

Meant to Be

Cliff and Joland's Story

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She noticed the handsome, young man across the room—his wavy brown hair, bright blue eyes, friendly smile. She had never seen him before, even though she lived in a South Louisiana town of only 400 people. The man's short haircut and his erect stance made her think *military*. She watched as he moved about the crowd, talking with guests, offering a toast to his brother, L.J., and L.J.'s wife, Flo, on their wedding day, July 25, 1953. She was there with a date, just a friend, but her attention returned again and again to this fascinating stranger.

After the reception, the party moved to a popular night spot, the Teche Club just outside New Iberia. The young man wandered over to chat with her date, introduced himself to her and then came back a few more times. *Oh, I'd like to get to know that one better*, she thought. Apparently the sentiment was mutual because each time he came by to talk, she had a feeling he was more interested in making conversation with her than her date.

Finally he asked her to dance, and she learned that he was a Navy man, had served in both World War II and the Korean War, had spent most of his ten years of service in Japan and was home on leave for a week. They danced several more times that night, some to the traditional *chank-a-chank* sounds of a Cajun two-step but more so to the likes of Bill Haley and His Comets. At the end of the evening, he asked her and her date for a ride home.

A day or so later, Clifton J. Charpentier called Joland B. Hebert and asked her to go with him, his Aunt Lou and Uncle Neil, to the beach at Grand Isle, Louisiana, for a few days of fun before he returned to his ship in Long Beach, California. Her immediate answer was *yes*, but her mother didn't agree.

"Mon Dieu! He's a sailor, Joland. What are people going to think?" her mother said. "You know what they say about sailors." Even though Joland was 19 years old, had her own car and a job, she still lived with her parents and typically adhered to their wishes. This time was different. She attempted to

prove to her mother that it was safe because Cliff's aunt and uncle would be there, and her mother knew them to be good people. For the first time in her life, she stood ready to defy her mother, insisting that she was going on this trip, with or without her approval.

Joland's demeanor convinced her parents she was serious. If they couldn't stop her, they at least wanted to meet this young man who had captured their daughter's interest, so they invited Cliff over for dinner on Thursday night. He was polite and respectful, but Joland's mother kept a wary eye on him all night. Her father enjoyed talking with Cliff, and her two younger brothers were engrossed with his stories of adventures in faraway places.

Joland barely slept that hot July night in 1953, and the hours at work the next day dragged on until 4:00 p.m., when she covered her typewriter and raced home to wait for Cliff and his aunt and uncle. Grand Isle is a small barrier island, 50 miles due south of New Orleans with beaches and restaurants and a dance hall, a popular South Louisiana getaway during those days.

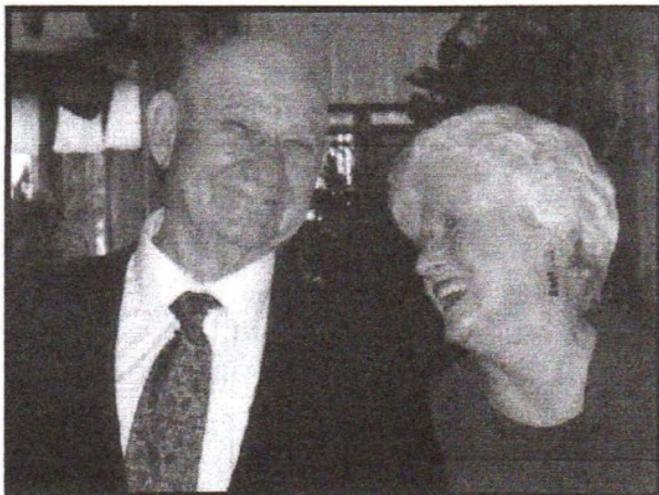


Cliff & Joland in July 1953

Cliff and Joland spent Saturday and Sunday eating, dancing, fishing for crabs, walking on the beach, getting to know each other. They even managed to sneak a first kiss while Aunt Lou's watchful eye roamed elsewhere.

On Monday, Joland asked her boss for the morning off, so she could take Cliff to the bus station. She picked him up and met his father and a couple other relatives. Saying good-bye to him was one of the most difficult things she had ever done, and she knew in her heart that if he asked her to go to California, she'd be on that bus, too. With no talk of that, she promised to write him every day. He committed to send a note whenever he could.

Over the next 18 months, the letters progressed from casual to interested to serious, and during a rare, pre-arranged call in September 1954—Joland's family had no telephone—Cliff asked her to marry him and mailed her an engagement ring. He had no time to return to Louisiana, so Joland could either wait to marry until he got out of the service in a year or so or go meet him in California before he shipped out again.



Celebrating 50 years married in 2005

Clifton J. Charpentier and Joland B. Hebert married on January 5, 1955 and returned to South Louisiana to live after Cliff's discharge from the Navy.

Today, their 56 years of marriage continues to prove their love was meant to be.

PATRICIA CHARPENTIER, author of the award-winning book, *Eating an Elephant: Write Your Life One Bite at a Time*, teaches, writes, edits, and ghostwrites personal and family history. A sought-after presenter, Patricia speaks throughout Florida and South Louisiana and offers memoir writing workshops and courses.

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