

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

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