

Fifty Years Ago...A Love Story Began

**Clifton and Joland Charpentier
with Patricia Charpentier**

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The Story Behind This Fifty-Year Story

In 2005, for a fiftieth wedding anniversary gift to give my parents, Clifton and Joland Charpentier, I decided to write the story of how they met and married. The tale settled in my memory as soon as I heard it as a young adult, and with each telling, I loved the recounting even more.

However, I did not know enough details to write my parents' story from memory, so I decided to interview my parents and construct the story from their own words. But, I wanted this book to be a surprise for them both, so I had to figure out a way to make that happen.

I settled on a plan. One Saturday afternoon, when I knew my mother attended Mass at Sacred Heart of Jesus Catholic Church in Baldwin, Louisiana, I phoned my dad, whom I called *Tuttie* from my earliest days.

"Tuttie, I have an idea for an anniversary gift for Mama, and I wanted to run it by you."

"Sure. What are you thinking?"

"I want to write the story about how you guys met and married, but I want it to be a surprise. Can I interview you while Mama is in church?"

"Of course. That sounds like a great idea," Tuttie said. "I know she'll love it."

"Yeah, I think she will. But, it's a surprise, so don't tell her I'm talking to you while she's in church, okay?"

"Yep. It'll be our secret."

Every morning around eight o'clock, my seventy-nine-year-old dad met his buddies at McDonald's for the fast-food restaurant's Big Breakfast—hotcakes, scrambled eggs, sausage patty, biscuit, hash browns, syrup, and butter—and unlimited refills of coffee. All retired, the five or six men usually sat around at coffee for a couple of hours while talking trash about each other, telling stories, laughing, and having a grand old time.

On one of those mornings, I called my mom. "Hey, I have an idea for an anniversary gift for Tuttie."

"Oh, yeah? What's that?"

"You know how much I love the story of how you guys met and married. I want to write it, but I need some help to fill in the details."

"That sounds like a great idea, Patricia." I heard the smile in her voice. "I can see Tuttie now, bringing the book to show everyone at coffee."

"But I want it to be a surprise. I don't want Tuttie to know about it until I give it to him."

“Sure. You know I can keep a secret.” My mom definitely could keep a secret. She always surprised me with unexpected gifts for birthdays and holidays.

“How about I call you a few times when Tuttie is at coffee? Then you can talk freely and not have to worry about him lurking around, wanting to know what you’re doing.”

“Great. It’s a date.”

“Remember, it’s a surprise, so don’t say anything about talking to me, okay?”

“Promise. My lips are sealed.”

I hung up the phone and laughed aloud. My parents had no idea that a conniving daughter had duped them both.

My plan worked perfectly. I interviewed each of them three or four times and felt like I obtained the specifics I needed. Now, to write their story.

When I began turning my parents’ words into one account, I ran into a problem. The important details matched—how they met, when they married—but other than that, they told two different tales. As hard as I tried, I could not weave both of their interviews into one story.

I figured my mother’s version was more accurate, but I didn’t want to omit my dad’s contributions. After a great deal of thought, I decided to write a *he-said, she-said* story and go back and forth between each telling his/her version of what happened. The more I wrote, the funnier the story became. It didn’t sound as though they experienced the same events.

I finished compiling their memories of that time, added photos, and printed the book: *Fifty Years Ago...A Love Story Began*. Before I packed my suitcase to travel from my current home in Orlando to my childhood home in Charenton, Louisiana, I wrapped my parents’ book in shiny gold paper and ribbons and chuckled as I envisioned them opening their gift.

Three days after my parents’ actual anniversary on January 5, 2005, as we waited for the forty or so family members and friends to gather and witness the renewal of their vows and share a great meal, I gave my parents their gift.

Both looked so smug as they debated about who should open the present.

“You open it, Tuttie.”

“Nah, you go ahead. You love to open presents.”

“But this is your anniversary gift too. I want you to open it,” my mom said.

“Joland, just open the box.”

After a few more rounds of negotiations, my mom finally did the honors.

Mama tore open the package and saved the bow, of course, as she always did. She flipped through the first few pages. I saw her eyebrows squish together as she showed the book to my dad.

“What’s this?” she said, pointing to one page. “This is you talking, Tuttie.”

“Yeah,” my dad said with a chuckle. “She called me when you were at church and told me not to tell you.”

“Well, I talked to her when you went to coffee, and she told me not to say anything to you.”

Then, they both looked at me and started laughing. My parents could not believe I had surprised them both. They told that story over and over at the party as they shared the book with people they loved.

The mini-memoir you hold in your hands is the beautiful story of Clifton and Joland Charpentier, married for sixty-three years before Alzheimer’s disease finally won its long



battle. My dad died on June 10, 2018. As I write this, my eighty-six-year-old mom lives deep in the world of dementia, surfacing only for a moment here and there.

Each time I read their story, it reminds me of who my parents indeed were, not the shells they ultimately became. I wrote these words to bring my parents joy in 2005, and I share them now to ensure their love story lives on long after them.

—Patricia Charpentier
May 2021

Fifty Years Ago...

In 1953, I had been in the United States Navy for more than ten years and planned to make a career of it. The Korean War was ending, and at that time, I served on a repair ship called USS *Laertes*, working a nine and three rotation. We'd spend nine months in Japan and three months in the States docked in Long Beach, California. We repaired all the smaller ships, the auxiliary ships.

I ran the carpenter shop, the electrician shop, the foundry, and the generator room, which powered the ship. That was my division. I supervised all those shops.

Ninety percent of the almost 500 people on the ship were skilled, trained laborers; that's what the ship was all about. It was a service ship. We did maintenance and repair work on other vessels. Every sailor who came on board went through school to learn or sharpen their skills if they had any. We didn't have young kids on our ship; they were people in their late twenties and up.



For the nine months we were out, we took care of any damage above each ship's waterline. If the ship needed repair beneath the water, it had to go into dry dock, and some other division, mostly contractors, took care of that.

While we were in the States during our three-month hitch, we maintained and re-supplied our ship, but we also had a lot of time off. I was free to go in and out like I wanted, but I mostly spent time on the ship because I didn't have anything out there. I didn't run the barrooms and stuff like that, so there weren't many other things to do.

I graduated from Franklin High School in May of 1952, and two weeks later, I went to work at Jeanerette Office Supply. I took my Aunt May's place for two weeks while she was on vacation. Larry Lampo, co-owner of J&L Engineering, came in to buy office supplies one day, and we started talking. I said something about looking for a full-time job, and he said he needed a secretary. When I finished my two weeks for Aunt May, I went to work for J&L and stayed there until I quit to get married.

I did secretarial work and bookkeeping and a lot of technical typing because Joe Pugh, one of the owners, invented



a sugarcane cutter. I wrote many letters to the United States Patent and Trademark Office in Washington, DC, because he was applying for a patent.

It was a pretty primitive place to work, a metal building that didn't even have a ladies' room. I either had to hold it until noon or go to the restroom at the little store across the street. The facilities weren't the greatest, but the people were. I had some good friends there. Some of the men who worked in the shop, Hank Bonin and Bussey Wormser, were like big brothers. They looked out for me and were always pulling pranks on one another. Bussey could never remember my name, so he always called me JoAnn. About a year after I went to work there, they hired another girl, a good friend of mine, Valette Landry, and the job was much more fun then.

Life was good. I had a paycheck—all of \$75 a month. Can you believe it? But it was enough. I dressed myself and even bought a car on that salary. Still living at home, it was easy to manage. I bought Mama a rosary with my very first paycheck, and when she died, I kept it. I still have it. I also bought her a dinette set that I paid for on time.

Before I met Cliff, I dated Moise Guillotte and then Henry Fauchaux but nothing steady. Both of them were just people to go out with. Henry asked me to marry him, but I was not interested in that, for sure. We went to Club Chateau to dance on the weekends. They had bands then, and during the week, we played the jukebox. I couldn't drink because I was only eighteen, and you had to be twenty-one then, but that was never important. We went just to dance. We also went to the Teche Club sometimes, but all of that changed in July of 1953.

L. J. and Flo's Wedding

I came home to be the best man for my brother L. J. and Florence Guillotte's wedding in July of 1953. The ceremony was at the Catholic church in Charenton, and it was all right. The wedding wasn't anything fancy, but it was nice. I was in my navy uniform because we weren't allowed to wear civilian clothes then. Flo had only one girl in her wedding. I don't remember if it was Rita Fauchaux or Mercedes Guillotte. Rita was Flo's aunt, but she was just a few years older than her. It was one of those two; I'm pretty sure, but I can't remember which one.

That's the first time I saw Joland. I saw her at the church. I didn't talk to her then, but I saw her there. I thought, "Who in the hell is that skinny little woman?" You wouldn't believe how skinny she was! She was almost blue; she was so skinny.

I first met Cliff at L. J. and Florence's wedding on July 25, 1953. I was dating Flo's uncle, Henry Fauchaux, who was maybe a couple of years older than she was. He was from Charenton, and he worked at Veeder's Store. I used to see him there all the time. He had moved to New Iberia, but his mama and daddy lived here, so I had known him, pooh, for years. He was an okay guy, but he was kind of nerdy.

I'd had a few dates with Henry when he asked me to go to the wedding. I said, "Uh, I really don't think I want to go." And he kept on. Finally, I said, "I'll go to the reception, but I don't want to go to the church." So, we went to the reception at Marie St. Blanc's house. It was nice, out in the yard, and they had a good many Charenton people there.

After the reception, we all went to the Teche Club to dance and listen to Philo Gonzales play. The Teche Club was a nightclub just outside New Iberia, on the left-hand side just before you got into the city limits.

That's where I saw Cliff for the first time, and he was nice-looking. He had a suit on because he was L. J.'s best man for the wedding. He stood in the wedding with Shirley Richard, Flo's best friend, but he didn't like her, and she didn't like him. That ended up being great news for me. They did not hit it off at all. I think it was mutual dislike on sight. Yeah, Cliff was nice-looking; he had hair then, and it was brown and curly.

Getting to Know You

The reception was at a nightclub between Jeanerette and New Iberia called the Highway 90 Club. They had a little band that played that *chanky-chank* Cajun music, you know the kind, one with a guitar, fiddle, drum, sometimes an accordion. That's where I talked to Joland for the first time.

Joland was there with somebody, Henry Fauchaux, if I'm not mistaken. He was her boyfriend at the time and for a short while afterward. I asked her to dance with me, and we talked. Then, I danced with her a couple more times. Everybody danced with everybody else at those dances.

I don't remember what we first talked about, but I probably had a pretty good story. I think I told Joland what I did and who I was, but I guess she knew who I was because of the wedding. I felt attracted to her. I just felt comfortable, and we spent a lot of the evening together. Of course, Henry wasn't too happy because I kind of monopolized her, but she left with him. She didn't go home with me. I didn't have a car. I don't know who I was with, but I was riding with somebody. Henry had a car, so I guess he had the advantage there.

I told people Joland was the one who corralled me, but that's not true. I was attracted to her. I wanted to see her again, so I arranged to do just that.

At the Teche Club, Cliff came over to the table where Henry and I were sitting. He knew Henry from before. Cliff just asked him about what he had been doing, and Henry asked him about where he was stationed, all that kind of stuff.

I thought to myself, Oh, I'd like to get to know that one better. Cliff came back a little while later, and I started asking him questions about the navy and what he did. He told me he was on a ship, working in damage control in the States for three months, but most of the time, he spent in Japan. At that time, he had been in the navy for ten and a half years. I kept asking him things to make him feel good and keep him coming back to ask me to dance.

I don't know what Henry thought about all of that, but I didn't care. Then Cliff said he didn't know how he would get home because L. J. and Flo had already left. Henry said, "That's no problem. I'll take you." So, they took me home first, and then they went back to Jeanerette and dropped Cliff off.

Meeting the Parents

Before the night ended, I told Joland I wanted to see her again and asked when I could come out to her house. I told her to let me know. I guess she called Aunt Lou's house. I didn't stay in one place; I was here and there, but she found me.



So, a couple of days after that Saturday night, I went out and visited with her and her parents, Luke and Louisiane Hebert. I believe I ate supper with them. That's when I got really uncomfortable. Her mama had a strange way of thinking. There was nothing liberal about either of her parents, but I had the most trouble with her mama. I guess they thought I was going to steal their daughter and murder her. That's the feeling I had, that I would do her bodily harm or something. All they were concerned about was that I was a stranger, and I was going to hurt their daughter.

I did all right with her daddy. We got along pretty good right off the top. We talked about what I did and where I had been and all kinds of stuff like that. He didn't object to me as much as her mama did. Her oldest brother, Jerry, was kind of outgoing, but her other brother, Junior, wasn't. Junior wouldn't even talk to me. Oh no, he was real shy. I was in uniform, which may have been intimidating or something.

Being around Joland's parents was uncomfortable, but it didn't bother me too much. I didn't have any intention of marrying their daughter or hauling her off. I just wanted to find out more about her, and I wanted her to come to Grand Isle with me for the weekend. I sure didn't have any intentions of carrying on anything from there. When I left to go back to my ship, I figured that would be the end, but it didn't happen that way.



Cliff called me for the first time a couple of days after we danced at the Teche Club. He phoned me at work and asked me to go to Grand Isle with him for the weekend with his Aunt Lou and Uncle Neil.

I went home and told Mama and Daddy, and they hit the ceiling. Mama said, "He's a sailor. You know what they say about a sailor? He's got a girl in every port. You don't know him, and you want to go off with him?"

"Yeah, but you know his aunt and uncle," I said. That didn't make too much of an impression, I can tell you. That's the first time I defied them and went against their wishes, but I was determined to go. If I had to move out, I was going to Grand Isle with Cliff. I was going to do it.

He ate dinner with us the next night, so my parents could get to know him. He didn't have a car, so we went and got him and brought him back to the house. Mama and Daddy seemed to like him, but you know, they were kind of reserved. The boys liked him because he told them a lot of stories about places he had been and stuff like that.

That night, I let him know I was going to Grand Isle with him.

Grand Isle

I think we left for Grand Isle on Saturday morning—me and Joland, Aunt Lou, and Neil. Once we got there, we didn't do much, just hung around the camp, ate boiled crabs, drank, took lots of naps. Joland and I rode around Grand Isle, caught crabs with chicken necks tied to strings, walked down the beach a couple of times, but that wasn't my cup of tea. I never liked sand, so we didn't do a whole lot.

But Joland and I did a lot of talking. She's a good talker, and even then, she knew a lot of stuff. She pumped me for information, everything about my life from day one to the present. She wanted to know where I went to school and who my teachers were. It just so happened she knew a few of my teachers in Jeanerette and some of the people I went to school with. For a time, she and her family had lived in Jeanerette, White City, really, right next to Hubertville.



It's funny. I know the guy and his wife who live in the house where Joland and her family stayed in Jeanerette. The house is still there. I don't know what Joland's dad Luke was doing when they lived in White City, probably carpentry work because it was before he was on the farm. When I met Joland, they lived on the Charenton farm, in that little house down the road from here.

That weekend, Aunt Lou kept looking out the camp door, watching us every minute. Even so, I think I kissed Joland for the first time in Grand Isle. It must have been when Aunt Lou went to the bathroom or something.

Cliff's Aunt Lou and Neil were taking him over to Grand Isle for the weekend. Grand Isle was about four hours from Charenton, and it was just a place to go with a beach and a nightclub and stuff like that—a lot of camps. They had rented a camp.

So, we left on Friday evening, and we stayed there until Sunday. Cliff and I had a good time. We rode around sightseeing, went out to eat and to the nightclub. We didn't go fishing because no one brought any fishing gear; we mainly did a lot of talking. We went dancing, slow dancing. The only thing I ever did was slow dance. I never could jitterbug. Cliff could, but I couldn't. That's about all there was to do in Grand Isle.

He slept on the porch, and I slept inside in the bed. It was a big room with Aunt Lou and Neil in the other bed.

We walked on the beach, and Cliff kissed me for the first time. It was nice, very nice. I thought, "I want to get to know this one better." I already liked him.

Saying Goodbye

My leave was up a couple of days after we got back from Grand Isle. I called and talked to Joland before I left, but I didn't get to see her again because I didn't have any transportation.

I gave her my address and told her, "If you feel like it, write to me," and she did. She had already given me her address. I wasn't sure how interested she was in me, but it was nothing serious on my end. I figured she was just somebody new I enjoyed meeting.

I didn't date much in the service. I went out with people, groups of people. When I was stationed in Texas, I dated a girl there for about six or eight months, maybe a year. Otherwise, I went out now and then, but it wasn't anything regular. I don't know. I just never wanted to get involved with anybody.

It wasn't long before I heard from Joland. On my way back to the ship, I flew out from Lafayette to Houston, then from Houston to Long Beach. By the time I reached the ship, I think there was a letter waiting for me. I'm pretty sure there was. It was on my desk in the office when I got back to the shop.

Cliff had to leave the day after we came home from Grand Isle. He only had ten days or two weeks off, and he had been in town for a week before I met him. He left on a Monday. I took off half the day, and we went to his house to meet his daddy. Then, we went to visit his other aunt and uncle, Clelie and Oswald.

After that, I took Cliff to the bus station in Jeanerette, and he left. The only thing I thought was, "If Cliff asked me to go to California with him today, I would go." Oh yes, it was just a feeling I had, like this is somebody I want to spend the rest of my life with. That's how sure I was, but there was no talk of that.

I think what I found more attractive than anything was Cliff's maturity. The boys I dated were, you know, kind of silly. He wasn't. He was confident, and when I talked to him, he told me about all of these things he did and places he had seen. He seemed so steady. He told me he was buying a house for his daddy, and I saw how well received he was by his family. I just knew. He was good-looking too! Those blue eyes—I remember his blue eyes. They really stood out.



It was sad when I dropped him off at the bus station because I had no idea when I'd see him again. He told me he had a good time, that he was glad he had met me, and asked, "Will you write to me?" And that was it.

After I got his first letter, I wrote to him, which was about a week after he left, maybe. I waited until I received his letter before I wrote. That was the custom in those days.

Courtship via the US Mail

Joland's letters went on and on. She can take half a sentence and make it into a whole page. Needless to say, my letters weren't like that. I'd get her letters—three, four, five big pages full. If I managed to write her one full page, that was plenty, and I had to work two or three days to get that.

We wrote back and forth about different things, but as time went by, we got more serious. I'd tell her I wanted to see her when I came home and all that stuff. I never made it back home, though.

Probably six or eight months after we started communicating, I talked like I was really interested. I just had a feeling that this was it; the way she spoke and the plans she had for her life started involving me. I guess I was ready.

I never even thought about getting married until I met Joland. Oh Lord, no. I never considered it. I planned to make a career out of the navy, and I always said the military was not a place for married people. It was not; it really wasn't. The service was not an environment where marriage could grow.

It's not as bad now as it was back then. You see, I had to do duty even if we were in port. I'd get one out of every five nights off and two weekends a month. That was all I could take. For some reason, my goals changed after I met her. The more we communicated, the more I knew she was the one I wanted to be with.

At first, I wrote maybe two or three times a week, but then I started writing every day. He told me he looked forward to those letters. I know he's going to dispute everything I'm saying. Anyway, every night, I'd come in and sit at the typewriter. Some days, I had plenty to tell him, and then other days, it was just blank because nothing had happened worth writing about. My letters were general in the beginning. I told him I had a good time with him, and I enjoyed meeting him and writing to him.

We weren't serious then. Cliff was still dating other people, and I was too. There was no talk like "don't date" or "wait for me" or anything like that. I was okay dating other guys. It was someplace to go and something to do, but there was nobody I was interested in besides Cliff.

Sometimes I didn't hear from him for a time. I'd go for a week or sometimes even two weeks without hearing anything. That's when he was traveling, when the ship was on its way to or from Japan. Then, I'd get two and three letters at a time. It just depended on where the ship was.

I wasn't really afraid when I didn't hear from Cliff. It wasn't wartime. We met at the end of the Korean War after Cliff had been in the hospital when he'd had a ship blown out from

under him. I never knew that happened to him until after we were married because he didn't talk about it.

It's funny, though; I had heard about this sailor from our area who was critically injured and was in the hospital for a long time. I never knew that was Cliff until a long time after we married.

The Proposal

A year or so after we first met, I asked Joland to marry me by mail. Didn't know you could do stuff like that by mail, huh? I bought her an engagement and wedding ring set in the ship's store in Japan. I didn't trust the mail service, so I probably waited until she got out to California to give it to her. It wasn't an expensive ring, but on my base pay, it was a lot.

I told her the only way we could get married soon was if she came and met me in Long Beach. I could not come home at that time because I didn't have enough leave.

When she said she would come to meet me, I was happy as a lark. By that time, I missed her.

Over time, our letters got a little more personal. Cliff would tell me, "I miss you," and I would tell him I missed him too. He got to where he said, "I love you," and then I'd say I loved him. He called me two or three times in those two years, but we had to make arrangements ahead of time because I didn't have a phone. I had to go to Grandma's to get his calls. He'd write and say he was going to call on such and such a day at such and such a time. Then, I'd go to Grandma's and wait for his call.



One time, he called and asked me to marry him. I said, "Yes, I'd love to." Later on, he sent me the engagement ring in the mail.

Then, he told me I had a choice. He said, "You can wait until I come home, or you can come and meet me in California, and we can get married here." If I waited until he got out, it would have been another year or more, and I didn't want to do that. I decided I was going to California.

The Trip Out West

A couple of weeks before Joland and her family were supposed to arrive in Long Beach, I rented an apartment for us to live in. It was a nice place. It was a house, and the landlady took half of it and made an apartment. She lived in the other half. Her husband had died, so she just divided the place, and we were the first ones to live in it. I just lucked out. Somebody on the ship told me about this person they knew who had just fixed up their house to rent part of it. I

went and talked to the lady and told her our plan to get married, so man, she went overboard, trying to get everything right for us.

She was a nice person. I couldn't remember her name if I tried, but she was so nice. I lived there before Joland and her family came to Long Beach, so I got to know this lady pretty well. When I made it to the house in the evenings, she'd have supper cooked for me. Real nice lady.

Before Joland came to Long Beach, the landlady brought me over to the Catholic church right down the street and introduced me to the priest. I told him what we wanted to do, but he said we had to wait until the bride got there before he'd tell us anything. He had to talk to both of us.

Joland and her family were leaving right after Christmas, so I knew when they would arrive. I can't quite remember how long it took them to drive out there, but it must have been right at five days.

I just couldn't imagine Joland wanting to drive all the way across the country. Of course, she didn't have any idea of what she was getting into. They didn't have any interstate highways then, so they had to climb up and down mountains going through Arizona and New Mexico. I mean those roads, you look at them, and they look like a little path. I drove that thing, and you could look down there sometimes at 8,000 to 9,000 feet down, right at the edge of the road. *Dooomb*, straight down. Almost every mile, you'd see wrecks at the bottom. I just couldn't imagine how they would drive it, but she said she could do it, and she did. She insisted on coming. She's got a strong will.

After Cliff asked me to marry him, I went home and told Mama and Daddy. I said, "I'm going to California to get married," and again, it was a big hullabaloo.

"You're not going to California, blah, blah, blah," Mama said.

"I am going to California," I said.

"How are you going?"

"Probably on a bus."

"You can't do that."

"I'm going."

The next morning, Mama asked, "Are you still determined to go to California?"

I said, "Oh yes. I've got to give my notice at work and just get a few things ready, but I'm going."

She said, "Well, your daddy and I talked about it. We'll take you."

I said, "When can we go?"

"Not 'til after Christmas."

Cliff asked me to marry him in September or October 1954. Oh Lord, I wanted to be over there for Christmas, but no, not until after the holidays. So that's what we did.

I had never gone against Mama and Daddy, and here I was, doing it the second time, just to be with Cliff. You got to realize Mama was scared of everything. Daddy wasn't as bad, but she could easily talk him into doing things. So, what Mama said went. We got the final word from Daddy, but we knew it came from her.

The night before we left, we went to my grandma and grandpa's house to tell them goodbye. That's the only time I ever saw my grandpa cry. He was an old softie, but you would

never have known that because he had this hard-shell exterior. You never saw any emotion other than if he got mad. He kept telling us, "Be careful. Y'all be careful. Whatever y'all do, be careful."

We left the next morning. It must have been a couple of days after Christmas, and I don't remember exactly how long it took us to get out there, but it was several days. Daddy drove his car with my two brothers, Jerry and Junior, and Mama rode with me. We drove my car and Daddy's because I planned to keep my car in California for Cliff and me to use.

This is funny. I remember we were going through Houston, and Daddy told me, "Follow me. Whatever you do, don't lose me." Well, Daddy stopped at a light, and I didn't stop in time. I put a dent in his bumper, but that was the worst thing that happened, so it wasn't too bad.

We stayed in motels at night because we couldn't drive after dark. We ate along the way. A lot of the trip was boring, especially through Texas. There would be miles and miles and miles of nothing.

I'll never forget when we got into the mountains. It must have been in Arizona. We were driving along, coming up on the mountains, and Mama asked, "We don't have to go up there, do we?" Mama and I both had never been out of Louisiana. We had never even seen mountains before.

"Well, yeah, I'm afraid we do," I said.

"We'll never make it up there," Mama said.

"Mama, do you see that car pulling that trailer? If they can make it while towing a trailer, we ought not to have any problem." Well, that's when the rosary beads kicked into high gear. She didn't say a word, dead quiet. She was praying.

I'm sure the roads today aren't like they were then, but at that time, we'd go around these curves and look down, and we couldn't see anything. It was just nothing down there, no bottom.

At one point, we pulled off the road at a lookout point to check it out. We shouldn't have done that because when Mama saw there was nothing down there, she was even more scared. And going out to California, naturally, we were on the right side, so we were on the outer edge of the road. We'd meet these big trucks, and I'd think, Oh God, there's not enough room for us and them too.

Finally, we made it over the mountains and almost to Long Beach, but it was getting late, so Daddy said, "We're going to have to stop here for the night."

"No," I said, "we ought to keep going."

"We have to stop here," Daddy said again. "We don't know where we're going, so we need to arrive in the daylight." Well, that was the longest night of my life, I do believe.

To this day, I don't know how I made that trip. Daddy didn't even let me drive in New Iberia because the traffic was too bad, but yet, I drove 1,750 miles to Long Beach to get married. Amazing.

The Telegram

I had sent Joland a telegram with the address of the apartment. When they didn't show up by the time they should have, I figured they got lost. I didn't have a phone at the apartment, so they couldn't get ahold of me. She could have called the ship, and they could have gotten in touch with me, but I guess she didn't think of that.

The apartment was a half block from the main drag they would have been coming in on. I walked out to the main road to see, and there they were. You talk about a coincidence! I got to the curb just as they were getting ready to pass the street. I would not have recognized Luke's car, but I knew Joland's little black Chevrolet. I waved her down and motioned for her to turn onto the side road, and she stopped on the street by the house.

Later on, I found out that the telegram they sent had the wrong address. Instead of *Raymond Avenue*, it had *Caymond Avenue*, and there was no such street in Long Beach. They had already made several passes looking for the street by the time I saw them.

I was some kind of glad to see her. She still looked like the skinny girl I'd seen a year and a half earlier. I'm telling you, Joland was bone-skinny, but she looked so good to me. I kissed her and hugged her.

I received a telegram from Cliff saying that he had rented an apartment, and it was at such and such a number on Caymond Avenue. When we got into Long Beach, we looked all over the map. We couldn't find it. I even stopped a vegetable vendor on the street and asked him where Caymond Avenue was. He said he had been working there all his life, and he had never heard of that street.

Daddy was driving up ahead of Mama and me, so I blew the horn to get him to stop, so I could tell him what the peddler said. When I blew the horn, Cliff walked out of the apartment. So, if you think God doesn't take care of fools! I mean, it was just almost unbelievable when I saw him walking out of that apartment. He heard the horn blow, and he figured that we had arrived and were letting him know. Really, I was blowing for Daddy to stop, so we could decide what to do next.

When I saw Cliff, I jumped out of that car. I think I put it in park, but I'm not real sure. I guess I did because it didn't roll off. I ran to him and hugged him. I was just so relieved because I didn't know what we were going to do. He didn't have a telephone, so I don't know how we would have found him. That's what I mean by God taking care of fools. Of course, Mama had been praying up a storm, too, because she was worried. She had gotten over her worry of the mountains and the ravines. Now she was worried about us finding Cliff.

Wedding Preparations

When Joland got to Long Beach, we went to see the priest. We already had everything together. I had taken care of the paperwork on this end, and she had her birth certificate and all that she needed. We talked to the priest and told him we wanted to get married the next day. That's when he started questioning me. Joland had already gotten written verification in Louisiana that I had never been married. He said that wasn't any proof. I could have gotten married anywhere. I had been all over the world.

So, I felt irritated and told him, "Let me tell you something. If you don't marry us tomorrow morning, they have a justice of the peace down the street. We're going to get married in the morning, whether it's you or the other. Now, you make your choice. These

people drove across the country to come here for this wedding. Give me your answer because I'm fixing to do something else."

Joland was kind of upset, me talking to a priest like that. Just a fact of life. That's exactly what we were going to do. I made sure he knew I had another way to do it. Our landlady went to that church, and she knew the priest. She said he was a funny bird, and it turned out she was right. She told me beforehand, "They got a justice of the peace two blocks from the house if you can't get the priest to cooperate."

I guess he figured I meant what I said, so he took the word of Joland's parents that I was free. I said, "It doesn't make any difference to me whether you marry us or not. I told you, I'm getting married tomorrow morning. Either you do it, or someone else will." So, we set it up.

When we went to see the priest, he didn't want to marry us. He asked me for the letter of introduction from my pastor. I said, "He didn't tell me I needed that. All he said we needed were baptismal and confirmation certificates for both of us." I had gone to Franklin because that's where Cliff had been baptized and confirmed and had gotten those. Then all of a sudden, it was, "Well, I can't marry y'all because how do I know that y'all have never been married before?"

"My parents can tell you I've never been married before," I said.

"Well, what about Cliff?"

"I've been in the navy for twelve years," Cliff said. "There's nobody in the service who has known me for that long."

So, the priest said, "Let me think about it. Y'all come back tomorrow."

Cliff told him, "Well, Father, if you won't marry us, there's a JP around the corner who will."

"Let me think about it," the priest said. "Come back tomorrow."

When we went back the next day, he said, "I'll take your parents' word that he's never been married." That was ridiculous. It was just his way out because they didn't know Cliff any longer than I did. The priest said he'd marry us on Wednesday morning, January 5, at such and such a time. I don't remember exactly what time; it was like at the seven or eight o'clock Mass. It was early, that I know.

Saying "I Do"

The next morning, we woke up early and went to the church to get married. A few people were there for morning Mass, but other than them, it was me and Joland, her mama and daddy, her two brothers, and our witnesses. The guy who was my witness, I knew from the ship. His name was Paul Morrison, and he and I served in the same division. We never visited outside of the ship, but he told me he was available at the time and that he and his wife went to that church. His wife, Darlene, was the other witness. I didn't know her at all, never had met her.

But we got married that morning. After the wedding, we went back to the apartment. The landlady had made us a cake, so we had a little reception at the house, just the family



and her. She was a real nice person. At the time, I thought she was old, but she probably was only in her early fifties.

Joland's mama and daddy left right afterward; by noon, they were gone. They stayed just one night. They got in on one day and left the next because her daddy had to get back to the sugarcane farm in Louisiana.

It still amazes me that they made it over there and back without any incidents. Of course, Joland said the rosary beads were smoking in the car because her mama rode with her. Those beads did cartwheels all the way to Long Beach.

Joland and I spent time at the apartment that afternoon, and at night we walked down to the restaurant district. It wasn't far. I showed her around all the nightclubs there. She couldn't believe some of the things she saw. Being from Charenton, with its population of 300 or so people, she had a hard time believing her eyes. We later went to a nice restaurant I knew about and ate supper. That was our honeymoon.

We got married on the morning of January 5, 1955. I woke up feeling a little bit nervous, not knowing what to expect. We had only met this priest once and didn't know what he expected from us, but it worked out fine.

I wore a blue suit. It was really a blue dress with a jacket on top of it, light blue, a faille suit, and a little hat because, in those days, you had to wear something on your head in church. I had bought the suit at Wormser's for this day just before we left.

The priest—Father Brill was his name—had us up on the altar, just me and Cliff, and when it was time to sign the certificate, the witnesses walked up. I remembered the witnesses' last name was Morrison, but I didn't remember their first names, so I dug out our marriage license. Our witnesses were Paul and Darlene Morrison.

We got married on a Wednesday, and it's funny because fifty years later, the fifth is on a Wednesday again. Mama had bought a cake from the bakery nearby, and we had cake and punch, maybe coffee. She had invited Paul and Darlene and the old lady we rented from to come over and eat cake.

Mama and Daddy and the boys left right afterward. Mama was crying like you would expect. The boys, well, it was just an ordinary thing for them. They were ready to get back to their trip. And Daddy never showed emotion of any kind, so it was like, "Okay, be good. Take care of yourself. Write often." Then, they were gone.



That was tough. I thought, "Oh my God, what did I get myself into now?" I knew I would be lonesome because I had never been away from home. For a little coonie (slang for Cajun) girl like me that had never left Louisiana, this was a big deal. Just the idea of them not being close by was hard because I didn't know when I would see them again. At that point, I had no idea that, in just a few months, Cliff would be sent overseas, and I'd come home to Louisiana.

As they drove off, Cliff tried to distract me. "Come on," he said. "Let's go. I'll help you clean up the dishes." He knew. He didn't want to see a storm of tears, so he came and helped me clean the kitchen because we had just finished the cake and coffee.

Being Newly Married

I had three or four days off right after we got married, so I drove Joland around, showing her sites in Long Beach. Then we settled down into a routine. I got off the ship every evening about four or five o'clock, something like that, and I'd meet her back at the house.

We spent those first few months getting to know each other because we had only been together in person for two or three days before I came back to Long Beach. I was in a good mood all the time. I had Joland. I had never experienced somebody that close, that I guess you could call devoted to me. I couldn't believe anybody would want to be with me like that. I had never felt so loved. It was scary to me because I just didn't know that kind of caring.

She did everything and more for me than she does now. She cooked. She cleaned everything. She loved on me. Anything she thought would make me happy, she did. Joland's a good person, always has been.

We had a lot of fun because I took her to places where she saw things she'd never seen before. Sometimes, I took her out to the countryside.

We even went digging for crawfish one time. *Digging*. She didn't believe me when I told her people dug for crawfish out here. In South Louisiana, we caught crawfish in traps or drop nets, but that's not how they did it in Southern California. People went out to tidal basins. The tide brought the water into these canals, and then they'd dry out. It was nothing but mud, but they had crawfish in there. You'd get down there with a shovel, turn the mud over, and pick up the crawfish. We went and did that, but then I told her, "We ain't eating those crawfish, I can tell you that." We only had five or six anyhow, so I said, "How about some boiled crabs instead?"

I knew where they had a seafood dock, a big old place with all kinds of seafood, right there on the waterfront. We went, and I told her, "Now, tell the man what you want." I stood behind her because I wanted to see what she was going to do.

When the guy came to help her, she asked, "Do you have crabs?"

"Yes, madam, we do," he said. "How many would you like?"

"How about a dozen? That ought to be enough for the two of us."

The guy looked at her funny and said, "Lady, you better let me show you the crabs before you get a dozen." They were those huge snow crabs that weighed as much as three pounds apiece.

Man, you should have seen her face when the guy held up that crab! She couldn't believe it. She said, "Oh, I don't believe we want that. I don't have a pot big enough to put it in." I don't know what we bought instead. I think it was some shrimp, and we made a stew.

We did stuff like that all the time because everything was new to her. I took her to places like that, like the supermarket. She'd never been in a supermarket and couldn't believe all they had. She spent an hour or more just looking around, *ooohing* and *aaahing* about all the stuff. We did simple things together. We didn't have a lot of money to go piddle around.

We went out to several clubs in the area for maybe a half hour, an hour. I couldn't stand too much of it, but it was a good experience for her. She hadn't seen anything like that. We'd do that in the evenings, just mess around. Most of the time, we went places within walking distance of our apartment.

One of the things she talked about most was when I took her on a tour of the ship. We ate dinner or supper on board; I can't remember which. She had never seen anything like that before. She saw pictures of ships in movies and tugboats on the bayou, but she'd never been *on* a ship. It was a town in itself, that ship was. Four hundred and eighty people were assigned to it, a full complement, but we usually ran about thirty or forty below most of the time. Hell, Charenton didn't have that many people in the whole town.

Most of the time, Cliff came home every evening. There were two or three times when he had what they called "duty," and he had to stay on the ship. That would be like overnight, and then one time, he had to be there all weekend. He told me if I wanted to come to the ship, he would take me around. I knew a girl across the street who worked in a little lounge we went to, and I got her to come with me.

First, we had to go to the harbor, and then we had to take a water taxi to the ship, get off the water taxi, and get onto the ship. Then, we had to ask permission to board. They asked who I wanted to see. I'll never forget, when they called Cliff up, they said, "And be sure you come up here fully dressed." Apparently, that was something they didn't typically do.

I had no idea of what the ship would be like. Cliff took us down to where he worked, and he had all kinds of tools, wood lathes, everything because he did a lot of woodworking. The first things he ever gave me were a wooden bowl and wooden candlesticks he made in his shop.

He also made guitars for the admirals. The admirals used to get together and play music. Cliff made a guitar for the admiral of his ship, but when the others saw it, they all wanted one. He made the wooden part, and they got it strung and tuned and all of that.

When we got ready to leave the ship, Cliff said, "I really wish y'all were going with another skipper." That's what I called him, a skipper. I don't know what Cliff called him. Cliff said, "That guy always tries to knock the seals off the buoys when he passes by." Well then, I was scared for sure, but we made it back with no problem, and the seals stayed in place.

One week, Cliff took me to the San Diego Zoo. Boy, that was something. I had been to Audubon Park in New Orleans once, but that was nothing compared to this zoo. At the time, the San Diego Zoo was enormous; I'm sure it still is. The animals were not in cages either, but more in their natural settings where you could see them, not behind bars like at Audubon.

Another time he took me to Tijuana, Mexico. That was something, especially for somebody who had never been anywhere. At that time, Tijuana was pretty rough. Some of the shows and the things they did, oh my Lord. One night, we went to this nightclub, and I had to go to the restroom. I asked the waiter where it was, and he told me to go through a certain door. Well, I went through the door, and I walked into somebody's room. I don't know if it was a

bedroom, warehouse, or whatever. Talk about embarrassed. I almost forgot I had to go before I finally found the bathroom!

In the show we saw, the women were three-quarters naked, and they had a spotlight that went around the audience. Every time it came towards me, I wanted to hide my face even though I didn't know anybody there. Still, it was embarrassing. I didn't know that existed in the world.

The next day, we went to all these little shops and stores on the street where you haggle with the people over prices. Cliff knew what to do, how to dicker with them. He said to me, "Now look, don't act like you want it, and we're not going to take the first price they give us."

He bought me a doll, a Japanese doll in a glass case, and oh, I loved that doll. When Cliff brought me back home to Louisiana, we had to pack the car with everything we owned. By that time, we had dishes and regular household things, so my little car was full to the top. He said I had to leave my doll and made me give it to the old lady who lived there. Talk about upset! I had to leave my doll.

In Long Beach, we went to this recreation center one night a week, where we did crafts. One time we did these paintings on glass with crinkled aluminum foil beneath the glass. We still have them. One of them was red roses. When we came back home, Daddy did some because I showed him how to do it. Those classes were fun. Cliff did some copper work. Yeah, he went to craft classes with me. Can you believe it? He knew I wouldn't go by myself, for sure, so he did crafts.



I had to bring him to the ship one time when he had duty. He drove, and then he said, "You know how to get back, right?"

"Yeah, I think so, but tell me anyway."

"Okay, you go down this street four lights and make a right," he said. "Then you'll be right where you're supposed to be." Well, I went down four lights, and I couldn't make a right—a one-way street. I drove farther down, turned around, and came back, thinking I miscounted. Four lights, I still couldn't make a right. It ended up being five lights instead of four. Finally, when I went around the third time, I saw it.

Another time, I was trying to go somewhere else, and I got caught in a traffic circle. I had never seen a traffic circle before. I went round and round and round before I finally figured the way out. So, driving in Long Beach wasn't too pleasant for me.

I took a job at Sleep Easy Drug Company, and believe me, I took the bus. No way I was going to drive there. It sat on the main street from where we lived, but traffic was terrible at that time of the morning. So, I walked to the corner, caught the bus, and got off where I worked.

Talk about a boring job. All I did all day long was type labels, address labels. You know how companies sell your name to other companies? That's what I did. I had to type the names and addresses on these mailing labels. I used an old Underwood typewriter, and it was heavy. If I didn't hit the shift key just right, my capital letter came out halfway up and halfway down. The boss got on us if we did that. They paid me so much per label, so naturally, the faster I typed, the more I got paid.

I did that for about three months, and it was boring, typing labels all day. I had a break in the morning, a half hour for lunch, and then a break in the afternoon. It was so boring, but it was a job. It was better than nothing, plus I didn't have to go down into the heart of Long Beach.

Even then, Long Beach was a big city, probably about the size of Lafayette now or maybe even bigger.

This is funny. I remember one time we went to buy some crabs, and the man asked me how many I wanted. I said, "I don't know, a dozen, I guess."

He said, "Lady, I think you better look at these crabs before you order a dozen." We wound up buying two crabs and had plenty left over. Those things were huge. I think they were called rock crabs or something like that. They were nothing like the blue crabs we had in Louisiana.

Another time, Cliff wanted me to make a dressing for him, so I went to the meat market by myself because it was only a few blocks from where we lived. I told the man I wanted some liver. He said, "How much do you want?" So, I told him how much and said I wanted it ground.

He looked at me and said, "Lady, I'm not about to put that messy, bloody thing in my meat grinder." I didn't know you had to cook liver first and then grind it. Being in California was quite an education. You know how it is; when they throw you in, you learn to swim, or you drown.

I loved our little apartment. I can still see it today. It was a house the owner had split in two. One apartment was in the front, and ours was in the back. We rented from an older lady, and the only thing I remember about her is that she drove a little electric cart, like a golf cart. She went everywhere in that thing. That was the first time I had ever seen one.

In our apartment, we had a bedroom and a small living room. The bathroom was off to the side, and we had a little kitchen. The kitchen was so small that the two of us couldn't get in it and work at the same time. I mean, you could stand at the sink and reach the stove just by putting your hand out. But I felt thrilled with it.

The apartment had a little whatnot shelf over the couch, and oh, I fell in love with that. It had a mirror at the back and two little shelves to put whatnots on. I bought two little bears, little bitty ceramic bears—one blue and one yellow—and put them on there. Fifty years later, I still have those bears.



Being in Long Beach and newly married was such a happy time for us.

Looking Back

Once we were married, I didn't have one, not one, misgiving about the whole thing. *Never.* Still don't. Nope. I wouldn't trade the last fifty years for nothing. Look what I got out of the deal—I got Joland and a daughter and a dog to boot!

It would be hard to pinpoint our best times, tell you the truth. Joland and I, we have a thing. We're just comfortable together. We fit well. She can read my mind any day of the week, knows what I want or what I'm thinking almost all of the time. It's amazing how she can do that.

I want her to know that I wouldn't trade these fifty years for anything in the world, nothing. That's the way I feel about it. It's not one single thing. It's everything we've had and shared all this time. She's my love. That's all there is to it. She doesn't hear that from me much

because I'm not one of those people who talks like that. The feeling is there, but I don't think I have to announce it all day long.



I am going to ask her if she wants to try for another fifty. That's my plan, to do another fifty. I don't know if we're going to make it, but we're going to try. There ain't never been anybody else that I even thought about. It's only been her, always.

I look at the last fifty years we've been married as some very good years. We had some tough years, but I think everybody does. The good years far outweigh the bad. At this time, I couldn't even tell you what the bad years were because I don't remember them. All I remember is the good stuff.

Some of the best times we had were when we first got married, when Cliff came back from the service, when our daughter was born. Our years on the houseboat were among the best too, just fishing and playing around out on the lake. Those were good years.

After I retired, then it was just Cliff and me, and I think we got even closer because there

wasn't his work or my work or anything else we had to do. We do a lot of things together. We like to go out to eat. We love to go to Lafayette. I think that's where we



talk more than any other time, on the way to Lafayette and back, and going out to eat. We talk about everything—people in our lives, friends, things that go on at his coffee break, at my catechism classes, those kinds of things.



I've seen Cliff change a lot over the years. When he got out of the service, he hardly talked. He was very, very quiet. He's come out a lot more. Sometimes, it's kind of hard to shut him up. He has a wide variety of friends, people he drinks coffee with. He's got two coffee breaks, one at McDonald's in the morning and then one at the Gentrys' house in the afternoon. He values those friendships.

I think I've changed a lot too in the last fifty years. I'm a bit more relaxed now. I used to be real uptight about things. Everything had to be just so, and I know I made Cliff pretty miserable at times. Now, stuff I used to fuss about doesn't bother me nearly as much. I hope I've grown to be more friendly and more charitable, more a person of faith.

Cliff has made me a better person. Our differences in personalities complement each other. In the beginning, I relied on him more because he had been to all those places and done all those things. He's a stronger personality than I am, and I rely on him for more than he relies on me.

I would want Cliff to know that these last fifty years have been very good, and I have never regretted getting married the way we did. A lot of people asked, "Oh, didn't you miss having a wedding over here with friends?" No. It would have been okay, but the main thing was being with him. The rest didn't matter.

Some people said, "It'll never work," Aunt Lou and Aunt Clelie mainly. They said, "Cliff is used to being on the go all the time. This will never work. You'll never have a family because he's too impatient. He's never going to have children."

I wish they were alive today, so I could say, "Na, na, na, na, na, na." Ha, proved them all wrong.

I want him to know that I'm so happy, and it's all because of him. I love him very much. He's everything I've ever needed, everything I've ever wanted.

And their love story continued for thirteen more years.



Cliff and Joland, renewing their vows on their sixtieth wedding anniversary