews—was no one's fault but her own.

Years ago, after she mentioned Lauren and Alan's third trip to Paris in four years and the Hamiltons' plans for their twentieth anniversary, a Caribbean cruise with their entire family, Boyd had held her plump palms in his strong hands and said in a hushed tone, "I can't do all the things I need to do if you're unhappy." She had solemnly nodded and pushed all thoughts out of her head of strolling along the Seine holding hands or walking along a deck in white linen resort wear as the moon rose over the ocean.

Boyd was tall and handsome and smart and important, and he was married to her. Other women might have more romance in their lives, but she had Boyd. When the chitchat at her quilting group or Church socials turned to exotic locales, she deftly turned the conversation to the wonderfulness of Boyd.

Every evening after dinner, he closed the study doors and worked into the night, sacrificing himself, sacrificing his time with her; but she didn't complain. His work was too important—to them all, family and friends alike. Her husband was CEO of a major company developing green technology. She didn't come right out and say it to her friends—but she certainly implied it—that if

some of those technologies were successful, the planet would be saved, including the charming Hotel Lutèce on the Ile Saint Louis in Paris, the entire Royal Caribbean Cruise Line, and Mopion, a dollop of sand surrounded by translucent water that Jeannie Hamilton had described once too often. Conversations over the colors for the nine-patch block ceased when the other women realized that Boyd saving the planet trumped them all. Trips, dress sizes, doting children—all were trivial in comparison to a husband who was not only running the stake (six congregations and two small Spanish-speaking branches) but was also saving Mother Earth. Only once had she caught Lauren flashing Mary a look, but Mary had politely turned her head.

So Jolene had stood open-mouthed when Boyd announced his intention to take her with him to a conference in Hawaii. *You could have knocked me off my pins with a feather*, her great-aunt's favorite expression, bounced around in her head.

Early in August, she peered out the airplane window at the Kona Coast as they soared over clumps of palm trees hiding luxurious resorts. She held her breath. In six hours, she had not fluttered once about her fear of flying. Boyd neatly replaced the sheaf of papers he'd been studying in his leather briefcase.

"We're here," he said, smiling expansively.

With only a moment's trepidation, she felt the plane's tires touch down on the runway at Kailua Airport. Stepping down from the plane's aluminum stairs, she clutched her carry-on in her arms until she noticed the other women swinging their bags, laughing, and getting into the island mode. She relaxed her grip on the handle and hurried to keep up with Boyd's long strides.

An orchid, a resort ID card, and a smiling concierge gesturing toward the pools and the lobby were almost as wonderful as the moist air touching her skin. Jolene had shriveled up in the past two years, she was sure of it. Parched skin that no lotion could soften relaxed in the fragrant humidity. When she inhaled audibly on their way to their hotel room, Boyd turned to her and raised one disapproving eyebrow.

Muttering anxiously, almost to himself, he followed her into Room 235. He rattled off his list as he opened the screen door to the lanai and watched the surf hitting the sand. He needed to register, talk with Bob Greer from United Technologies, get the lay of

the land, arrange for a working breakfast, and probably schedule a golf game or two. Down on the beach, children were making sand castles or chasing the waves, and dozens of heads bobbed in the water near the reef.

“Did you bring a book?” he asked, glancing over his shoulder.

“Oh, don’t worry about me. I’ll wander around and unpack. Get settled, you know.”

Boyd unbuttoned his starched white shirt and dropped it on the bed. Jolene’s heart started to pound expectantly until he pulled a fresh polo shirt from his suitcase and slipped his iPhone into his pocket. “Do you have your phone? Is it charged?”

She nodded.

“I’ll call you later. Choose a place to have dinner.” And then he was gone. She crumpled onto the edge of the bed and pulled a Ziploc bag of chocolate chip cookies out of her carry-on.

Each morning Jolene ate banana-macadamia nut pancakes on the terrace. In the afternoon, she reclined in a lounge chair and sipped a strawberry smoothie by the pool. At night Boyd arrived back at their room, tired and worried and hungry. After dinner, he promptly fell asleep while she watched old movies on mute.

Some nights Jolene sat wrapped in her new pink cotton robe on the lanai, listening to the sounds of the waves and watching people in the adjacent restaurant. Torches lit the entrance, and shadows fell across the sand. She could hear laughter and the clinking of glass. One night she thought she saw Bob Greer and a slender woman with silver-white hair and tanned skin. A fringed, turquoise shawl around her shoulders and her sandals caught in her fingers, the woman leaned against a tall palm watching the white breakers pound against the sea wall. When Bob touched her shoulder, the woman turned, smiling at something he said. Jolene heard Boyd’s gentle snoring through the sliding screen door.

He’d promised her, and perhaps himself, an outing on Thursday.

“If things go well, we’ll take off and go snorkeling. I’ve booked an excursion,” he’d said, “to the bay where Captain Cook was clubbed to death.” Leafing through a stack of paper proposals, Boyd smiled expectantly, as though she should be pleased. As though she didn’t hate swimming and wasn’t afraid to put her

face in the water. Plus she'd seen what women wore around the pool, and her suit had a generous skirt.

"Go to that little bay," he'd suggested. "Rent some gear and practice." But the bay was a half-mile walk, and the attendant was surly, and the water was cold, even after she stood in the waves up to her knees for ten minutes. She'd smiled at the little children frolicking in the water and splashing in the waves, but then she'd pulled the mask off her face and headed for the small strip of sand between the water and the fringe of grass.

Thursday morning, Jolene ordered a bowl of oatmeal and a selection of island fruits. She tried to suck in her stomach, but the effort involved more than just her abdominal muscles, and her shoulders and neck were sunburned and uncooperative.

As a piece of mango melted between her molars and her tongue, she remembered dreaming about Will Grant the previous night. He'd been swimming with her in the little bay. Her body, lithe and young, had webbed toes; no fussing with flippers as she backed into the surf. Will had held her hand, and they'd laughed and splashed water at each other before diving beneath the waves and swimming effortlessly, without gills or a snorkel. When Boyd's alarm buzzed, she'd squeezed her eyes shut and tried to slip back into the dream.

Pouring another packet of Splenda on the oatmeal, she wondered if Will was still teaching third grade in Beaver, a parched town in the middle of Utah. Such a pretty boy, with blond hair and a quick smile. They'd been so desperately in love.

"You're an attractive girl," her mother had said. "Lose a few pounds. You can do better." Boyd equaled better. A serious student from an excellent family, good, long-standing members of the Church. "Boyd will go far," her mother had said, and he had, but had she? She crossed her ankles neatly under the wrought iron table and sat up a little straighter.

Why did she still dream about Will? It must be almost thirty years since she'd seen him last, the day he had found her in the stacks on the third floor of the Merrill Library. She'd been studying for her abnormal psychology final; her papers and books were spread on the table in front of her, and she was crying. She always spent a fair amount of time crying during test week, but she shouldn't be crying now. A lovely diamond was prominently dis-

played on her left hand. Her degree would be more of a decoration. Her father had paid the deposit at the reception center. Peach and pale green were the colors she'd chosen.

People bumped in and out of tables during finals, so she didn't look up when a wooden chair scraped across the linoleum. She balled up the tissue in her fist, pressed it under her nose, and glanced across the table. There he was. Will. He reached over and touched her free hand.

"Jo." Her name coming out of his mouth sounded like the lyric in a song. The right side of his mouth curled up in a half smile. "Your dad told me you were here studying."

She glanced anxiously over her shoulder, as she slid her left hand under the edge of her notebook. Inhaling deeply, she said, "I'm getting married. The end of June."

He nodded. "You're the millionth person to tell me."

Catching a tear sliding down her nose with the tip of her finger, she sniffed loudly. "When did you get home?"

He cocked his head to one side. "Two years after I left. Pretty much standard."

Her face flushed hot. He'd been home three months and she hadn't heard from him. She'd never delivered the winsome post-engagement speech or flashed the tragic smile she'd rehearsed in the bathroom mirror. Now, here she was, red-faced, blubbery, her only tissue a soggy rag.

He pressed her knuckle above the ring. "This is a mistake. I've thought about this a lot. We're supposed to be together. You and me. Like before."

Her mother's voice spewed out of Jolene's mouth. "Only 10 percent of girls end up marrying their missionaries. People change. Two years is a long time."

He covered her mouth with his palm. "I was more than just your *missionary*. Have you told Boyd that? Have you told your bishop?" He dropped his hand.

She shook her head. He'd let his blond hair grow again. It curled over the edge of his collar, but he didn't look the same. His jaw was more pronounced, more mannish. He'd grown up. He clenched and unclenched his fist until his knuckles turned white.

"If I tell Boyd, it will put a stop to all this, won't it?" His eyes searched her face.

She shuffled the papers on the table.

"I spent two years in Bolivia," he said, "because you wanted me to go. You promised me you'd wait, Jo." His voice was low and insistent. "What happened? We were best friends."

At first she leafed through her notebooks as if she'd lost something important, some pertinent bit of information, then she rested her forehead on her palm. She tried to think, but memories choked her. It had been spring their senior year. They'd sluffed class to wander along the canal bank behind the high school. She'd given Will a little push, caught him off guard, and he'd fallen into the water. Off went her yellow patent leather shoes, and she jumped in. Water running down his face, his blond hair plastered to his forehead, he'd kissed her. Right there in the middle of the canal—in freezing water from the spring run-off—he'd kissed her soft and long, and then they'd laughed and hidden in the tall grass.

She started to smile, "Do you remember—"

"Of course, I do," he whispered. "I remember everything."

She squeezed her eyes shut and remembered the watery smell of the canal on his skin and shaking grass seed out of her hair. She bit her bottom lip.

"Boyd's brilliant," she whispered. "He'll make a wonderful father."

Will winced as though she'd slapped him. He pushed the chair back and stared down at her. "But Jo, does he ever make you laugh?"

As the waiter passed her table and a gentle breeze rustled the palm fronds, she shoved the oatmeal away and reached for a poppy seed muffin.

Boyd returned promptly at 12:15, his tight features belying the broad smile on his face. "Ready?" he asked needlessly. Jolene had learned long ago to be punctual, her beach towel tucked under her arm, her sunscreen, glasses, a comb, and granola bar hidden in her bag. Nodding pleasantly, she exhaled slowly. Hyperventilating irritated Boyd.

A red-striped canvas awning covered the sightseeing shuttle that transported them to the dock where a jaunty sign invited them to join *Captain Jack and His All Girl Crew* for a *Scuba and Snorkeling Adventure*. A green plastic slide curved around the side of

the boat from the top deck into the water. Jolene's stomach lurched. Fifteen passengers made their way across the plank and found seats among the red-cushioned benches. She clutched the railing until Boyd loosened her fingers as the boat moved out and motored along the coast.

Lean, toned girls in bikinis so small they were almost irrelevant sauntered back and forth serving drinks and glimpses. Each taut fanny made Jolene's suit feel a little tighter. Boyd declined the drink. Captain Jack—and Jolene decided that, thirty years ago, the name “Jack” must have been a requirement for birthing baby boys on the islands—described in delightful pidgin the hotels on shore.

When she spotted dolphins racing alongside the boat and leaping out of the water, she touched Boyd's shoulder, but he didn't acknowledge her. His hand shielding his eyes, he scanned the coastline as the captain described the multi-million-dollar properties.

“He probably graduated from MIT,” Boyd whispered, nodding toward Captain Jack. Jolene smiled, and Boyd patted her thigh absent-mindedly.

Kealakekua Bay was finally in view. Captain Cook's memorial, a white obelisque marking the spot where the clubbing actually took place, jutted up from the black rock base. Across the bay, sheer lava cliffs dove into the water. Another boat with another Captain Jack and another green plastic slide was anchored a quarter mile away. Jolene watched the tourists on the other boat climb the steps and, laughing as they slipped down the slide, splash into the undulating water. Preschoolers, Jolene thought as she tightened her life belt and adjusted her mask.

Breathing slowly in and out, she stood on the flimsy ladder a few moments too long. Boyd nudged her. “Go,” he mouthed, and so she did. As she eased herself into the water, her white T-shirt billowed out around her, and she forced herself to breathe into the mouthpiece.

Moving his flippers rhythmically, Boyd passed her, gesturing with his arm that she was to follow. Both arms stretched out to make her more buoyant, she kicked her legs tentatively and swam away from the boat. Face down, she searched the clear, cold water for signs of sharks or sting rays. She didn't like swimming with fish. She'd seen them before. In aquariums, large fish and small,

probably in the kids' pediatrician's office. Or postcards. People loved pictures of exotic fish on postcards. She reminded herself that all she had to do was keep from freezing to death or turning into lunch until Boyd had seen enough fish and headed back to the boat where he could pretend he wasn't ogling the bikini-clad crew. She kicked her legs, stopped, breathed in and out slowly, and kicked a little more.

A black-and-gold-striped fish swam behind her. She could feel its tiny eyes. She glanced out of the corner of her mask to watch its little cheeks glub in and out. She swam a little farther, the fish following closely. Holding her arms and legs perfectly still, Jolene bobbed up and down with the motion of the waves. She was perfectly calm until the fish touched her leg. Bolting straight up out of the water, she jerked her head around looking for the boat or Boyd, or another snorkeler—someone, anyone. Salt water up her nose, she sputtered and coughed.

Pouring the water out of her mask, she twisted around and spotted the green slide on the side of the boat. Wet hair stuck to her forehead and got in her eyes. Forget the mask, she thought. She pushed it up on her forehead and swam the breaststroke kicking with her flippers, until she reached the side of the boat and the ladder.

Her wet T-shirt clinging to her torso, she shook her head and sent a spray of water over the cushions. She didn't care. She wasn't going back into that ocean. She'd fake it. She'd describe every fish postcard she'd ever seen. She was a world-class faker. A pro. She hugged herself and waited for the sun to return her core temperature to normal.

"Screw this," she muttered. "A vacation. I'm supposed to be on a vacation, not on some death-defying, sexless adventure on the high seas. This is supposed to be fun. Dammit."

She stewed angrily for more than an hour, watching the surface of the water for Boyd to reemerge. But he didn't. Other people were climbing into the boat, finding their beach towels, making wisecracks to one another, and popping open bottles of beer. She searched under the bench for her bag and her flip-flops. Her matted hair had dried and was probably beyond hope, but she could at least run her comb through it.

She bent down on one knee and searched again. No bag. No

towel. No Boyd. She tried to glance inconspicuously at the other swimmers and the bikini-clad crew, but she hadn't really noticed faces earlier in the day. She walked around to the front of the boat and looked up at Captain Jack lounging in the checked plastic lawn chair with a diet Coke in his hand.

The guy with the red hair and the Vikings T-shirt wasn't her particular Captain Jack. Her shoulders slumped wearily. Wrong man. Wrong boat.

She stared across the bay at the other boat a quarter mile away. The boat's engines were engaged and a soft spray of water churned in the wake. Feeling betrayed, she slid into the water, adjusted her mask, and paddled furiously across the bay, stopping every few minutes to make sure she was headed in the right direction and not out to sea. Her legs ached. She fought to keep from gagging on the mouthpiece.

Finally, she drew close enough to the boat to hear Captain Jack ranting over the microphone about the missing fifteenth diver. Ranting, it seemed, about her. When one of the crew spotted her in the water, the captain spun the wheel and closed the distance. Several hands pulled her up the ladder. Goose bumps covered her arms and thighs, and her suit wedged uncomfortably in her crotch.

Boyd glowered under the awning, his jaw clenched. She could see the muscles in his cheek twitch. Everyone's eyes were on her. The captain was yelling at the girl at the bow to haul anchor; they were going to be forty minutes late for the dinner cruise. A thickish sort of woman with an off-center ponytail sidled up to Jolene. "You need to say something to your husband, honey. For a half hour, he didn't realize you were missing, and the captain ripped him a new one."

What, exactly, was Jolene supposed to say? But there it was—out on the deck—what everyone was thinking, why everyone was staring at her. Her husband hadn't noticed she was missing or didn't care. Or worse, he hoped she was lost under the water with all the fish.

Her hands shook. She scurried over to Boyd's side as though her proximity could erase the tension on board. His nostrils flared, and he hissed, "I am so sick of your obvious plays for atten-

tion.” He handed her the striped bag, dropped onto the cushions, and spoke to her in monosyllables until the next morning.

A week later, on Thursday, Jolene arrived at Mary’s for quilting group. She had bought a new short-sleeved yellow top to display her peeling neck and arms, undeniable evidence of island travel. She knocked on the door, holding her head high. Jeannie answered the door and hugged her quickly. “So how was Hawaii?”

Jolene launched into the preamble she’d rehearsed in the dressing room mirror at Macy’s. “Wonderful. We had such a good time. Boyd finally relaxed a little. He’s been working so hard lately.” She looked around and tried to breathe more slowly. “The hotel was beautiful.” As warm tears began running down her cheeks, she glanced from face to embarrassed face. These were words she’d been enduring for years; but now when it was her turn to say them, she couldn’t form the words in her mouth, couldn’t make a coherent sentence, couldn’t stop crying.

Jeannie guided Jolene toward a brown chenille sofa. Lauren overheard the sobs while she was slicing tomatoes in the kitchen. She leaned over to Mary and whispered, “Poor thing. Stuck on an island with Boyd for ten days.”