

The Mountains of Key West

by Sandra McDonald

Julie Morgan decided to stop arguing with her husband and instead went for a nice long run. Key West was hot and quiet this early in the morning, with the marshlands fetid and the sun not yet above the fronds of palm trees. She crossed South Roosevelt Boulevard to Houseboat Row, where colorful shacks clung to flats and floats, and then quickened her pace. She passed the houseboats and was heading towards the beach when great gray-blue mountains unfolded on the horizon in front of her.

At first glance she took them for clouds. But as the slap of her sneakers on concrete brought her closer she saw

they were lush and green, covered with larch and spruce and pine. Mist hung in the lower valleys, and rivers streamed out toward the sea. Just like back home. Of course there were no mountains in the Florida Keys. The coral reefs that comprised the islands were as flat as Kansas, though sharper on the knees. Yet there the mountains stood, a mile or so offshore, and Julie could smell pine on the breeze, and hear the distant cries of eagles.

She slowed her pace and finally stopped, sweat pooling between her shoulder blades. The ocean beyond the seawall was flat and aqua blue, as pretty as all the military brochures promised. A yellow rowboat floated between

shore and mountains. Inside the boat sat a handsome man with jet-black hair and emerald eyes. His skin was darkly tanned beneath a white T-shirt and cut-off shorts.

"Come on!" he called to Julie. His smile dazzled her. "I'll take you where you want to go." She was twenty-two years old and blonde and pretty. This wasn't the first time men had offered her casual invitations.

"No thanks," she said.

His smile didn't diminish. "This isn't the place for you. You need views and valleys, forests and cliffs."

Julie held up her hand to show off her diamond wedding ring. Jim might make her mad enough to want to fling it off

sometimes, but she hadn't yet. "I'm not going anywhere." He gave a little shrug and began rowing backwards. "You say that now. Call me when you're ready."

The mountains rolled into clouds once again, distant and unreachable. Julie squeezed her eyes shut, opened them again, tried peering through her fingers. The boat was nothing more than a yellow blob on the flat water. Obviously humidity was playing tricks with her vision. No mountains, she told herself. Don't be silly.

But the memory of the man's smile stayed with her, as did the sparkle of his eyes. She started jogging again. The sidewalk took her past the airport and a row of pink motels before she reached

Smathers Beach and turned home again. When she let herself into their apartment, Jim was just emerging from the shower.

"Good run?" he asked.

"It was fine," she said.

He rummaged through the boxes in the closet. "Though we know it's not your responsibility, do you think you could help me find my new socks?"

She pulled the package from the closet and handed it to him. He finished dressing in his bright white uniform, the one reserved for special military occasions.

"This change-of-command ceremony," she said. "Why can't I come?"

"I told you why. We haven't even gotten your dependent i.d. card yet."

Julie didn't like that word, *dependent*. It made her sound helpless, like a child. They'd been in Key West for two weeks. Two weeks in which he'd gone off to work every day and she'd unpacked all their moving boxes in this tiny apartment that was supposed to be temporary, though no one could say for sure. Jim drove their only car and left her stranded all day long. In the evenings he had a beer or two at the officer's club or on Duval Street with his new flying buddies. Before they'd arrived in Key West, Julie and Jim had spent a week-long honeymoon in the Poconos. It seemed very long ago.

Julie asked, "When are we going to get it? My card."

"On Monday." He examined himself in the mirror. His crew cut and freshly shaven cheeks made him look like a teenager. "Good enough, don't you think?"

"Your shoe has a smudge." Julie retreated to the kitchen to pour herself some orange juice. A moment later his arms slid around her sweaty waist. Jim kissed the back of her neck.

"Marry me, marry the Navy. President Reagan thanks you. I promise, it'll all be better when we're settled in. We'll get your card, we'll get our permanent housing, you'll meet my CO and all the other wives."

She knew that CO stood for Commanding Officer, just as "NAS"

stood for Naval Air Station and "VF," for some inexplicable reason, meant "fighter squadron." When she had met Jim three years ago, he was attending the military college in Northfield and she was studying history at Bennington. Even then he'd had his heart set on the sky. Acronyms rolled off his lips like water, whereas she made crib notes and kept them in her purse for quick reference.

"We're okay?" Jim asked, his arms tightening.

"We're fine," she said.

He dashed off in the service of his country. Julie watched from the balcony until their Ford pulled out of sight. Key West was a thriving military outpost, full of boat squadrons and SEALs and bomb

disposal units. Radar dishes kept close watch on Cuba, just ninety miles to the south. This island, two miles wide by four miles long, would be their home sweet home for the next three years.

In her calendar she noted, "Mountains across the water." Green Mountains. Home to Vermont's first militia, she remembered. Free-thinkers and independents willing to take things into their own hands. Then she showered, and under the lukewarm spray tried to will away the memory of the stranger and his little yellow boat.

* * *

The first time Jim took her to see the sunset at Mallory Pier, Julie enjoyed the crowds and artists and fortune-tellers,

the carnival-like atmosphere. When the sun dipped below the ocean, everyone clapped and cheered. Afterward, the admirers floated from one open-air bar to the next, like fish following a deep sea current. The second time she saw the sunset, Julie took pictures and had them framed to hang on their concrete walls. The third time she saw the sunset, she stopped clapping. The fourth time, she sat on the seawall with her arms clasped around her knees and watched a clown pull a rainbow handkerchief out of his nose.

"Try to enjoy it more," Jim said, looming over her.

"It's the sun," she replied. "It goes down every night." Jim told her about

the Hash House Harriers, a group that combined running with bar crawling. Julie demurred. He invited her to bar crawls organized by the Blackbirds, but she declined those as well. Everybody on base drank, to one degree or another. The husbands because their tight-fisted, fast-flying, macho culture demanded it, and the wives because most of them were so desperately unhappy.

"It's not like there are any jobs," said Lily Boxer, whose husband Jake was also a Blackbird in VF-45. Lily gazed past Julie's shoulder to the flat ocean outside the window. "What are you going to do? Clean motel rooms? Waitress? If you're lucky, maybe work as a cashier at the commissary."

Julie thought Lily was exaggerating, but educated women had few employment opportunities on an island filled with restaurants and bars and motels. The younger, childless wives took ceramic or painting classes in the base rec center, or visited the private Navy beach, or learned to sail the small catamarans available for rent from the Morale Department. The older ones went to book club meetings or lunches at small restaurants, biding time until their husbands' next duty assignments got handed down by bureaucrats in Washington. After two months in their off-base apartment, Jim and Julie were assigned a two-bedroom unit on Sigsbee Annex. It was a bland, concrete ranch

house with worn walls and old appliances, but the air conditioning worked just fine. The backyard dropped off right into the Gulf of Mexico. Their closest neighbors to the left were a warrant officer, his wife and their four loud children. To the right lived Captain Bill Hutchinson and his wife. Hutch was the commanding officer of an intelligence squadron based a few miles up the overseas highway. His wife Margie dressed flamboyantly in yellow and purples and was fully gray at the age of thirty-eight. She told Julie that everyone called her "Minute."

"As in 'Wait a minute,' which I never do, or 'That girl does a million things per minute,' which is probably true, or

a s i n' She talks a million miles per minute and never lets us get a word in edgewise,' which is something people just have to get used to," Minute said, with a bright smile and Southern accent. She held out a plate of homemade brownies. "Now what's a smart girl like you going to do to keep your brain from going soft in the sun, hmmm? Work or babies?" Julie took Minute's brownies with deep appreciation. "I'm not ready for maternity clothes. But everyone says there aren't any jobs."

"None that pay well, that's for sure." Minute was on the committees of a half-dozen events per year, ranging from fundraisers to literary weekends and charity bike runs. She hooked Julie up

with the Historical Society, and soon Julie was soon giving walking tours of Old Town and the Key West cemetery, with its quirky headstones and ornate, moss-decorated crypts. Jim came home from flying every day and said, "I'm glad you're keeping busy," but sometimes Julie thought it would be nice to live in a place with more than two supermarkets, and where the humidity didn't make you feel coated with sweat all the time, and where the nearest mall wasn't forty-two bridges up the highway.

"Maybe you could teach at the community college," he said one night at dinner.

"I called. They're not hiring anyone."

"Take some classes yourself?"

Julie scraped a t h e r plate o f tuna casserole. "There's nothing I could use there to get a master's degree."

Because of its prime waterfront location their house became the focal point for many Blackbird get-togethers. Julie would sit in the screened-in lanai, listening to the other wives gossip while the men drank beer and hit golf balls into the ocean.

"Did you hear about Admiral so-and-so?" the wives would say, and there would be commiseration over the poor man's drinking problem. Or maybe they'd say, "What about that chief who got arrested?" or "They caught that seaman right there, in the man's apartment, his pants around his ankles." No rumor went

unreported and no secret stayed private.

"It's like a soap opera," Julie told Jim, but he said scuttlebutt was often the only way to find out important things in the military.

"Like inbox diving," he said one night, when it was just the two of them sitting out under the stars. "If you're around the offices after everyone's gone home, you rummage around in the yeoman's inboxes. See who's been nominated for what awards, who's taking leave, things like that."

He lay back, his arms folded behind his head.

She slapped at a mosquito trying to feast on her arm. "Would they let you transfer, if you wanted to?"

"Why would I want to?"

"Minute says there's a naval air station in Washington, just outside of Seattle."

"They don't have F-16's. You know that's what I fly."

So much for transferring. She couldn't take flying away from him. Whenever he talked about it his whole face lit up, and his hands waved in the air, and his feet started to tap an offbeat rhythm. She tried to think of something that made her feel as enthusiastic. The closest she came to rapture was when they made love, but even that was a chancy thing.

"He's a bit fast," she told Minute as they walked past old seaplane ramps to a stretch of undeveloped peninsula. It

was best to exercise early in the day, before the asphalt heated up and stuck to the soles of your sneakers.

"Did you two sleep together before you got married?" Minute asked. Julie shook her head.

"So you're still learning," Minute said. "That's a good thing. Day you stop, it all gets kind of boring."

"He thinks he knows what he's doing," Julie said, and then bit her lip. Maybe that wasn't the kind of information you were supposed to share about your husband. None of Julie's friends back home had married, and her mother had merely said, "Sounds about right, from what I remember."

Minute gulped from her water bottle.

"Flyboys. Always in such a damned hurry. " Julie's gaze was drawn to a patch of scruffy pine trees growing around an abandoned bunker. Through the brown and green she could see a glimmering blue lake, Lake Champlain, with the Adirondacks just beyond it. She and her father had taken a long car ride up there once, just the two of them, her puzzle books and Barbie dolls scattered across the front seat of the rumbling old Buick, his empty beer cans rattling on the floorboards in the back seat. He told her long, rambling stories about Benedict Arnold and Fort Ticonderoga and the treaty of Ghent. She couldn't remember how long they had been away, but when they got home her mother had

squeezed her so hard Julie felt her ribs creak. Her father had moved out soon afterward.

"They say that doctors do it with patience, professors do it by the book, football players are measured by the yard and pilots keep it up longer," Minute was saying. "You've got to teach him right or it'll never be good for you, and that's a hell of a way to spend the rest of your life." A yellow rowboat was moving steadily across the lake, and in it was a man with a bright smile. Julie turned away from the sight. "I can't tell him how to do it. It just starts a fight."

"Well, he'll just have to listen, if he wants you to be happy. How are things otherwise? I don't think you like Key

West much."

Julie shrugged. "It's not my kind of town."

Minute patted her shoulder. "That's the nice thing about the navy. Wait long enough, and they'll send you somewhere else. I like it around here. But that's me and my tropical bones. Other people . . ."

She trailed off for a moment, her gaze on the sea.

"Thing is, Julie, you've got to be careful around here. Unhappiness can lure you away to places you don't want to go. Places you should steer clear of, you know?" Julie thought maybe Minute was talking about extramarital affairs. "Don't worry," she said, and forced a

smile. "I'm not that far gone yet."

* * *

She tried ceramics, but kept breaking the molds. She took sailing lessons, but repeatedly capsized. She got a job managing a T-shirt and souvenir shop near Key West Bight, but quit when the owners were arrested for drug-dealing out of the back room. For awhile she tutored a Polish immigrant family through a local literacy program. Both parents worked multiple minimum-wage jobs and came home exhausted every night. Julie also tried needlepoint, line dancing, Asian cooking, a church choir, and writing little history columns for the local newspaper. The editor always mangled the paragraphs, sometimes

printing them out of order or with missing sentences. She quit when he started putting them under his own byline.

"Ask me what I'm doing today," she said to Jim at breakfast one morning. Warily he peeked over the edge of the sports pages. "What are you doing today, honey?"

"Going to a Tupperware party. Ask me what I'm doing tomorrow." Jim obliged.

"I'm going to a basket party."

"Don't we have a closet full of baskets you bought last month?" Julie dropped another pancake onto his plate. "You want me to say no to your CO's wife?" A year after they first arrived, she

discovered she was pregnant. She stood in their little green bathroom with her hands folded lightly over her womb. A lizard hung on the bathroom window screen, watching her. Surely a child would change their lives for the better. Lily Boxer and the other VF-45 wives would throw her a baby shower. Jim would be thrilled with a little boy he could hoist into the air and fly around the room. Julie would fit right into the clique of young moms who all baby-sat for one another and took their kids to the Naval Hospital and enrolled them in playtime at the child center, which was painted bright green and blue instead of Key West's ubiquitous pink.

Six weeks later, just as she was ready

to call her mom back in Vermont, the baby miscarried right into the toilet bowl in a mess of pink and red tissue. The pain was like bad menstrual cramps. For weeks afterward, Jim would cuddle her with his arms and legs comfortably weighted over hers. The doctor said, "You can try again," but she thought, no, probably not. Because, really, what was the point of anything? Why should she paint their bedroom or try to grow a garden or even have the lanai screens fixed up, when the next tenants would move right in and change everything anyway? Why bother making friends with another military couple when the next thing you knew they were given magic tickets off the island to other

commands, other duty stations? Why even go outside when all you did was sweat and break out in heat rashes and get yeast infections and watch your hair frizz into an unmanageable, puffy ball?

Minute said, "You've got island fever," and took her up to Miami for a girls' weekend. The shopping was fun and the Museum of Contemporary Art an excellent change of pace, but on both the trip up and down Julie saw key deer lying dead on the side of the highway. Small deer, fragile, killed by cars. People in Key West were dying, too, of something called AIDS. Blackness had crept in under the greenery, the endless relentless greenery, but Julie knew it had always been there, always lurking. No

jungle could exist without rot. The volunteer coordinator from the Historical Society left repeated messages on the answering machine. Someone needed to show the houses of Ernest Hemingway and Robert Frost to the endless tide of tourists. Julie unplugged the machine and stayed inside her own concrete house, watching Jim zealously mow the lawn while she drank glass after glass of unsweetened ice tea.

His muscles were smooth and long, his waist narrow, his chest hairless. She was looking forward to the years when they could stop being thin and tanned. She'd grow a little rounder in the hips, he'd get a little beer gut under his khaki's. The hair on his head might fall

out, or hers sprout gray and wiry. They'd live in the Rockies, where the weather brought real seasons. They'd wear coats and gloves and long woolen scarves as they shoveled snow, white cold snow, snow that made her nose ache, snow that muffled the noise and din of the outside world.

"Fantasy Fest's coming up," Jim said when he was done with the grass. Julie drank more tea.

He pulled a beer from the refrigerator. "You didn't go last year." She hadn't gone because drunken parades of transvestites and nudists wasn't anything that sounded fun, even if Minute swore it was all good fun, and Lily Boxer herself got fixed up as Marilyn Monroe. "Like

Mardi Gras," the other wives told her, as if that was supposed to entice her.

"Julie," Jim said, tugging her close, his lips on her neck. "You don't jog anymore. You don't go out with Lily Boxer. Minute says you won't go to lunch. All these oil paints and canvasses you bought a few months ago? They're just sitting in the corner."

"I'm learning to paint," Julie said. Landscapes. Jagged, up thrusting, rugged. The volunteer teacher at the recreation center had suggested she try colors other than black and gray, and Julie hadn't gone back to class since.

Jim nuzzled her throat. "It'll be something new. Something different." She supposed anything new on Key West

was to be embraced, because there were only so many sun-drenched days a woman could endure, so many piñacoladas and barbeques, so many tours of the gleaming aisles in the base department store, so many sunsets and palm trees and sunburns.

On the day of the parade she and Jim took a cab down to Duval Street, which was strung with beads and lights and banners, people walking around bedecked with orange feathers, beer pooling in the gutters, lipstick smeared on men and women's faces both, tropical reggae and Jimmy Buffet and Cajun music blasting from mounted speakers. They met other Blackbird couples at a bar on the parade route. For the first

time since losing the baby, Julie bellied up to a wooden counter and sucked down a strawberry daiquiri.

Lily Boxer said, "Didn't you need that? Another drink for the girl!"

"Don't you get my wife drunk," Jim said, wrapping a n a r m around Lily's bare shoulder and squeezing her tight.

She kissed his cheek. "Would I do that?"

Julie had another, and then another, and soon everyone in the parade of half-nude or ornately costumed strangers became her best friend. Papier-mâché floats of dolphins and mermaids danced in the overhead sky. Street vendors proffered jewels from the deep and ambrosia of the sea king. Bearded men

sashayed in diaphanous blue costumes. The sun sank and the crowds danced and at some point Julie realized she had lost track of Jim. Somehow she had ended up on a stone bench in a charming little courtyard behind a restaurant. The stranger sitting beside her had emerald green eyes.

". . . and he says maybe we'll get posted to Norfolk next, but do you know where Norfolk is?" Julie leaned closer to the man, enjoying the wooziness in her head and tongue. "Virginia. Tidal flats. Strip malls. Who wants to go to Virginia?"

"You can stay here in paradise," the man said.

Julie wagged her finger. "This isn't

paradise."

"No," he agreed. "But I can show you where it is." Which is how she found herself following him down the alley, through someone's back yard and along a white picket fence. A cool breeze ruffled her skirt. She'd slipped off her sandals and was carrying them over her shoulder with one finger. Golden beads clanked around her neck. She could hear music and laughter swirling in streets just out of sight. The sounds echoed strangely, as if captured and relayed by the pearly insides of a conch shell. The handsome man took her through the narrow streets of Bahama Village, past houses that looked like children's cottages, until they came to a low stone wall. Beyond it was

a patch of grainy sand. A yellow rowboat was anchored in the shallow water. Moonlight glinted off its oarlocks.

"Your chariot," the stranger said, with an elaborate bow. "If you dare." Dizziness swept through her, a not-unpleasant feeling. Julie sat on the sand, which was still warm from the day's heat. She tossed her sandals aside and threw her head back to the star-laced sky. Her neck felt bare and exposed.

"I have a husband," she said.

"Marry me, instead," the stranger said. Her vision blurred slightly. She wiped her eyes.

He sat beside her, his legs long and lean in the moonlight. "Look there, to the

west." Julie fixed her gaze on the faint delineation between nighttime sea and blue-black sky. Silver-rimmed clouds rearranged themselves into a towering white mountain, a sculpted chunk of snow and ice. The weight of it, its vast enormous bulk, tilted the entire world.

"I don't know that one," she said.

"Denali," he whispered.

Denali. The word rolled off her tongue. She imagined bears and wolves and moose, and a log mansion with a hearty blaze in the great stone hearth.

"Who lives there?" she asked.

"No one," he replied. "Join me. I promise you fidelity, devotion, sobriety. Long winter nights with frost on the windows. A dog, if you'd like. Or maybe

a polar bear. Something with fur." She stared at the mountain. It remained hard and real, and ever so close. A land without people in it. Without mistakes.

The man leaned closer. "The two of us, at the edge of the world." A branch cracked nearby. Maybe Jim or Minute or even Lily Boxer had figured out she was missing, and come to rescue her. But Julie saw only a black dog, its tags jangling, sniffing at something in the sand.

"See?" The stranger sounded triumphant. "A dog! We'll take him with us."

"Someone else's dog," Julie said.

She climbed unsteadily to her feet, the alcohol sloshing around in her stomach.

She was going to have a hell of a hangover in the morning. Palm trees around her stirred in the salty breeze, and her shoulders began to tingle from the cold.

"I can't go with you," she told him. "This is the world I married into."

"What about your own happiness?" the stranger asked.

"It's not here." Julie offered him a hand up. He took it, rising gracefully. So handsome. So tempting. "It's probably not in Norfolk. But it's somewhere." His lips grazed hers. They tasted like wild apples and honey.

"I'll always be here, waiting," he said.

Julie never told Jim about the mountains or the stranger. When they

divorced seven years later in the flatlands of Corpus Christi, she briefly considered a trip back to Key West. Then Minute wrote to tell her that VF-45 had been decommissioned. The Blackbirds existed only in memory. Several other units had moved away and entire neighborhoods of housing had closed down. The island and the Navy and every thing else was changing, always changing. Julie followed her instincts west, to the Rocky Mountains in Colorado. She eventually found happiness in the arms of a math professor. They married and had a blue-eyed son.

"Mommy!" he would say, splashing merrily in the bathtub. "I'm sailing the

boat!" Perched at the tub's edge, her knees wet, Julie grasped the yellow toy and skimmed it over sloshing mountains of soapy water. "Let's sail it together."

About the Author:

Sandra McDonald is a military veteran and former Hollywood assistant. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing and her first novel, *The Outback Stars*, will be published by Tor in April, 2007. Her short fiction has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Strange Horizons*, *Talebones*, *Chizine*, *Say...* , *Lone Star Stories* and other publications. Visit her website at

www.sandramcdonald.com.

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