

When Love Conquers All

It began at the party.

It was one of a succession of parties that occurred every year during the debutante season. This particular one occurred at 21 East Bay Street – the home of the prominent Mr. John Singleton Kirk and his lovely daughter, Maria. At this party, Dr. David Jasper and Maria were formally introduced. This quickly progressed to a formal proposal of marriage and an equally formal acceptance. Because of this carefully orchestrated series of events, David had managed to restore his family's finances within six months of his first meeting with Maria.

About a year later, their life together changed forever. The sparkle in her bright blue eyes and the smile on her face never faded as she held the little blanket out in front of her face and then hugged it close again and snuggled it under her chin. "I'm so happy David! Do you think it will be a boy?"

"It had better be," he said with the quiet confidence of a man accustomed to life's preferential treatment. "It is family tradition for the first to be a masculine child." He bowed to her and smiled: "In everything else, ladies first." and they both laughed with the joy and contentment often felt by young couples. Her joy stemming the certainty that their love would last forever, and his contentment based on the certainty that, because of her money and their new heir, the Jaspers would continue to prosper.

And indeed, it did turn out to be a boy. David Michael Jasper, Jr. Soon to be known as Michael, was the pride of all, but especially his mother. She'd refused the assistance of any servants, preferring to spend every waking hour with him. "Look David, Michael just winked with his left eye! He has never done that before!" Her sincere amazement at each of Michael's 'firsts' quickly lost David. "Oh look, he's smiling at you!"

"Sweetheart, he's been doing that for six months now."

"Oh, I know, but never quite like that. Look! There it goes again!"

At Michael's first birthday party, they had all of the usual guests, but this time there was a new face present. That being the beautiful, youthful face of 20 year old Miss Juliana Huger. David was informally introduced to Juliana by Maria. Maria was so busy doting over her son's every move and opening his gifts for him, that she didn't notice the look in David's eyes when they first met with Juliana's. He said, "It's so very nice to meet you, Miss Ju . . . Ju . . ."

"Juliana, silly." Maria said while showing David one of Michael's gifts. "You never miss a name David, what's wrong, rattled?" She laughed and shook a silver rattle in front of David. Her eyes gleamed with delight as she turned to a guest behind her, "Thank you Claudia, I can tell Michael just loves this new rattle. You are so very kind."

Yes, he did get rattled, but the fact that Maria was occupied allowed him time to recover with a laugh. “Miss Juliana, then. It is quite a pleasure to have you with us today.”

Julianna managed to release her indrawn breath and conceal her pounding heart as she spoke. “Well, thank you so kindly, Dr. Jasper. I am enjoying your hospitality immensely.” Juliana was never so instantly drawn to a man before. When he couldn’t get her name out, she knew he felt the same. Right then she realized that this sweet young mother, who was still obviously ripping open presents and laughing with her little boy, would be in her way. She smiled at Maria with a pleasant, neighborly smile and looked over at Michael: “oh, Maria, he is so handsome.” But while these words were purring from her lips, she thought *If I’m going to get this man, this little Mother Mary and her son will have to go. But first, I have to get the man.*

That was not difficult to do; it only took getting an appointment with her family doctor.

When he would come home, his loving wife would greet him at the door, usually with little Michael in her arms. “Hi sweetheart,” she’d say and give him a kiss and a warm smile. She’d playfully ask, “How was your day, Doctor David?” He’d give her a kiss, put his arm around her and escort her and little Michael back into the house. Once in their warm den, he’d play with Michael while he told her

about his day. She always looked forward to this, for the only person she loved more than David was her dear Michael, and, together, they were her whole life.

But after that party, everything began changing. Now, her playful inquiry about his day was answered with a bored, “The same as every day, Maria,” and instead of that warm way he’d wrap her in his arms and walk with her back into the house, he’d just walk past her and go to the living room. There he’d have a quiet drink and spend some time with Michael. Unlike the first year, when dinner at the Jasper estate was accompanied by light hearted laughter and interesting conversation, it had become a quiet, introspective affair. After dinner, he’d retire to their comfortable den to read.

In the end, all she had were the gentle gusts from the harbor, her Michael, and her questions.

Then, one day David invited Maria to come sail with him. She was so excited and relieved to be asked to join him that she never thought to question why. She knew nothing of sailing and had never learned to swim; nevertheless, she stepped on the thirty foot sloop without hesitation. The wind was strong and cold, for it was early November when the winter winds first begin to pick up. When she boarded, David offered a reassuring smile and said, “It’s cold sweetheart, so wrap up tight and don’t get wet.

Sweetheart! I haven't heard that in a long time, she thought. She stood at the helm with the man she once married and still loved. Finally, she thought, all of her waiting and patience had paid off. Finally!

They had slipped away from the dock and sailed out into the harbor when he gave her a smile. "Alright honey," he said, "we are going to have to jibe to make the turn, so I need you to go to the bow and man the jib." When she looked at him with a puzzled look, he tried to explain: "We're going to turn, honey, I need you to tighten the rope for the sail up front." He saw where she was looking, "Yes, that sail up front honey, just tighten the rope by pulling it through that brass cleat." Unable to describe "cleat," he just pointed.

"Oh," she said, "I've got it."

"Probably not, dearest," he said, "but you will get it, don't worry."

With this encouragement, she walked around the port side of the cabin to get to the bow. Just as she was about midway, he spun the wheel hard to starboard.

Now, any sailor knows that when a boat jibes, or a turn with the wind, several events will occur. First the sails will begin flapping, this tells the sailor to switch sides of the boat and tighten the mainsail to prepare for the turn. Then the sails will begin to catch the wind. If the boom is not secured by this point, it will whip across the deck with a tremendous force. Maria, of course, was no sailor, so when the boom began to swing over the cabin, she just stood there. By the time she realized her mistake, it was too late. The boom came storming across the top of

the cabin and swept her off the deck as easily as a windshield wiper will chase water off the glass.

“Maria!” he yelled. He could see her in the choppy water, struggling but still at the surface. Horror at what he was doing was stayed with the utmost self-discipline. “Wait!” he yelled, “I’ll come about and get you!” But, instead of simply turning the boat about and tossing out a life ring, he kept on sailing. When he turned back, he found her body floating face down on the cold, windy harbor. He pointed the boat into the dying wind, and the sails luffed idly in the wind – just a lazy flap, plop sound like one would hear right before the boat jibes. He thought, *Oh my God, what have I done? My God, what am I doing? Stay calm...wait. You’ve planned this too long.* He held the wheel tightly and watched as her body rolled and slid beneath the surface. With a mixture of horror and relief, he tightened the mainsail and turned the boat towards shore.

‘Oh, the sadness of it all.’ One woman said.

Another agreed, ‘The poor man, married to such a sweet lady for only three years, and now a widower!’

And another, ‘Oh, the poor, poor, dear, look how broken up he is. How will he ever raise that poor child by himself?’

And of course they admired his fortitude as he bore his despair and stared straight ahead during the funeral.

‘What a shame.’

Of course, they also praised his strength as he hired a nanny for Michael, clenched his teeth and went back to his practice. What a fine man he was.

Maria was proud of her brave little boy. She so deeply wanted to be there holding Michael, but all she could do was watch him cry in his nanny's arms while he tried to understand that his mother was with God. Though that hurt her, she was filled with gratitude as she saw David's strength and love for his son. They couldn't know it, but she watched. She loved them so much that she couldn't leave. Of course, she noticed that the marriage seemed kind of rushed, but she understood; it was for the boy's sake, after all.

Though Maria tried to watch only when David was home with Michael, she couldn't help but notice how life was changing at their home. Juliana, at first the devoted wife and loving mother, was spending less time with David and as little as possible with Michael. She was too busy spending David's money and 'visiting friends' to be home very often.

Then the awful day came when Maria saw the truth.

Everything changed when David came home and saw the clear red imprints from four narrow fingers across Michael's right cheek. At first he believed Juliana when she told him that the nanny had done it, but something seemed wrong with her story. When he saw that the the mark was on Michael's right cheek, he called Becky back from her room where she was packing her things. When Becky, answering his summons, came into the den. David said, "Catch," and tossed her

Michael's silver rattle. She caught it with her right hand. Michael was struck by someone's left hand, and Julianna was the only left-handed person in the house.

Once she had caught the rattle, David brought Michael to Becky and asked her to take him to his room.

Despite all of Julianna's denials, he saw, for the first time, who he had married. Unfortunately for Julianna, so had Maria.

Once she had left with Michael, he turned back to Julianna, "Why the devil did you slap him?" She didn't offer any explanation; just met his eyes coldly. "I have tolerated your . . . disinclination . . . for him, but, I will not have you hurting that child!"

She knew that she had been caught, so her eyes took on a look of bitter amusement. With a kind of confidence that told him he was seeing her for the first time. She shrugged, "So, I slapped the sniveling little brat; it's not like I knocked him off a boat and watched him drown." This got Maria's attention. Julianna let out a contemptuous laugh, "You murdered your wife and now you reprimand me for a mere slap? Oh, what a hypocrite!"

He stood leaning against the door frame through which Becky had taken Michael. He breathed in deeply and released it in a sigh, "Yes, out of my love for you . . . I curse myself daily for what I've done, but Michael will not pay the price for my stupidity! That's final!"

With an air of triumph, she said, "Divorce me then."

“Oh, you would like *that*, wouldn't you? It would be cheaper and easier just to knock you off a boat!”

As Maria heard this argument, she felt disoriented, like a lifetime's faith had been disproven. What could they mean? It was an accident . . . that's all, just a senseless accident. Then the horrific moment of clarity came. There had been no accident . . . “No! He couldn't have!” It was inconceivable. “He couldn't! He wouldn't!” Then she knew: He could . . . and he did.

Maria's thoughts went cold, and her heart sank deep within her. The last bit of self-delusion bubbled out; her love died, and in its place came the resolve brought on by hatred.

In that instant, she saw her home, her son, her husband – her life. She remembered the quiet evenings in which she, David, and Michael would sit on the piazza. She remembered the sounds their voices as they talked and laughed and the rising joy of Michael as he would at first giggle, then laugh, and then squeal with delight as David tickled him. Even now, the remembrance of those nights made her smile. Then she thought, *Look what he took from me; look what that cold bastard took from me!*

And then she remembered the sounds of those sails: how they quietly luffed limply when the boat first pointed into the wind. And then how that ruffling sound increased as the boat began to turn. How scared she was as the sails began flapping

louder and more wildly until rising to a crescendo by snapping like a belt or a whip as the boat continued its turn, and then the swoosh of the boom as it swung and swept her off the boat. She managed to get her head above the surface just in time to hear the final Pop! of the sails when they fully caught the strong wind and then to watch the boat as it sailed away.

Life was different from that moment on. David and Juliana could no longer pretend that there was any love left between them. Just as Maria's sincere love for her husband was only met with disgust, so was David's love for Julianna. It wasn't long before they moved to separate bedrooms, and, eventually, led separate lives beneath the same roof.

This, of course, made it easier for Maria. David would pay for taking her from her beloved son, but she wanted Michael to grow up as happily as possible. So, for now, she would concentrate on Juliana.

It wasn't long after that argument when David heard the crash and the scream. He rushed out of his room and ran to the bottom of the sweeping staircase to find Juliana holding on to an end post of the banister rail. With a look of sincere concern, he asked, "Darling, are you alright? What in God's name happened? Did you trip on the stairs?"

"No, I didn't *trip!*" she said vehemently, "I was pushed."

Sobered by her hatred, David looked around and shrugged, “M’dear, there’s no one around to push you. You must have slipped and just thought you were pushed.”

“Damn it, I was *pushed*! I was just walking down the stairs when I felt this pressure on my shoulders and then . . . then, it *pushed* me!”

Once more he looked around and shrugged. “Yes, dear.” He said patronizingly, then turned and began walking back up the stairs. As if a second thought, he said “I’m glad you are OK.”

“No you are not!” She screamed hysterically at his receding back, “You wish I had broken my neck!” This caused him to stop, but he didn’t turn around. “Oh,” she said, “but that’s not the best part.” Then she laughed as if anticipating the punch line of a joke, “no, the best part is that *it*, whatever *it* was, broke my fall. Isn’t that a laugh, whatever pushed me, didn’t want me hurt!”

He resumed walking up the stairs to his room. As he opened the door, she could barely hear him as he said, “Hmhf... a shame,” and entered his room.

Maria watched with some satisfaction as the shaken, but unharmed, Juliana went back up the stairs to her room. *No*, Maria thought, *I won't let you get a scratch, my dear Juliana.*

Juliana quickly learned to keep a distance between her and Michael. Anytime she came near him, things just seemed to come from nowhere – a

misplaced toy truck, a ball, some marbles. Yes, sometimes she'd slip and fall, but she would never get hurt. Not a scratch.

Before long, she also learned to listen for a sound that always preceded one of her 'accidents'. Ironically, it did not begin as a harsh warning or a menacing hiss; instead, it sounded like a pleasant whisper of a harbor breeze and the luffing of a canvas sail. This sound became her signal to stop and look around. Inevitably, whenever she heard this, she would see or hear Michael nearby. If she didn't quickly get away that ruffling of the sails would become a flapping noise, then a slapping sound, then woosh!, as her feet came out from under her. So, no matter where she was, when she heard the sound of sails ruffling in the wind, she'd stop, turn around, and walk away.

This began to occur more often, and not just when she walked near Michael. Once during a walk home from the market, she heard the breeze and the stirring of the sails. Then sound of the sails became louder – flapping – and that increased to a noisy popping, and then the 'snap!' of the canvas when it caught the wind at the end of a jibe. On this occasion, right after that last snap, a wind lifted some leaves from a pile of clippings. They blew up and slapped her in her face with a hundred tiny hands. Another time, during a peaceful walk below the oaks at White Point Gardens, she heard the wind catch the sails. Unbeknownst to her, a squirrel, high in the oaks, jumped from one limb to another. Unnaturally, it fell short of its intended target, and, instead of completing a light landing on a limb above, it fell. She heard

the sail fill and ‘snap!’ just as that poor squirrel landed on Juliana’s head. It scrambled off in terror and left the little lady alone, screaming like a mad woman staring at her shadow. A time or two, while visiting a friend, a door slammed shut in front of her. All too often, she would trip over objects that had mysteriously lain in her path.

The sound of sails gently luffing in the wind quickly escalated from a source of dread to one of terror. It wasn’t long before the sound of any cloth flapping in a light breeze would absolutely horrify her. Since she lived on the Battery, where the canvas sails flapped and popped as the cargo ships cruised by, where flags would flutter in the wind, and where laundry would ruffle in the back yards, her terror was rapidly reaching the point of insanity.

People began noticing this. The last time she went on a quiet walk with a friend, they were casually talking when she suddenly stopped and began looking around in a panicked rush. “Did you hear that?” She asked

He too stopped, looked at her, and listened for whatever she might be hearing. “Hear what?” he asked.

But she was far away in some horrible nightmare. Her body was tense, her eyes searching. When he finally managed to regain her attention, her eyes lost their look of horror and momentarily focused on her friend. “The sails,” she said, but she didn’t wait for a response; instead, she vacantly stared off, turned and walked away. No one cared to spend much time with her after that.

It even got to the point that she heard the flapping of the sails over the voices of people when they spoke to her. The gentle flop-flap-plap would increase by degrees until the sound of canvas popping against canvas would drown out their voices.

But then it stopped.

When she entered the first floor apartment in her father's home, she found complete peace within the serenity of its stillness. She walked further into the apartment until she entered the study. Still no sound. She advanced to a chair in which she used to sit and read. Tentatively, she sat; she could hear no breeze, no canvas sails. With the hesitancy of a child lifting a precious glass vase from a table, she turned and lifted a book from a shelf behind her. Carefully she opened it. No sound. Then she did something she had not been able to do for so long—she read. Yes, finally, read!

There were limits, However, to her reprieve. When she opened the door to leave, she could feel the gentle harbor breeze sweeping through, and in that breeze, she could hear the low, God-forsaken rustling of canvas coming to life. She stood there at the open doorway for a moment. Then she understood. She nodded to herself, turned, shut the door behind her, and reentered her apartment. She went back to the study, sat down in her favorite chair, and cried. She never tried to leave again.

Maria was not finished with her yet, for soon the sounds of luffing sails returned. At first she didn't know what to do, but as the intensity of the flapping sails rose to slapping, snapping, popping, she ran around the apartment in a panic, shutting windows and closing curtains until, as she shut the last curtain, all the tortuous wind stopped, and she sank down to the floor and, in this peace, slept. She lived out the next few years of her life with only the light of a candle or lantern and food brought to her by her baffled family.

Michael grew up healthy and strong. Like his father, he studied to be a doctor. Unlike his father, he excelled in med school and became a prominent surgeon. Once Michael grew older and left the house to begin his own life, his father began isolating himself more and more. It got to the point that he would refuse to cross the threshold of his front door. If someone came to the door and suggested he come outside, he'd mumble something about the sails and retreat back into the safety of his home. He was only in his early fifties when, for no understandable reason, he allowed his practice to fail and became a recluse in his mansion. His eyes took on a haunted look and his jowls drooped like a man haggard with years of weariness. People had long stopped visiting, but neighbors would report hearing him argue loudly with the emptiness. Sometimes they'd hear him begging, and, at times, they would hear him sobbing.

His deportment changed only when Michael came to visit. It was then, and only then, that David would smile and laugh.

They would talk for hours.

“Why don’t you come to our house and live with us, Father?” Michael would ask, “After all, I have a healthy practice and a nice home, and there is plenty of room for us all.”

The smile would fade from his father’s face and the sparkle would change to the dullness of utter resignation. “No son, I like it here,” David would say. He could hear the sound of canvas being stirred stop as he repeated his refusal to leave: “No, I think I’ll stay right here.”

One day, after years spent seclusion, Julianna stopped receiving the tray that her father set out for her each day. When she had eaten nothing for a couple of days, her father entered the apartment. He stood at the doorway drop-jawed, disbelieving what he was seeing. First he saw what she had done with the mattresses she had demanded after the first few weeks of her seclusion. The room was in complete darkness because every window was covered by a mattress, and each mattress was held against a window by whatever furniture she could find. This served to block out all light and sound. Within the ring of mattresses and furniture, there contained only darkness, the putrid smell of death, the buzzing of flies, and a dead woman curled up on a sheet in the middle of the floor. The coroner said she was, literally, scared to death.

David lived to the ripe old age of fifty-nine. His room was not in total darkness, for his son still came to visit on occasion, but one day his maid found him, in semidarkness, hanging from his chandelier.

Despite the fires that constantly burned in the coal fireplaces, the mansion had not held warmth since Maria's death, but, upon David's death, warmth returned like a bird to her chicks. The windows were opened, the breezes once again blew into the home, and the curtains billowed like sails on a bright and windy harbor. It looked like spring had finally returned to the mansion.

It's impossible that this story should end happily, for, when one loves for two, and the other not at all, dissatisfaction begets betrayal, and revenge becomes inevitable.