

Bill & Jolene - Short Story

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Jolene Renton-Buckner, though plain and understated in beauty, was a confident, well-planned, over-achiever. Her stature was understated beneath her unrelenting strive for perfection. She was neither humble nor boastful, but carried the two like a set of dinner trays above her head—perfectly balanced and likely to tip at the first moment of carelessness.

Bill Buckner was her husband, but she called him William. Bill collected antique sewing machines and toasters, selling them through his website, and he always stayed true to their value, never over-pricing or swindling a customer. He wore glasses too large for his face. The wire-frames so constantly slid down and he so constantly pushed them back up that a faint, red line ran down the center of his nose, as if his face had been folded in half. Jolene told him every day that he needed new glasses, that he looked fish-eyed and that the red line on his nose was really starting to ruin her sex drive. Bill said he would get new ones tomorrow.

Jolene came home from work Tuesday afternoon with an announcement. Bill was at the kitchen counter on his laptop, glasses brimming the tip of his nose, and his top teeth chewing nervously at the skin behind his lip. At the sound of the door, Bill looked up from his computer and waited for his wife's entrance into the kitchen.

"I got it!" she exclaimed, as she dropped her briefcase to the kitchen floor. "I got the promotion!"

"That's wonderful, honey!" Bill said excitedly, index finger pushing his glasses to his eyes before rising to hug and kiss his wife. He threaded his arms through hers, embracing her, and nuzzling his head into her neck. "I'm so proud of you."

Jolene was taller than him in her three-inch heels. She wrapped her arms over his shoulders and squeezed him into her. "Let's celebrate!" She kissed Bill on the nose quickly and aggressively, then released him from her grasp and opened the wine cabinet.

The two had settled comfortably into their plush purple loveseat by their second glass, and both sipped dreamily from the gold-tipped crystal ware, gifts for their wedding only a few years before. Frank Sinatra played on the antique record player as Jolene told him all about what her new office was to look like and the plants she intended to buy this weekend to make it feel more like home.

"What about an aquarium?" Bill inquired, as he swirled the wine slowly in his glass.

"Oh William, honestly. Aquariums are for dentist's offices," she answered quickly, tipping her glass back gracefully. "Besides how would I ever remember to feed them?"

"I suppose you're right," Bill said, tilting his glass to his mouth and letting the last drops slide in.

Jolene poured herself a third glass. She took a generous gulp before setting the glass back on the coffee table. Bill could always tell when his wife was drunk; her eyes had a heavy tired gaze and her normally fidgeting hands began to relax on the armrest. She stared lazily into the spinning record player—an antique, something he had found online and was quite proud of—"A classic" the seller had written to him in an e-mail, "Works just as well as it did back in '54". When the player had arrived, there was a small crack in its base, too small to affect its playing but large enough to notice across the room. Jolene told him to send it back. The crack was huge and ugly, she said. But Bill found something likeable about it. It gives it character, he told her. Bill smiled now at his purchase.

"Can you turn that off? The spinning's making my head hurt," Jolene said, her chin beginning to sink into her shoulders. She unbuttoned her starched white-collared blouse to the third button, letting her chest breathe the fresh air.

Bill stood up and took the needle off the record. The song came to a sudden, sharp halt. Looking back at his wife he noticed her eyelids had begun to close. He reached for the small, colorful tin next to the record player; it was the shape of a giraffe, a child's toy once, a treasured antique now.

"I wish you wouldn't do that, William," Jolene said suddenly, her eyes still closed, fingers pressed to her forehead.

“Do what?” Bill asked, as he fingered a small plastic bag and a yellow glass pipe from the bottom of the giraffe.

She answered him with silence, perhaps pretending to be asleep or too drowsy to respond. She listened as he quietly filled the pipe, knowing how precisely and cautiously he did this—picturing him separate the seeds, careful not to let anything escape, his fingers pressing into the pipe. He was very good at doing this, and very quick. She kept her eyes closed.

There was a long pause of time, filled with the soft sounds of Bill’s inhaling and exhaling. The bitter but familiar smell filled Jolene’s nostrils.

“William?” she asked, finally breaking the silence.

“Yes, Jo?” he answered, a steady stream of smoke floating from his nostrils. He was very relaxed now. He held the antique giraffe tin in his hand and thumbed the smooth lid, admiring it.

“Are you happy for me?” Jolene asked, her eyes still closed, as if talking through a dream.

“Of course I am,” he answered, raising the pipe to his lips.

“How happy?” she pried.

Bill paused, staring at his wife. Her brown hair, usually pulled tightly into a ponytail at the crown of her head, had begun to fall loosely at the nape of her neck and over her eyebrows. It gave her firm, stiff appearance a tender, soft one.

“Very,” he replied, softly, his voice smooth now. Bill was never very talkative, but Jolene knew that in a few more drags, he would be.

“You don’t seem it,” she said.

Bill shrugged. “I’m sorry,” offering no further explanation.

“Is it because I’ll make more money than you?”

“No.”

There was silence. Bill took another hit. He needed it.

"When are you going hunting again?" she asked, relieving the sudden tension. He hunted not for wild animals but for potential treasures, often driving hundreds of miles to find an original 1968 sea foam green toaster from a rundown antique shop that undervalued its price. Bill was in his glory when he was hunting.

He took another puff and held it in his lungs for a moment, his chest expanded, jaw twitching before he exhaled and answered, "I was thinking about going to that little hole-in-the-wall antique store over in Newmark. I think I'll ride the old Amtrak. Or just rent a car again."

Jolene didn't respond. She watched him place the yellow pipe inside the bag, roll it up into a tiny bundle, and press it to the bottom of the neck of the giraffe-shaped tin. As he slid the cover back on, he cleared his throat. It was gruff and rustic sounding. "Unless I could drive the BMW," he said, weakly.

"Oh Willy, come on!" she exclaimed, jerking from her seat and clanging the empty wine glasses in her hand as she walked toward the kitchen, ankles wobbling slightly. "The first week of my new promotion and I arrive in a dirty public bus. Wouldn't that be a sight to see." Her words drifted off behind the sound of running water as she filled the empty glasses.

Bill placed the tin back on the shelf and the needle back on the record. Frank Sinatra began singing again. *I've lived a life that's full. I've traveled each and every highway.* He smiled, watching his wife fumble with a sponge, too drunk to be washing dishes.

He took a long breath in, as if he was still smoking, but now it was only air—air and Sinatra. "I thought Craig could drive you," he said, finally.

Her soapy hands slid over the long flute of the glass but couldn't grasp it quick enough before it clanged against the sink. She gasped, held it up to the light. The gold-tipped rim was chipped. "Dammit," she sighed, pretending to be too distracted by her careless accident to answer her husband. "These were a set!" she exclaimed, then threw the glass into the garbage.

"Oh honey, don't throw it out! It's just a chip!" Bill jolted up from his seat and into the kitchen.

"I can't stand cracks in wine glasses," she said, placing the other glass on the counter to dry. "What if we were to have guests? And we served wine in that chipped glass?" Her voice was getting louder. She wiped her hands on a towel and stared at her husband, who was now digging into the bottom of the trash. "It's not an antique, Bill. You can't salvage it."

Bill pulled the glass with the minor chip out of the garbage, peeling a piece of lettuce from it. His glasses were now at the very tip of his nose, threatening to fall off. He examined the chip carefully. "This is nothing," he said quietly.

She watched him from the other side of the kitchen. Her face bore a look of disgust, not at the wineglass but at her husband. "I'm going to bed," she said. But she didn't move. She watched as Bill twirled the glass around slowly in his fingertips, as if entranced by the tiny chip.

"I thought since the two of you go out for lunch every afternoon, he wouldn't mind driving you to work one morning," Bill said, eyes still on the glass.

"Who?" Jolene unconvincingly acted naïve. Her voice was shaky.

"Craig," he answered, finally pushing his glasses up his nose. The red line down the center of his face seemed more vibrant in the neon kitchen light.

Only Frank replied: *I planned each charted course. Each careful step along the byway...*

She stood dumbfounded, surprised by her husband's boldness. He looked up at her finally, grinning the way a child does when they've gotten away with something.

Jolene cleared her throat and raised her chin, attempting to look unphased. "Yes, I suppose I could give him a call," she answered, stumbling over the words slightly and turning toward the stairs.

Bill held his smile and gaze on her. "I'm sure he wouldn't mind," he said, but she was already heading upstairs.

He ran warm water over the wine glass, rinsing it, careful not to run his finger over the fresh chip. Then

he poured the rest of the bottle of wine, only a few drops, and brought it with him to the purple couch. He sank slowly into it and drank the wine in one gulp, feeling the sharp exposed glass against his lips.

Upstairs he could hear drawers opening and closing, as his wife dressed for bed, but the noises faded. Soon it was only him and Frank left in the living room. He reached for the giraffe tin, began filling his pipe, and was soon calm again. That night he slept on the couch as always, but he fell asleep with a smile on his face, thinking about driving the BMW down to the antique store in Newmark and hoping he might find the perfect underpriced, undervalued little treasure. But he wasn't quite sure what it would be.