It Won’t Happen Again

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Jean sat on the dock watching the boats skim over the lake. Puffs of white clouds scurried by, stretching into long fingers with the aid of a sailor's breeze. The lapping of the water against the rocky shore in its rhythmic movement made her weary, and this was what she dreaded. For six years she had been unhappy with her life, but now she had made a clean break, free to start anew.

Six months ago Jean left her husband. Only recently in her family's summer cottage was she able to get away from the inquisitive neighbors and small town stares. She wanted to be alone in her misery and was afraid of every intruder. No one could really understand her.

Jean looked down at the paperback lying beside her. She had been trying to read it for three weeks and still hadn't finished it.

Right now she was most concerned with the future of her little girl. Next fall Carrie would go to kindergarten. She wondered how her child would feel when she saw Bob again this afternoon. He was to pick her up from her swimming lesson.
She hoped he had received her note in time. She vividly remembered the burning words in his letter.

"Guess I should tell you I'm engaged."

Bob had been a good father but was far from a good husband. Jean still had scars on her legs where he had beaten her.

Oh, I hate him. I don't know how I could ever have fallen in love with him. He wasn't dependable when he was courting, so how could I have expected him to be in marriage?

She tapped a cigarette from its case and lit it with her initialed lighter. "J. A. N." On the bottom was inscribed, "With love, Bob." She inhaled deeply several times and went back to her thoughts.

What will Carrie think of me now? She has always been crazy about Bob and may resent my taking her away from him once she's with him again. I'm scared! We were just beginning to adjust, and he had to show up.

The closing of a car door jolted her back to reality. Through the trees Jean could see Bob's new Triumph. Wonder how he paid for it. He never could manage money. There were many meals that Carrie and I ate hamburger instead of something better because Bob had to have plenty of beer on hand for his buddies.

She froze to the sun-dried deck as the carefree two stepped into view. Bob was more handsome than ever with his newly acquired suntan, and Carrie blushed with excitement at being with her father. Swinging their clasped hands back and forth, they walked swiftly toward the dock.

Men! I hate them all!

His first step on the dock echoed loudly in her sensitive ears and each subsequent step kept time with every third beat of her racing heart. His arms hung down to his thighs at an angle, the tight muscles raising the forearm and hand unconsciously to their natural position.

"Hello, Jean."

"Hi." She looked toward the shore line in order not to meet his eyes.

Carrie barged in front of him. She looked like a little
china doll with her dark eyes glistening, and her black hair lacquered to her head, occasionally dripping water on her shoulders.

"Oh, Mom! Look who's here! Daddy! He came to pick me up at swimming. I introduced him to my teacher and the kids in my class. Can he stay with us now?"

Jean pulled Carrie's wet body next to her. "Carrie, your father has other things to do, but he will be with you this afternoon. Have a good time while he's here."

Bob took Carrie's hand and held it between his. "Carrie, why don't you show me around the neighborhood?"

Inquisitively she looked up at him. "O. K. But don't you want to see Mom? She misses you too, 'cause she cries all the time."

For the first time Bob's and Jean's eyes met. To Jean it seemed forever before his gaze left hers. Her uncertainty was interrupted by his deep voice.

"I think I'd like to take that walk now, Carrie. I'll visit with your mother later." He picked her up in a powerful sweep and flung her on his broad shoulders. He turned and strode for shore, engrossed in the laughter coming from above.

Jean turned her eyes back to the comforting ripples and distant boats. The tiny waves never meddled with her problems but remained aloof, and the motorboats were too engrossed in their short happy summer to notice.

She picked up her book again, and it fell open to page one. I wish I could start with the first page of my life again. It isn't so easy to start over again at twenty-six. All the good ones are taken. Those left over are duds.

From the next dock, Carrie yelled across the water. "Hi, Mom! Why don't you go for a swim? We're going to! I'm going to show Daddy how I float." She didn't notice her dad creeping up behind her until she was flying above the dock and falling rapidly toward the water. "Hey!"

As she fell, her arm scraped the dock, and she squealed out in pain. Bob splashed in to catch her as she came up for air.

"Oh, Carrie! Are you all right? Let your ol' Dad see!"
He lifted her arm out of the water to examine it. "I'll have it fixed up in no time. Looks O.K. except for a few scratches and a couple splinters. Run up to the cabin and get a needle and a bandage." He set her up on the dock, and affectionately patted her seat. "Hurry!"

He watched her scurry up the steps. Then he turned and submerged in the blue expanse.

On the surface again, his powerful body lunged forward with each stroke. Every movement of his crawl economized on strength, giving the most forward motion possible. Bob had won several A.A.U. swimming medals as a high school swimmer, and still held his college record in the individual medley.

Jean watched his graceful stroke as he swam toward her. She wished she had a mirror to see if her tears were showing. "Oh, well! Wait till I give him a piece of my mind!"

Just like a playful dolphin, Bob dove under the water and came up with such force that his whole body was visible. Finally, he grabbed the dock, and raised his head to meet Jean's eyes.

"Jean, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt her. I broke one of the unwritten rules, but it won't happen again."

*How many times have I heard that. "It won't happen again."* She stumbled to her knees. "You bet it won't happen again. You can dally around with your girlfriends, but don't you ever lay a hand on her again, or I'll have my lawyer take away 'all' visitation rights! She's your daughter! How can you be so stupid?"

His forearms resting on the dock, he grinned. "I've thrown you in hundreds of times, and you never seemed to mind. What's your problem, anyway? Jealous?"

Jean could scarcely see him through her squinting eyes. Her lips were drawn tightly over her teeth.

"I should say I am jealous! Why couldn't you just leave us alone? Why should I have to share her with a two-timing rat like you?"

Her hands shaking, she took a cigarette out of the case. She held it to her mouth, and quickly snapped a flame to her lighter.
Bob was sitting on the dock now and glaring at Jean. His breathing was heavy, shoulders and chest rising slowly and then falling. "God Damn! If that's the way you feel about it, I'll never bother you again! She'll probably grow up to be an ol' bitch like you!"

A twig snapped on shore, and they both turned to look. Carrie was leaning against a tree staring at them.

"Please, Mommy and Daddy. Don't do that." She was crying now. "I love you! Don't you love me?"

Jean jumped up and ran to meet Carrie who began tip-toeing slowly over the cracks on the dock. Carefully she held a needle between her thumb and forefinger, and clutched a box of band-aids in the other hand.

Her mother first looked at her skinned arm and then at her watery eyes and tear-covered cheeks. "I'm sorry, Carrie. You know I love you very much." She grabbed a towel and quickly dried her child's tears. "Come on now, and I'll take care of your arm."

Stepping out to the end of the dock again where Bob was waiting, Jean tensed with self-consciousness.

Bob watched them approach, noticing how much more slender Jean was. Every curve moved as she walked, but her face was as expressionless at a statue.

"Please, Bob, let's not argue in front of Carrie or mention our 'D.'"

After sterilizing the needle in the lighter flame, Jean began picking at the splinters. "Be a big girl, Carrie. I'll try not to hurt you."

"Bob, do you like your new job?"

His massive physique towering above her, he muttered. "Naw. I quit. I have to see a fella tomorrow, so guess I'd better be getting back. It's a good five hour drive." He bent over kissing Carrie on the cheek, and leaped across the dock and up the stairs.

Carrie tripped after him. "When will you be back, Daddy?"

He hastily climbed in his red sports car, and the low roar began. In another moment the humming mufflers could be heard speeding down the lane.