

Our Secret Beach

By Sheila R. Christianson

It was the morning of September 4, 1999. I asked Grant as we got him dressed, "Do you know where we're going today?" He shook his head "yes" with the sweetest smile. He now could only communicate with blinks and this small nod. When I said, "I'm making good on my promise to you- we're going to Secret Beach," my 36-year-old husband's eyes twinkled.

Our relationship began in 1992, when an old friend told me she had this terrific guy for me to meet- great personality, charismatic and charming. "I don't think it will be a love connection," she said "but you'll have fun."

It wasn't love at first sight, but Grant was the most sensitive, caring and respectful man I had ever met. And the funniest! He always told a great joke that I had never heard before.

Three months later, Grant was promoted and told he would move to Paris in 6 months for an indefinite time. When I found out, I thought, "Isn't that just my kind of luck?" I was already head over heels in love.

We continued our relationship during those six months, but then he left for Paris and I was in Detroit. For 1 ½ years, we saw each other every three months. We had international phone bills the size of mortgage payments and phone sex that would put the 1-900 numbers out of business. In September 1994, unable to take the separation any longer, I quit my job and moved to Paris.

Paris really is for lovers. Where else can you experience the majesty of the Eiffel Tower while kissing the one you love in the moonlight? We also were able to travel to England, Ireland, Germany and Switzerland between Grant's business trips. It seemed too good to be true.

Grant's company moved him back to the U. S. in December 1994. We decided to live together. I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him, marriage proposal or not.

Grant began having problems walking in spring 1995. I remember him saying, "Watch me walk. Do I look funny?" It wasn't obvious at the time, but his left foot dragged when he walked or ran. He decided to see an orthopedic specialist, thinking his knees might have been damaged from a lot of skiing, but held off until after our long-awaited vacation to Hawaii. I was excited to see Hawaii for the first time, but I had no idea just how special this vacation would be.

On our first day, Grant took me to his favorite beach on Kauai, known as Secret Beach. We had to hike down a long, steep dirt trail, but Grant held my hand and coached my footing. After about 10 minutes, I saw the most brilliant aqua-blue ocean. As I got comfortable on my towel, Grant caressed lotion onto my back. I closed my eyes, finally relaxing in the 80-degree heat. Grant said, "I know it's hot, honey, but you really should slip something on." I looked up and noticed a small box on the towel in front of me. Before I could fully focus on what was happening, he opened the box and the most stunning, brilliant-cut diamond engagement ring stared back at me. "Yes" was the answer. He had shaken my world and at the same time grounded me with his existence. I wanted to walk with him through life.

Three months later. On a muggy day in July, Grant came into the home we had bought as I was unpacking a box. He was unusually quiet and deep in thought. I greeted him with a hug and kiss and asked about his doctor's appointment. The orthopedic specialist referred Grant to a neurologist when he found nothing wrong with his knees. Grant handed me some pamphlets, one about Multiple Sclerosis and the other about Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (also known as Lou Gehrig's disease) and said point-blank, "The doctor thinks I have one of these diseases. They are similar in symptoms and difficult to diagnose."

It took another four months to confirm Grant's diagnosis as Lou Gehrig's disease. The doctor told us it makes the nerves gradually die and no longer connect with the muscles. Eventually, people with it become unable to do anything for themselves and usually die within 3 to 5 years by choking or suffocating. The cause is unknown and treatment is unavailable. Our dreams of a long life together were shattered.

Grant and I were in the midst of planning a Kauai wedding. He asked if I still wanted to marry him. I told him I had waited for him my entire life and I wanted to be together for as long as God was willing. When we married on March 24, 1996, repeating, "In sickness and in health for as long as we both shall live, "our family and friends knew the gravity and determination behind the words.

Grant's health was declining quickly. He was spending most of his time in a wheelchair and it was getting more difficult to use his hands. We both agreed it was time for Grant to plan for early retirement. We had always dreamed of retiring in Kauai, but we never dreamed we would be in our 30s.

The native Hawaiians say the island of Kauai either accepts or rejects you. Grant and I were accepted with open arms. Everything for our October 1997 move fell into place, including an accessible home for Grant.

Our marriage barely was surviving the gradual progression of Grant's illness to each different stage. It was easy for Grant and I to love each other for all of our wonderful qualities, but the true test was loving each other in all of our ugliness. I lost a husband and he lost a wife. I gained a "child " dependent in every way physically.

When Grant lost the ability to speak clearly, I was the only person who could understand some of his words. I knew I still loved him and would be there for him until the end. I assured him of this time and again when he was trying to push me away. He didn't want to put me through all of his pain.

Two months before Grant died, he was hospitalized with pneumonia and then went home with Hospice. Before we left the hospital, he made me promise I would take him to Secret Beach one last time. Coming home was overwhelming. I was getting about 3 to 4 hours of sleep per night and Secret Beach was the farthest thing from my mind.

I finally accepted that Grant was not going to recover from his pneumonia. He was getting weaker, losing more of his precious energy each day. One day I said to our good friend A.K., "We have to get Grant to Secret Beach this week or it will not happen" She talked to some people in the surrounding area that day and returned home with good news. A man named Miles was a property manager for one of the owners who had private access on the only road to the beach. Miles understood how important this

was to us, because he' d taken care of a woman for two years who died of cancer. He said he would try to arrange it for the upcoming Saturday, September 4, and would call us.

Grant' s condition worsened during the week. He mostly blinked his eyes to communicate with me. I spent Friday preparing for a picnic, champagne toast, and special ceremony. We hadn' t yet heard from Miles. I told Grant the next day would be a special one and he needed to conserve his energy.

Miles finally called Friday night at 11:00. He told us to meet him at the gate by noon.

Early Saturday morning, I packed the cooler and picnic basket and gathered our wedding pictures and some books from which I planned to read. I also brought the leis I had saved from our wedding day. It was Hawaiian tradition to toss them into the ocean wrapped in ti leaves. If they float out and don' t return, it means your love will be as deep as the ocean and your burdens as light as the sea foam above.

Grant was having a very difficult day, with shortness of breath and weakness. It was truly now or never. Six friends and my assistant helped me load up the Blazer with everything, including Grant' s oxygen, morphine pump and medications. A.L., supported Grant' s head while we drove.

We arrived at the gate a little after noon. Miles was there and we soon were on our way down. When we arrived, we parked on the sand. It took all of us to get the wheelchair settled in a perfect place, with Grant' s feet planted in the warm sand. Beautiful Hawaiian music played while the picnic area was arranged. Our wedding pictures and leis were set out; the champagne was chilled. During it all, I could see Grant soaking up the essence of the day.

After a while, I began my little ceremony. First, I made a champagne toast to the day. Grant was able to savor a bit of bubbly. Second, I read a beautiful prayer from Marianne Williamson' s *Illuminata*, to help him let go of what he could no longer control. I also read from Shakti Gawain' s *Creative Visualization*. I expressed my heartfelt gratitude and love to Grant. I told him it was okay to let go if he was ready. Then I wrapped our wedding leis in ti leaves and cast them far out beyond the lava rock. We watched as they floated farther away with the waves.

Grant wanted some time to sit by himself. I wondered what he was thinking as I watched him sitting with his eyes closed. I was thinking of the day he had proposed on that beach and about life without him.

When we arrived home at 4 p.m., Grant was having more problems breathing. For the next 3 hours, A.K. and I struggled to ease Grant's breathing. Then, at around 7 p.m., Grant decided he was tired of fighting. He looked me in the eyes knowingly when I listened to his lungs and could hear they were full of mucus. I said, "Grant I know your lungs are filling up and I don't think there is anything we can do." Then, all of a sudden, he gave me several eye blinks, which was our agreed-on signal that he was ready to leave. I held him and said, "Grant, I love you" and kissed him on the lips. Then I said, "You go on and get out of that body because it's not working for you anyway." And he was released. I could feel the presence of his love and warmth in the room.

I held him for four hours before they came for his body. I laughed and cried. I was so happy he was free of his prison, yet so sad for myself and others who were cheated out of more time with this wonderful man. I called some family and friends to tell them. We lit candles and played the same music from the beach earlier that day. I didn't want the moment to end, because when it did I knew I only had my memories.

The memories from that day at Secret Beach and the previous 5 years of dealing with Grant's terminal illness are now being used to help others. With the assistance of two dear friends who were my husband's caregivers, I have started a caregiver support service on Kauai which functions as a healing retreat or place of respite for primary caregivers of loved ones with long-term or serious illnesses.