

# ONE DAY IN THE GULF OF GEORGIA

BY  
LAD MOORE



*I wouldn't trade it for a big church wedding and a honeymoon in Hawaii.*

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I leaned over the ladder in Suzanne's swimming pool so that I would be sure to catch the swimmer's ear when she surfaced. I had been instantly smitten by her beauty and grace in the pool—an Esther Williams crush, so to speak. Yes, I had seen this girl at school, and her name was Kay. I also knew she was a friend of Suzanne's, my date for tonight's Mr. Touchdown Dance.

Droplets of water scattered like gems as she tossed her hair from side to side in the reflected light. As she patted her face with a terry towel, I introduced myself. Then, perhaps overly hasty and anxious, I leapt from quick introduction to asking her to the movie the following Friday. In words that poured over me like hot wax, she promptly informed me that she was going steady. It was 1959—a time when the words “going steady” were respected covenants akin to those other oaths—“King's X,” and “Crossing

hearts and hoping to die.” And die I did. In an instant, my hopes were dashed. Maybe I shouldn’t have rushed things so.

I’m going with Johnny Pollock,” she said. “You know him, he drives a Buick. He’s also in DeMolay.” *Johnny Pot-luck*, I mumbled mockingly, well out of earshot range.

The bar was thus set fairly high. For sure, Buicks and DeMolay were daunting credentials to overcome. I was just a Chevy guy and not a member of anything. The closest thing to membership for me was when I gave ten dollars to BJ Solomon just so I could recite his club credo. The sum total of it was: “*If I lie I die, BJ Honor.*” His organization charter had no rules and its members attended no meetings; just paid dues. BJ was an absolute marketing genius.

Six months passed before I saw her again. I was at Neely’s, a drive-in barbecue eatery and Mecca for high school hangers-out. There she was, in the back seat of a convertible full of squealing girls. Esther Williams, eating plain old barbecue.

“Hi again,” I said in my best flirting voice. Meanwhile, I tried to mimic the little lip-curl that Elvis was so adored for. “How is old Johnny Pollock these days? I haven’t seen him around.”

“Oh, You didn’t hear? His daddy sent him to military school in Arizona. Maybe he’ll come back for the summer, but who knows?”

Her words were like happy-grams from Western Union. Once again, the anticipation of a date spurred a hasty tongue. My next words must be bold, I thought. I walked over to the convertible and without hesitation, asked if I could call her. This time, a smile rewarded my forwardness. She handed me her phone number—penned in lipstick on a Neely’s napkin. It was all the stuff of a James Dean movie.

After the Neely’s reunion we dated like a train schedule. Every weekend was reserved, every spare moment claimed. The intensity soon caught the eye of Kay’s parents, and diplomatic relations began to strain. Her father’s handshakes became wincingly firm when he greeted me at the door. Her mother transfixed on my face with increasing scrutiny, hoping I might vaporize under her supernova glare. Kay and I were no longer left alone when I visited, and there was always a pair of beady eyes straining over the raised newspaper her father held as a decoy. Eventually my phone calls were being intercepted, and a spirit of détente set in. This soon deteriorated further, and I found myself a complete persona-non-grata for their daughter’s attentions. In a lesson most parents fail to learn, such imposed exile serves only to make the absent heart grow fonder. The first week after graduation, in a bold and calculated move, we eloped.

Donaldsonville was a small town in Southwest Georgia, just across the Chattahoochee River from Florida. While Donaldsonville sought fame for its strawberry fields, it had

caught my attention for its reputation as a marriage mill to serve the under-aged. While too young to marry under Florida law, Georgia welcomed such love-desperados as we. At the courthouse, a simple license application was completed and we were sent to obtain blood tests. Like a low-budget version of the prolific beckoning neons that abound in Las Vegas, Donaldsonville hyped marriage blood tests on every Dr Pepper sign at every service station in town.

The Colquitt Street Gulf station banner read: “Marriage Tests While U Wait,” a slogan that seemed expedient to our needs. We gave blood and waited on the results, persevering through a Studebaker lube job and a siren-blaring wrecker call. It was a tense time, but soon a man wearing the embroidered name “Sonny” came forward with a reassuring verdict.

“Y’all’s blood’s fine,” he said. I half expected him to show me a dipstick for proof. He scrawled our blood types on a garage repair receipt and said to return it to the courthouse. I couldn’t help but notice that our ten-dollar fee amounted to three times the cost of the Studebaker lube. Although I never saw the backroom lab, I dismissed the high cost as necessary to insure that his expensive medical equipment remained in absolute sanitary condition.

At the courthouse, the clerk recorded our blood tests and we were ushered in to the “Ordinary,” who was introduced as “Her Honor Mary.” This court official turned out to be something of a cross between a justice and an auctioneer. The ceremony was a staccato of rapid-fire whereas’es and therefore’s. Her Honor eventually paused at the only familiar words in the litany, those being: “If these are the wishes of the betrothed, say I do.”

We did.

At that point, our Ordinary’s hand shot out of the sleeve of her robe like a prize-fighter’s jab, her palm collapsing flat to accommodate our twenty-dollar bill. There was nothing ordinary about her reach and grasp.

“You are hereby lawfully united as man and wife,” she concluded. Before I could kiss my bride and legitimize the whirlwind vows, I was interrupted. The Ordinary presented us with a marriage gift-box adorned with a white ribbon. Inside were sample-size cosmetics, non-prescription ointments and creams, Midol, and a ladies’ shower cap. On the cap were stenciled the words, “McAdoo Insurance—we keep you dry in the wet spots of life.”

The finality of marriage quickly calmed the stormy relationship with Kay’s parents, and the birth of their first grandson two years later elevated me to hero status. Now, forty-plus years later, I still hold a fondness for that little Georgia town, Colquitt’s Gulf Station, and the cattle-call marriage mill at the courthouse. And while nothing about that day was Buick, and certainly not DeMolay, I still hold the prize.

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