

## FICTION PRIZE WINNER

**Judge: Sena Jeter Naslund, author of  
*Adam & Eve, Abundance: A Novel of Marie Antoinette,*  
*Four Spirits and Ahab's Wife***

“‘We’re All In’ is a story written with verve and honesty. It depicts the persistence of hope in relationships between women and men, despite a history that predicts failure of one sort or another. It’s the human spirit, even if self-deceiving, that one admires and recognizes in this exceptionally well-written story.”

# We’re All In

Jeannine Dorian Vesser

Every Saturday is Karaoke Night under the pavilion at Goat Island Campground, at the edge of Lake Chickasaw, but it’s cancelled tonight because of mine and Jude’s wedding. It’s his third, my fourth, so we dubbed it our lucky number seven, and we’re going with a casino theme. We even had a banner printed with “Marriage is a Gamble—Let’s Roll the Dice!” This morning, once the rain had stopped, I headed down the hill with Mary Dan to decorate the concrete picnic tables for tonight—green tablecloths to look like the felt on poker tables and giant dice in the middle. We covered an arch I borrowed from the florist with peach plastic roses, which I thought would look tacky, but actually it looks okay. Then we stretched the banner across the top, and I think Jude will realize it was worth every dime when he sees it.

And now Jude’s leaving with Dad to get Dad’s boat out of dry dock and clean it up. Jude wants to string lights up the mast and anchor it right off shore, something he’d seen once at a friend’s wedding in Key West.

“Then we’ll swim out to it after the reception and spend the night on it,” he said, and he looked at me with his impossible-to-resist, bluest

eyes I've ever seen. I told him he'd have to get rid of the dead animal smell before I'd step foot on it. I don't want him to think I'm just going to roll over every time he has an idea. And I also told him to be back by six, and be sober, but I doubt either will happen. My dad tends to have a bad influence on Jude.

The night we came up with the casino theme, we were up at Freddie T's with a bunch of people for Cajun night. Dad had been buying everybody shots of tequila, and Jude started telling how he proposed right after we'd had sex one night.

"But it wasn't just any sex," he said. "It was the best we'd had yet." He did a shot, put the lime in his mouth, and let out a yelp that made some people look over at us and laugh.

"So he gets out of bed right there, and gets down on his knees next to the bed," I told them.

"And we're both naked and sweaty." He lifted up another shot glass. "Here's to being spontaneous."

I looked at him and pretended to pout. "You're not sorry, are you?"

"NO, baby! Third time's a charm." Jude was the only man I have ever let call me baby. He slammed back the tequila and yelped again. "But I guess not for you. Anyway, that doesn't matter." He leaned over and kissed my neck, whispering something to make me giggle, and I rolled my eyes at Mary Dan and slapped his back like I was mad.

I sit at one of the concrete tables under the pavilion finishing the dice. I draw dots on each side of a Styrofoam cube, then push a rose in the center. I hear gravel crunching, and Miss Elma pulls up in her golf cart. There's a little click as the cart stops. She stares at me with her arms crossed, her upper lip puckered like she smells one of the dead crappies that sometimes washes up on the beach.

"You think it's funny to make a joke of marriage? Mary Dan says you're not even going to use a real preacher."

Mary Dan is my best friend and I'm thankful for all her help with the wedding. She even found chocolate candy wrapped like poker chips. They have our wedding date on one side, and "We're all in!" and a tiny deck of cards on the other. But Mary Dan is a gossip, and I don't need her pointing out to Miss Elma, who's 72 years old, that the preacher isn't real, even though he's close enough in my book.

"It's legit, Miss Elma. Jude checked." Jude's friend is marrying us; he got his license off the Internet but says it's legal. He's been marrying people for over a year.

"It's not just that. I don't see how this kind of wedding can be sanctified: no preacher, it's outside, and you're making the place look like a casino."

I hear a laugh and turn around to see Mary Dan walking up, looking happy she stirred the pot. She likes drama.

"You know better than anybody I don't like rules."

"I'm disappointed in you, Rhetta. I thought after Tim you'd changed." She

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gets back on her golf cart and rides back up the hill, where her trailer sits. Her comments hurt because I want Miss Elma to be happy for me.

Miss Elma was my first friend at Goat Island when I came here nine years ago after husband number two. My daddy had retired here, but he was living with his girlfriend, and that was kind of awkward. He said he'd heard Goat Island was a fun place to live. It wasn't an island at all, just a trailer park off Highway 67, downwind (some days) from the paper mill, and I was surprised how neat everybody kept their little yards. All kinds of lights were strung up in the trees, some chili peppers, some Christmas colors. Tiki torches were everywhere, even squares of green plastic grass like some kind of fake lawn. The trailers were lined up in rows on the side of a hill, which led down to a sandy strip of beach next to the lake, a boat ramp, and, of course, the pavilion with picnic tables underneath. The goat part was true. Still is. They eat all the extra garbage laying around and whatever washes up on the beach. They're pretty cute. But mean.

Elma's been here the longest—eighteen years—and is the manager, and also the mayor, she tells everybody. That first night, I couldn't believe all the rules she had: fences no taller than two feet around your patch of asphalt, outside lights off at 10, 11 on weekends, garbage day on Thursdays—put it out by 6 a.m. or haul it to the dump down the road. She acted tough, but when she was through, she invited me to her trailer at the top of the hill, with the best view of the lake, and listened to my story about husband number one—the high school boyfriend who didn't want to stop partying with his friends—and

husband number two, D.D.

Me and D.D. had only been married a few months, but I knew on the honeymoon—Vegas, of all places ( I know, not very original but I'd never been)—that it wasn't going to work. I told Elma how I'd followed him around like a lost puppy for two days, bearing the brunt of his meanness when he saw that Vegas poker wasn't anything at all like the dinky little machines he played at Rooster's every night back home. I got bored. One night I plunked down a stack of chips. D.D. was drunk and despondent over the five hundred he had just lost, so he barely noticed when I started winning until another guy at the table whistled real low and long, and D.D. saw me scrape up a huge pile of red chips. I told him I was going to cash in and head upstairs.

Big mistake, because D.D. wasn't the kind of man who could watch a woman do better than him, especially in front of other men. But in the end it didn't matter what the odds were paying in Vegas that day, I knew the marriage wasn't going to stick. The fact was he couldn't give me anything I couldn't get on my own. I was feeling like a failure, but that night in her trailer Miss Elma told me it was a mistake anyone could make. It didn't mean I wouldn't find somebody to love me for life. She had two under her belt before she found her Ed, dead twenty years now. I felt she'd be someone I could turn to, and I still do. She just gets on a toot sometimes.

**M**ary Dan and I finish up the tables, and she wants to get our rafts and go out for a float before it gets too late.

“One last happy hour while you're single.”

“Jude's not going to lock me up, Mary Dan.”

“You know it'll be different. He'll want you hanging out with him and his friends.”

“He goes off with his buddies—he won't mind if I do.”

“Yeah, well, you're going to be over on the other side of the lake in one of his fancy condos.”

I get excited picturing that. Jude works construction on this whole new development going up on the east side of the lake: new marina, condos, three restaurants, and one will be Italian. The housing market is bust, so the condos are going cheap cheap, and Jude has already bought two. We'll live in one of them and rent out the other one.

We walk down to the beach lugging our lime green inner tubes and carrying our drinks: rum boogie for me and vodka tonic for Mary Dan. I float out to the middle and pull down my straps to get some color for tonight. I lay back, close my eyes, listen to the hum of all the motors on the lake and highway.

“Are you nervous?” Mary Dan asks, but I hear the smile in her words.

“I guess I'm getting pretty good at this.”

“You should be. You've been at it for twenty or however many years.”

“Hey, we're both in our forties, and you don't have anybody in the wings.”

She splashes me and I splash her back. I cover my drink in case she does it again.

“You seem calm.”

“It’s going to be weird leaving this place, but we’ll still see each other all the time.” I’ve thought about leaving before, even tried to move out of the whole state once. But it seems like something always gets in the way—Daddy begs me to stay, or I can’t find a new job, or the time Miss Elma broke her hip and was bedridden for three and a half weeks. For the first time, I feel like with Jude I might actually be able to pull it off, even if it is just moving across the lake.

I lay back and picture us in the new condo, decorated with new furniture, me cooking him dinner in a kitchen with granite counters. He’s different than the other three. First, he’s younger than me—35 to my forty-something—and easily the best-looking guy around. His job keeps him in shape, unlike these other men at Goat Island with their beer guts and scrawny legs. The first time I saw him was at Freddie T’s. He was singing along with the band, “Help me, Rhonda, help, help me, Rhonda.” He looked like he was about sixteen years old. When he ended up in my trailer later that night, he snuggled up right next to me under the covers, even though I had about a week’s worth of stubble. Tim, the last husband, would have put the sheet between us.

When I’m out with Jude, I feel like I’ve accomplished something, even though I know I shouldn’t marry somebody just for their looks or money. But not since Tim left five years ago have I dated anyone this handsome, or responsible. And Jude doesn’t act prissy about his looks and probably doesn’t know half the ladies at Goat Island would give their eye teeth to be sleeping with him. And he doesn’t mind spending his money. I can’t stand a cheap guy. But it’s not just about the money. Miss Elma is wrong. I have changed; I know what I want now, and Jude can give it to me.

I see Tim’s face, and I feel a queasiness start in my stomach. I don’t want to think about it, today of all days. I open my eyes but not before I see him the morning he left. I pretended to be asleep, but watched his back as he threw his T-shirts and jeans in a box. He walked over, and I felt him standing over me, smelled the cigarettes on his work shirt. Then just heard the trailer door closing.

“Rhetta! Rhetta! Hey!”

I sit up too fast and nearly fall out of my inner tube.  
“Dammit, Daddy. You made me spill my drink!”

He stands at the wheel of his sailboat waving one arm, while Jude is over by the mast twisting something back and forth. It looks like he’s headed straight for me, and I see Daddy’s drunk.

“If you fall asleep during the ceremony, I’ll kill you,” I mumble. Mary Dan stands up in the shallow water, laughing.

“Stop!” I scream as loud as I can. “Jude, grab that wheel!”

Jude finally looks up and runs back to the wheel, grabs it just in time to avoid getting tangled in the rope that marks the swimming area. I swim over to the rope and hang on to it, treading water.

“What are you two idiots doing? Y’all are like Frick and Frack.”

“Just a few beers, baby. I swear.”

I believe Jude, but know my daddy wouldn’t have stopped at three or four beers. I just hope maybe he’ll slow down a little.

“What time’s it, Jude?”

“5:30.”

“I’ve got to go if I’m going to be ready at 6:30.”

Daddy stands up and walks to the edge of the boat. “You’re overreacting, Rhetta. I wasn’t even near that rope,” he laughs. He opens the hatch in the floor, pulls out the anchor, and drops it over the side.

“Please don’t have anymore till the reception.”

“10-4,” he says and salutes me, like he ever listens to anything I say.

I stand in my kitchen, looking at a photo on the side of my fridge. It’s of me, perched on the side of Tim’s boat, back when I could still wear a two piece. Across the bottom I wrote, “I love you.” He used to carry it in his wallet when he was working out of town. It’s still creased down the middle, and I trace it now with my finger.

Miss Elma pulls up in her golf cart. White crepe paper dangles from each corner of the roof, and there are even beer cans trailing behind the cart. Everybody knows Miss Elma drinks, but she’ll never admit it. Even now she’d say she got the cans out of somebody else’s garbage.

I grab my bag with my makeup kit and flip flops and my bouquet and walk outside.

“You did a good job on the decorating, Elma.” I sit next to her.

“You can back out, Rhetta.” She squints at me as she pulls on her cigarette.

“We can drive this right on up the hill to my trailer and I won’t let anybody in.

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I don't want this to end like with Tim."

Elma is possibly the only person who understands how devastated I was when Tim left. Even Mary Dan acted like I should have gotten over it faster. When I ended up in the hospital, I couldn't convince Elma that it was an accident. I woke up the first morning, and Elma still lay crooked in the chair next to the bed, her head thrown back and her mouth open, snoring real soft.

"It's going to be great, Miss Elma. You'll see," I tell her.

I see Jude standing down at the bottom of the hill, getting a beer out of the keg, which I had asked him not to tap until the ceremony was over. Well, I'll just have some catching up to do. Mary Dan waves her arm at me to let me know it's time to start.

Jude's wearing a Hawaiian shirt. A lot of other men are, too, and a few still have their swimming trunks on. I stand next to him and smell his aftershave. I love that smell. The first time we talked about marrying, after two months of dating, he said he'd leave it up to me, that it didn't matter one way or the other to him. When he did propose, clear out of the blue that night, I promised myself I'd try hard this time.

Standing next to Jude now, I'm glad I'm sober so I can concentrate on the vows, and I remind myself to remember them every day. Jude's friend pronounces us man and wife, and we walk through the crowd and over to the pavilion for the first toast. Daddy holds up his red plastic cup and starts a speech, his words only a little slurred.

"I told Little Bit here when I met Jude that she'd be crazy not to hang on to him. If she can, that is." He laughs, and the crowd does too. I feel my face getting hot with embarrassment. Daddy talks about his and Jude's golf outings and the new houses Jude is building around the lake, then he remembers why he's here and lifts up his cup. "Here's to Rhetta and Jude—this one's a keeper!"

I kick off my wedge sandals and pull my flip flops from the tote bag I had stashed under the bar. I think my white dress looks good against my tan. Mary Dan did a great job fixing the food on all the tables, and there's already a line next to the tables of prime rib and side dishes. I see Miss Elma's pickled cucumbers, and my mouth starts watering thinking of them. I try to ignore the burnt cheese smell coming from the paper mill. Hopefully the wind'll shift.

"Great spread, Jude," somebody yells, then I hear someone say, "Cha Ching!"

Jude said it didn't matter what it cost. He wanted it to be a fun party, and it looks like it's on its way.

**I**t's getting dark and fireflies start lighting up here and there. It's perfect weather with no humidity. I might even need a sweater later on. Jude is over next to the keg, laughing and talking with his boys. Mary Dan is flirting with my dad, which she does every time she starts drinking in the afternoon. I think she has her eye on him for marriage potential, which would be weird, but I'd finally have a sister.

Miss Elma stands next to the bar with what looks like a gin and tonic, talking and nodding to Mr. and Mrs. Baxter. Every once in a while Mr. Baxter leans over to hear her better against the band.

Everything is just as we planned—even the sailboat looks perfect out bobbing on the lake and casting wavy lines of light into the black water. Jude must have strung the extra lights around the edge while I was getting ready.

I do a shot with Mary Dan at the bar, then request the first dance. I have to drag Jude away from the keg. We step sideways, turn, and move together like we rehearsed. I sense the eyes of everybody watching us. These women wish they were in my shoes right now. I'm finally getting lucky. But, hey, Jude is lucky too. I sway my hips in time with "Mustang Sally" and hope he notices. I slide up next to him now and move my hips back and forth against him in time with the music, like it's the first time I've ever danced to this song at a wedding.

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