

The Redwood Writers
“I Made A Terrible Mistake” Contest 2021
2nd Place Winner

“The Legend of the Sand Dollar”
By John Lesjack

One Sunday night, between relationships, I ventured into Baker Hall and ball room dancing.

Before the dance began, everyone lined up for a lesson and learned a basic west coast swing move: triple-step, triple-step, rock step, practiced the move and rotated partners. I hadn't noticed my new partner until she stood in front of me wearing a blue “Save-the-Whales” T-shirt that matched her blue eyes.

Raimee, a forty-two-year-old full time college senior and part time secretary, said she went dancing once a week. As she talked in her velvet voice something profound happened within me and my knees turned to mayonnaise. After we rotated, I thought:
That woman looked just like her voice.

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During open dancing, Raimee surprised me with her request to do a west coast swing. "I may watch my feet," I said. She laughed and said, "Everyone's a beginner once."

I didn't look at my feet. I looked at Raimee—five-foot three, maybe-four, enchanting smile, dark hair, flat stomach...

The following week, I warmed to her praise for having practiced and I questioned the possibility of dating someone with minimum availability.

Baker Hall's roof leaked after a rainstorm, the place shut down, and Raimee accepted a drive to Monterey Bay. We boarded a whale watching boat, slipped into our life jackets and chatted with the crew. Choppy water and the boat's constant motion, however, sent me to the railing...!

Raimee called one Friday. She had obtained a better paying job and agreed to celebrate with dinner on the coast Sunday. Saturday, at Macy's, her roommate selected the perfect outfit for beginning a new job.

After dinner, I presented the gift. "This outfit honors your efforts to achieve your goal."

Raimee cried. "Your thoughtfulness touches me. My family thinks environmental studies are foolish."

We held hands and walked the beach where Raimee picked up a whole sand dollar. "Someday, I'll tell you the legend of this shell," she said.

Conflicts with Raimee were confusing. For example, Raimee became very upset with me after our spotlight dance at her uncle's wedding reception when I received compliments.

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"The man is the frame; the woman is the picture. Direct all compliments to me," Raimee said.

After her commencement exercises, a few parties, and a few drinks, Raimee said, "Marriage won't work for me, but I think of us as life-long partners."

Several differences concerned me: I was eight years older, close to retirement, had three grown children, owned my house and a mountain cabin. Raimee was interviewing for career opportunities.

For my birthday, she presented me with a sit-down dinner beside her coffee table. Shadows from tea lights in the windowsills flickered on the apartment walls as she raised her glass in a toast, then whispered, "May I have this dance?"

In her bare dining room, she switched on the music. Natalie Cole sang, "Unforgettable," which began our night club two step—one and two...

While we danced, Raimee whispered, "Honey, can we claim 'Unforgettable' as our song?"

"It's the only reason I came here," I whispered.

In September, because of my plan to retire, live in the mountains and research California history, we visited my cabin. Raimee developed a rash and we left early.

Back from southern California in October, we sat on her couch as she gushed with news. Dauphine Resort in Chrystal Beach offered her an administrative position! Because an opportunity in a living history program had surfaced for me, I thought: "*That which I feared has come upon me.*"

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We were in deep conflict. My heart wasn't into keeping Raimee from her career, nor did I want to live in southern California. We cried as we agreed to a long-distance relationship.

During my Dauphine Resort visit, and our beach walk, I found broken shells. Raimee picked up a whole sand dollar and explained, "The best part of the sand dollar is inside," but she looked so good in the evening's twilight, I forgot her entire explanation.

Two commutes, one summer and one romance later, during a beach ceremony, Raimee married her boss. I sent flowers.

At Baker Hall, I worked the door collecting money the night a big man handed across the correct amount, and said, "Two please." When I held out two tickets, there stood Raimee. She flashed her rings, introduced her husband, and said, "Save me a dance." In the morning they'd empty her storage locker and head home.

During the opening chords of "Unforgettable," I said, "How propitious!" Raimee took my hand and said, "Not really."

The crowd hushed; a spotlight stayed on us, and we glided around the dance floor. Lessons and practices paid off. Fred and Ginger never danced a better night club two-step or received more applause. After our last dance, she said, "Goodbye," handed me a little white box, and ran out the back door. I went home.

Raimee's gift was a whole sand dollar with a note.

"Sweetie, I don't want to part with bad feelings. If you have any negative thoughts about me, please connect them to the legend of the sand dollar. The shell,

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supposedly, contains five white doves. When the shell's broken, those doves are released into the world where they spread Good Will and Peace. Love, Raimee

That night, I pondered only one question about our relationship: Had I moved to Chrystal Beach would my "life-long partner" have married me?

Standing by my open bedroom window, I snapped the sand dollar in half and watched the night sky. I didn't see any damn doves, climbed into bed and cried myself to sleep.

One summer later, alone in my cabin near a little waterfall, my writing project—Zorro's role model—moves right along. Sundays, after volunteering at Columbia State Historic Park, I dine in Sonora at "Kahlil's Café." Still in my jeans, denim shirt and boots, I sit at the counter where, Chrissy, the waitress says, "Anything to drink?"

I say, "Beer."

Chrissy asks, "What kind?"

"Root."

"You'll fit right in at 'Bidwell Hall,' Chrissy says. "Have you done any social dancing?"

I say, "Ballroom."

Chrissy says, "Up here, there's only two kinds of dancing—country and western."

The following Sunday, during the lesson before the dance begins, the instructor says, "If ya'all can count, ya'all can waltz." We partner up, step and count, "One, two, three."

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Melania, my first partner, can either count or step but not both. We rotate. Ivanka, a queen-size woman wearing flats, requires pushing. I'm thinking, "These dance lessons? Huge mistake!"

My new partner is playful. She's also blonde, cute and my age but her "Save the redwoods" T-shirt makes my hands sweat.

The instructor counts—one, two, three. My partner adds, "drive, five, six," spins me around, says, "Oops!" And we laugh.

My next partner informs me that Jenette Milot is a dance teacher from the local college. Over her partner's shoulder, Jenette's pretty face looks my way and causes my inner voice to remember Nancy Reagan and "Just say no!"

After the lesson, I'm discussing which is best: Country or western dances when D. J. Dimitri announces, "Ya'all came here to dance, so ask someone to dance. Now, from the movie, 'Urban Cowboy,' here's Anne Murray singing, 'Could I have this dance?'"

Before I'm ready, Jenette extends her hand.

Oh oh, it's déjà vu time. Her blue eyes, the slogan and my memories are overwhelming.

I say, "I can't," and step outside onto the deck. I'm thinking my warm cabin is nearby, but when I turn, I bump into that gorgeous blonde standing in front of me in the moon light and complicating our lives wonderfully by saying, "Are you all right?"

"Maybe," I say, both hands in my pockets. "I'm trying to run away."

In a soft voice, Jenette asks, "Do I remind you of your ex-?"

How does she know to ask that question? Is she psychic? I wonder.

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"I lost my husband to cancer," Jenette offers. "I don't know if I'm over his loss yet but what helps me with my depression is to just keep moving."

All I lost was a partner and a seashell. Jenette's loss puts a different spin on my self-pity party and causes a major emotional shift. Also, she intrigues me something fierce, so I confess, "You both have causes."

Jenette looks down at her shirt and up at me.

"Redwoods are my daughter Chrissy's cause," Jenette says. "I got home from hiking and this shirt was available."

My comfort level rises enough to say, "Now I can do what Dimitri said to do."

"What's that?"

"Ask you something."

"What?" she says.

"Could I have this dance?"

Jenette's smile brightens that old wooden dance hall as she says. "It's the only reason I came out here."

We join others on the dance floor as Anne Murray sings, "When we're together, it feels so right..."

In the weeks to come, I volunteer in Jenette's classes which improves my dancing and stifles my depression. The season's first snowstorm closes Bidwell Hall, so we picnic on Jenette's red checkered tablecloth in front of her fireplace. In years to come, Jenette and I grow closer and closer but every now and then, as couples do, we have disagreements. During those times, my inner voice whispers, "She's a keeper. Look for ways to kiss and make up."

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One summer morning, when we aren't talking, I'm finishing my tea and toast in our dining room when Jenette enters looking fabulous in her silk blouse, skinny jeans and boots—her going-to-town outfit. She sets a little box in front of me, then puts her warm hands on my shoulders which means we're talking again.

"I've missed your touch," I say.

Jenette gently rubs my neck and says, "Do you want to be alone while you open your mail?"

That's when I notice the return address label: "Raimee Lindow."

I say, "Watch, Honey! At no time do my hands leave my arms." I open the box and find one letter and one sand dollar.

I say, "We have no secrets," open the letter and read, "Sweetie," then explain, "That's me."

Jenette says, "I know, *smart* ass."

Sweetie, I've made a terrible mistake. He can't dance. He's tight with the money. The marriage is over. You loved me better than anyone else. I should never have broken off my partnership with you. What can I do to fix us? Love, Raimee

P.S. Save-the-whales.com needs a donation.

Jenette sighs, slides onto my lap, wraps her arms around my neck and says, "What are you going to tell her about us?" Her silk blouse feels good as we hug and I say, "The truth."

"Good," Jenette says. We stand up and I'm already in my office typing when she yells, "We're all meeting for lunch downtown!"

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Raimee, Thanks for the gifts. After I cracked open the first shell, the doves of goodwill flew into my life and deposited my lovely wife, Jenette Milot. We'll save the last sand dollar for the coming elections. As for how we're doing, permit me to say Jenette's close to retirement. My editor has big plans for my writing. Our offspring are delightful. Oh, we donate only to Save-the-redwoods and Girl Scout cookies.

Raimee, losing you was a serendipitous bump on the dance floor of life. Because you met someone, I met the most intriguing person of my life! That's fair!

Blessings,

I drive quickly into town, mail the letter, rush into Kahlil's Cafe where Jenette, standing in line with family members, turns, says, "Did you..." And I hug and kiss her and say, "You intrigue me!" She says, "What..." I kiss her again and say, "You're so pretty!" She says, "People are..." and I kiss her again and say "the first time we danced, I knew..." We hug.

Chrissy turns to my daughter and says, "I hope Raimee writes to your dad more often."

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