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A Summer Dream Come True

Jackie Webb

The languid summer days of '75 began earlier than usual, around May. I waited with tense anticipation for the end of June to arrive. I had received acceptance in January on scholarship to the Summer Research Institute of Oceanology. As the days approached, my excitement heightened.

Although a summer of intense research and study of ocean organisms would appear to some as tedious and dreary, I eagerly awaited the trip to Newport. I imagined myself traipsing around the rocky shores of New England in search of tidepools in the crevices, sailing the Narragansett Bay to drop plankton tows, exploring the inlets and harbors of Connecticut and Massachusetts, mapping out sand dunes and being showered by the salt spray of the waves slapping the shoreline. It was a near perfect dream about to come true, depositing images in my mind of an august summer with work that I loved, in a place I revered. Except for the "Dear Jane" letter I had received from my estranged boyfriend, I was in sublime reverie.

I had spent the entire school year preparing myself mentally for a scientific expedition in the summer. Academically, I was equipped for the challenge ahead. Emotionally, I was not quite as prepared. I was a high school teenager who was categorized as a "brain." I did have a social life, though nothing spectacular. I befriended others easily and had, for four years, become very close to one particular young man. We had this on-and-off-again relationship, typical of teenagers, I suppose. It was different for me, I thought. I knew that one day I would marry him. He was "the one."

During my junior year of high school, he and I had been "off" in our relationship most of the year. He had broken up with me not long after the school year had begun. So what, I reasoned. I would just "leave him alone, and he would come home..." I corresponded with him from time to time, but usually with no response. I did the logical thing to take my mind off him. I threw myself into my studies.

The year was packed with challenges. I was in top academic honors courses. My favorite, marine biology, was the epitome of learning experiences. My love for research, my ardent passion for the ocean and all it contained, and my drive to achieve resulted in my applying for, and winning, a scholarship to one of the most prestigious summer study programs in oceanology—and in New England. I could not have been happier.

A letter arrived from my distant beau in early June. It was the kind of letter with news of mundane family life you might expect from a cousin, not your true love. Then,

there it was—the last paragraph, almost like an afterthought:

Oh, I have to tell you. I'm getting married June 29 at my church. Big step for me! I'll pray for you for your life ahead. That's all for now.

Well, that did it. Good-bye. Have a nice life. I am not the overtly emotional type—no sobs, no tears, just a resignation to get on with things. I decided I did not need the interruption of a relationship in my life anyhow. If he was the one, he was gone now. With an almost secret hope in my heart, I kept the letter.

Upon arrival in Providence, I was picked up by bus and driven to the school in Newport. New England was as beautiful as I had remembered in my childhood: rolling lush green hills along the rocky shores. St. George's School protruded through dense green trees and profuse foliage on the ascent of a hill accessed by the winding coastal road. The stately Gothic architecture of the school cathedral and well-trimmed lawns looked like the brochure of an ivy-league college. This would be home for the summer.

The research program began the following day after all 21 students had checked into their dormitories. Each of us was assigned, in groups of threes, to an advisor in our field of interest. I was assigned to zoological oceanography, my first choice of study. Within the first week of classes, labs, lectures and field work, my peers and I had chosen our research topics and were devising various schemes and plans for experimentation.

My days were filled with trips around Narragansett Bay on the school boat, the *Puffin*, to drop a tow line and plankton bucket, hiking the rocky shores to outline and study tidal pools, and wading along the shore of the Second Beach with temperature and salinity test kits. My research also involved long nights in the lab counting copepods, which had been caught in the daily plankton run, as they migrated vertically in a cylindrical beaker.

I kept the "Dear Jane" letter with me. I would pull it out and read it when some melancholy moment struck me. In July, I finally realized he was truly gone, married by then.

On a quiet Sunday afternoon, two weeks before school was to end, I was lounging around the visiting room awaiting my weekly telephone call from my parents. I answered the phone on the first ring with a voice betraying my homesick heart. My mother's news for the week consisted of trivial details about my siblings, her errands, and the mail. Almost as if she had forgotten, she

informed me that she had sent a care package to me that included a typewritten letter, addressed to me, but with no return address. She said she had opened it "just to see who it was from." It was from him—my true love—another letter! My heart was leaping within me. Mom said she thought she mailed the package the prior Thursday, so it should arrive early in the week.

My interest in my oceanology classes waned daily. I watched time ebb on the clock. My research was ready to be compiled into written form, and, try as I might, I could scarcely get a word written on the page. I lived for mail call—and that letter.

Wednesday's mail brought the long-awaited note. My dormmates gathered around as I breathlessly read his typed words:

I am writing in reference to my last letter. I had joined the Army and somehow my orders came through for me to report on the day I was supposed to get married. I reported and was processed and when I got back, my girlfriend and I broke up. She went to another guy. I just hope you have a good life and my prayers are with you. Tell your family I said hello. I'll be leaving for boot camp in September. Good-bye.

I was ecstatic. This was my chance. He could still be mine. I wrote a long, thoughtful, non-condemning letter during my geological oceanography class the next day. I told him my research would be completed in August, and I would be returning home. I mentioned the date and time of my flight just in case he might want to greet me.

The last three days of school were frenzied, trying to prepare final papers and oral presentations. I made it through my lecture with the ease of a first-place-speech-meet veteran. The following day, with suitcases, memorabilia and souvenirs packed, my classmates and I pledged our love to one another and bid our good-byes.

The Rhode Island shoreline faded away, smaller and smaller, until it finally disappeared in my airplane window. The return flight home seemed an eternity with long reflections on the days that had just preceded. With mounting anticipation, I prepared for my flight to land.

My family was waiting inside the gate, eager for my return. I flew to their arms, thrilled to be home and among my loved ones. As I picked up my shoulder bag to leave, he stepped around the corner and stopped in front of me. There he stood—my true love. I melted into his arms. It was my summer dream come true.



Photograph by Gina Hill