

Martin and Nell

A Short Story by Charles Williams

"Do you come here often?" were the first words Martin ever spoke to Nell on a Friday evening at 7:20 in May of 1961. Nell was sitting at the bar in Steinman's, the neighborhood cafe in Diamondville, Wyoming that sunny evening eating fried catfish and sipping a cold beer. She nearly choked at the naivete' of the question and said, "Yep," without looking up. During those days, the local bar was both restaurant and town meeting place. Dances were held on Saturdays, and local folks brought their instruments and played well into the night. Sundays, there were all-day family fish fry dinners even in the cold harsh winter months. Nell Steinman, 24, had spent most of her life, except for four years at Colorado State, working with her parents here and knew all of the town's people, but on this night, this stranger would change her life.

"May I buy you a drink?" was his second question as she wiped her face with a napkin. "Oh, just a beer, nothing fancy," she replied. Martin, an Air Force doctor newly resigned from his military obligation, was overcome and trembling inside, but he tried hard not to show it. The beauty in Nell's face was breathtaking, as was the rich color of her long sun burnished hair, the symmetry of her sinewy proportioned body, the delicacy of her slender fingers as she tore away the catfish from its bones and drew its goodness to her voluptuous un-lipsticked mouth. She was a vision, a rough diamond with exquisite clarity hidden in Steinman's bar, an out-of-the-way dive in the back roads of US Highway 30, 55 miles east of Green River, Wyoming.

"Excuse me sir, a beer for the young lady?" was his call to the bartender, and the barkeep poured a pint from the tap. He slid the cold brew towards Nell with a wink. Matthew Appleby, a Steinman's employee for over 25 years, had known Nell since birth and was her god-father. He read Martin's intentions and approved. He silently joked to himself, "A goal is a dream with a deadline, fella!" And Martin's deadline was fast approaching, as he knew

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Nell's limits with strangers. There was a decency in Martin's 26 year old carriage, leadership in his demeanor, an intelligence in his eyes, and youthful ambition spewing from his countenance. Martin was smitten with Nell, and knew intuitively that she was the one. Later that evening in May, 1961, he proposed, and Nell said, "Yes." They had known each other for three hours forty seven minutes and had not yet kissed.

In May of 1971, Martin caressed Nell around her waist in the kitchen of their home in Santa Barbara, and squeezed her tightly, as had been their waking ritual at morning light over the years. Martin, a successful Doctor of Internal Medicine, adored his bride. She was preparing breakfast for their children, Martin Jr, 5, Perla 4, and twins Irene and Santelyn aged 3. They lived in love, harmony, and sincerely. Unknowingly, they passed unto their children an enduring love for family. But Martin Jr. never bought the scenario his father recounted so many times as to how he and his mother had met and married after only a few hours meeting each other in a bar. He often scoffed at his parents' allegations. "Oh come on, you don't marry somebody after knowing them just for a few minutes!"

Often the family visited Steinman's in Diamondville and ate catfish dinners. They were delicious. The grand children absolutely loved Nell's parents, Carl and Belen Steinman, and were appreciative, and respectful even through Grandpa Carl's ideas of strict discipline, but there was always Grandma Belen's encompassing love. Oh, how she loved her grandchildren! They were more dear to her than any of the memories she had amassed over her years with Carl. Her hugs erased all fears, all tears, all troubles and woe. And when Grandma Belen died at 83 in July of 1981, Martin Jr., Perla, Irene and Santelyn were as devastated as were their parents. She was buried at Town Cemetery in Diamondville, Wyoming among a grove of flowers and trees. In June of 1982, Carl joined her of a broken heart, and was laid to rest beside her, among the same grove of flowers and trees.

In May of 1991, Martin Jr, now 25 and a graduate of Stanford University holding an MD degree in Internal Medicine, drove south east down US route 30 to Diamondville, Wyoming to visit his grand parent's graves at Town Cemetery. There, in the afternoon light by the rear fence, were the grave stones of his grandparents, Grandma Belen, and Grandpa Carl Steinman. He wept inconsolably as he relived their love for him and his sisters. He had brought roses and carnations, the favorite flowers of his mother and grandmother, and placed the flowers at their head stones. He smiled finally before he left the gravesite remembering the story of his parent's

meeting there in Diamondville after only a few minutes. "Oh, come on, you don't marry some one after just meeting them!"

He considered his sisters, all of whom had graduated college and had started families of their own, settling in Santa Barbara, California communities with loving husbands and caring grandparents. He was the last to find happiness, as he was the last of the doubting Thomases when it came to developing anything close to a lasting relationship with a woman. His studies foreshadowed any hope of encountering a relationship. It was important to him to succeed in his parent's and sister's eyes, so he sacrificed everything in quest of his degree. Often his classmates chided him for his diligence saying, "There is life after MD-ism," they joked. But to Martin Jr., his drive was insatiable. He had to succeed. No nonsense was his mantra, and so it was till graduation where he finished "Summa Cum Laude" in his class. Offers from world wide hospitals who needed his expertise in Internal Medicine called and literally offered millions of dollars as starting salary for his services. "No nonsense," was his mantra, "No foolishness," was his motto. There was no way he would countenance impulsiveness in the matters of his life as his father's story of his mother's meeting so often declared. Martin Jr. was a realist. He left the cemetery and drove towards Diamondville for one last visit, one last encounter with his childhood.

Steinman's Bar had long since been sold and was now owned by Pastor and Nene Santos, a Filipino family. The signboard outside on a 50 foot pole read, "Nene's"; The menu had not changed, and the patronage was the same. Sunday family dinners were still served at \$5.00 a plate. The Mayor of Diamondville still held city council meetings in Nene's meeting room, and families danced and sang on Saturdays in Nene's auditorium. It was still a quiet community, even after all these years. Dr. Martin Jr. parked and went inside. He took a seat at the still familiar bar.

He saw a beautiful young lady sitting there at the far end eating a catfish dinner and sipping a

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beer. Her name was Nell Santos, 24 years old, Nene's oldest daughter, and a recent graduate of Colorado State. He was instantly smitten, his breath quickened with every glance at her beautiful countenance and felt compelled to engage her in conversation. His inner struggle against impetuosity was intense.

"Excuse me sir, I want to buy a beer for th...the.. for that young lady," was the young doctor's call to the bartender, and the barkeep poured a pint from the tap. He slid the cold brew towards Nell with a wink. He read the young man's intentions and approved. Jasper Caulderone, a 14 year employee, was Nell's god-father and had worked there since she was 10. He also knew the story of a Martin and Nell from years back, the couple who had met and married after just a few minutes' introduction at this bar, but he was not aware that this stranger was Martin, Jr. He silently joked to himself, "These two kids are in love and don't even know it yet!"

The beauty in Nell Santos' face was breathtaking to Martin, Jr., as was the rich color of her long auburn hair, the symmetry of her well proportioned body, the delicacy of her slender fingers as she tore away the catfish from its bones and drew pieces of it to her voluptuous lipsticked mouth. She was truly a vision, a diamond with exquisite clarity sitting in Nene's bar, an out-of-the-way dive in the back roads of US Highway 30, 55 miles east of Green River, Wyoming. Martin Jr's mind raced through his childhood, his adolescent taunts to his parents, and his chiding over their first meeting. He felt embarrassed by his youthful actions now while sitting at the bar. He knew intuitively that Nell was the one!

Later that evening in May of 1991, Martin Jr. proposed, and Nell said, "Yes."

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