

## THE ENGAGEMENT

The damp mist chilled Martin as he snapped shut the car door and surveyed the indistinct scene. The High Street lay, broad, shrouded in its vaporous blanket. Occasional, anonymous, people appeared and then vanished, dark masses swallowed in the grey gloom. Above him an anaemic sun signalled its readiness to concede defeat and surrendered. Below, the saturated, leaf strewn, pavement slipped beneath his feet. It was an inauspicious start.

The wide street typified many of the villages and small towns in that part of the Country. Martin could not see the row of buildings opposite but he accepted their presence on trust. For a start, the map signified their presence and, more germane, the Town Hall was located across in that direction. Interred within, he would find the District Surveyor's offices. With a slightly nervous tremble he mentally groped and crossed the road in search of them.

Some ninety minutes later he re-immersed himself in the cloud, clutching dust-laden rolls of drawing and plans which had been thrust into his arms without enthusiasm. The town's drainage troubles were of great vintage and many souls had toiled on fruitless schemes before him. He had been told this before he left London and warned, also, that he would not be the last.

He was undaunted. Martin was in that brief period between adolescence and manhood where enthusiasm and idealism joined forces and over-rode the brutal, crushing, blows that pass for, and fall as, experience. Full of self-belief, he held that to all problems there lay a solution and he was totally capable of its identification, resolution, and presentation.

A brief hint of sunshine touched him as he came upon his car and he deposited the plans on the rear seat. As he stood on the pavement his mind conjured a hazy picture of what the town must look like, its topography, concentrations of population, and highways. And then, suddenly he realised he was walking, exploring but with no clear objective in mind. A pair of looming, half-timbered, cottages gave way to a narrow alley which led him onto a broad pavement. Martin detected a lych gate which betrayed the location of the imposing gothic church.

A flight of steps led him away, his feet descending until he arrived back at the High Street. The mist was clearing and he was able to distinguish an avenue of tall, leafy, trees and, beyond, the uneven ridge-line of the buildings opposite. He was standing outside a cake shop in the window of which he noticed a hand-written sign advertising morning coffee. Without thinking, he went in.

A short, rotund, woman stood at a small counter before him, addressing an excited group of eager, elderly, townswomen. Beyond, he could see clusters of chairs and tables stretching into the darkness that filled the far extremities of the narrow room. He was noticed and the woman greeted him with a look that was reserved for strangers and irregular customers. "Coffee?" mouthed Martin quite silently and followed the wave in the direction of the table nearest to the counter.

"We do lunches as well," said the woman as she served him. Martin spent a full twenty minutes sat at the table, watching the knot of gossips, noting the arrivals and departures. Clearly this was a regular meeting place, and many of the people he was watching were ones he might be calling upon in the forthcoming weeks. Yet he was there, alone, sat in the semi-darkness, like the solitary member of an audience watching an all-female play. Suddenly he felt uncomfortable and self-conscious, and hastened outside.

It was curiosity that made him return for lunch. The number of patrons had increased although there was none as young as he. The food was close to tasteless but reasonably priced and Martin was wondering what alternatives there might be when a commotion at the door made him turn his head. The proprietress had greeted the latest arrival by her Christian name and it was clear that the girl who had just bounced in, shattering the glass-like peace, was one of the

“regulars”. He watched the long-haired blonde take her seat at a table set for long. One look at her was insufficient. Without inhaling, Martin had to look again.

She was slim, tall and, in Martin's eyes, the epitome of beauty. Her hair was piled high upon her head above piercing blue eyes set in a pale, flawless, complexion. He looked again, then furtively sought reflections in the cutlery, his glass, and the water jug; anything to confirm the truth of the original. The proprietress and the girl were locked in a low, serious, conversation. Martin could detect no more than a low murmur, but he had learned her name. There had been a couple of Carols at school. One had red hair and spots. Neither looked like this manifestation. She was still seated at her table when Martin passed by to the exit. To his lasting disappointment she did not look up but her eyes remained lowered, reading a letter laid beside her plate.

He telephoned London from his lodgings. He would require assistance if the survey was to be completed within the agreed programme. His request had been anticipated. A free-lance surveyor would join him on the following Monday.

That evening Martin found himself thinking of little else other than the girl in the cake shop. Whenever he looked at a plan or opened a book her image appeared before him. She was there in his dreams, remote and aloof, yet there was hope. He knew it was inevitable that he would return to the shop for lunch, whatever the culinary alternatives that existed.

He arranged his work so that he went in for mid-morning. The proprietress recognised him. He was the sole customer.

At a few minutes to one o'clock he crossed the threshold again and took a seat facing the door. A few minutes later she entered and sat at the same table as the day before. She appeared not to notice him. Despite his continuous attention, she did not glance once in his direction. Sadly, Martin turned his attention downwards to the meal and sought his lost appetite. He was still downcast when a shadow fell across the table and a sparkling clear voice from above addressed him.

“Could I have some of your water, please?” He choked on a mouthful of hard peas. Before he could clear his throat and graciously signify his agreement she had raised the jug and filled her glass. Her smile radiated. “Thank you,” she said sweetly and retreated to her table. Martin bit his lip and cursed his luck. He had met her and, struck dumb, had not uttered one single intelligible sound. It was a catastrophe!

A heavy cloud hung over Martin's being for the remainder of the day. Outside the sun shone and men went around in shirt sleeves, but Martin's shadow was eclipsed. More than that, his senses were reacting in a manner entirely alien to him. Every time he thought of the incident his heart thumped, small beads of sweat gathered on his skin, and a lump swelled in his chest reminding him, dreadfully, that his nemesis had passed. The world had ended, yet he was still alive.

Furthermore, as if to compound his misery, the next day dawned. It was dull with a chilling breeze that stripped leaves from the trees. It was also Friday. He did not go into the shop for coffee and was late arriving for lunch. The greeting from the proprietress bordered on enthusiasm and he suddenly was made to feel like a regular customer of many years standing, but his eyes sought amongst the tables and lowered heads beyond her, for Carol. Incomprehensibly, his vision reported to his consciousness that she was not there. Her normal table was set for two but unoccupied. He sat down heavily and gazed, solemnly, at the door and out into the windswept street, awaiting the vision that would fill him with ecstasy. Each passing minute pressed him deeper into a wretched torment. She did not come.

At the end of his meal he rallied his courage. “The girl?” he enquired as he went to pay his bill. “The blonde girl who normally sits at that table - over there!” he added, trying to appear calm and natural.

A knowing glint appeared in the proprietress' eyes. “Mmmmmm?” She murmured as she placed a coffee on the counter.

“She's not here today?” The proprietress stood upright and arched her back, thrusting her hands like a pivot behind her. A smile broadened into a grin which filled Martin with uncomfortable guilt.

“Not here?” she repeated with great emphasis. Now wretched, Martin pushed his tray towards her. The world seemed to darken around him as he mentally clutched at the remaining luminous area.

“The girl,” he repeated, knowing he was unable to conceal the desperation. “Sits over there!” he indicated. The smile changed. Martin recognised an essence of maternalism and Carol's name came to the tip of his tongue. A fearful image of his father stopped him from uttering it. That moment seemed as if it would last for ever. Martin was conscious of everyone in the room stopping eating and watching him. It was going to last forever!

“You mean Carol!” beamed the woman, excited. “It's her early lunch day, today!”

A few minutes later he strode out of the shop into the street, the weight of care and worry lifted from his shoulders. He paused for a moment, surveying the panorama of shops, offices, banks and estate agents around him. Somewhere there Carol was working. It did not matter where. She was there, maybe even watching from a darkened window. It did not matter.

Martin went home for the weekend. He tried to act normally but he wondered if his attentive parents or younger sisters detected a change in his attitude. As usual he went out with his mates to one of the local dances on Saturday evening. It was more of a squeeze than a dance, the floor bearing an inescapable resemblance to Martin's conception of the Black Hole of Calcutta. The regular girls did not interest him, nor did the dark eyed beauties who arrived on a late afternoon train from London, secure in the knowledge they would recover their return fare with interest. He went through all the motions of appearing to enjoy himself, but his heart and thoughts lay in an unknown location, many miles away.

The assistance arrived on Monday as planned. Martin teamed the free-lance surveyor up with a chain-man from the Council and set him to work at the eastern end of the town. Brian was short, but dark and handsome. He was suave, but coarse, as Martin was soon to discover when a local young lady of acceptable appearance but questionable repute appeared in the Council Depot. There was many a comment and talk of her jealous but simple husband, but also a complement of nods and winks as the girl happily ran the gauntlet of fondling and probing fingers.

“I've brought a packed lunch,” said Brian when Martin cautiously queried his plans for subsistence. “I always bring one. I'll eat it with the chaps.” Martin had no doubt this was on the strength that the girl would put in another appearance. He discovered that there was a marked discrepancy between Brian's eating habits and the substance of his expenses claim, but for the moment he greeted the announcement as good news. Brian did not blend into Martin's image of his relationship with Carol. He was unrefined and coarse. It would be better if Carol did not learn that he knew Brian.

It followed that Martin went alone to the cake shop that lunch time. A shock awaited him. Carol was not sat in her customary place, instead she was sat at his normal table, in his place. Quite impassive she watched him as, in confusion, he chose an adjacent table and sat. She was looking at him and, to his combined horror and supreme pleasure, she leaned in his direction and beckoned to him. “Come on,” she cooed. “You can sit here, with me.”

Martin looked around him. Was everyone watching? He rose slowly. “Oh, come and sit down!” she repeated. “Don't be so sheepish. I don't bite!” Gradually he sat and succumbed into paradise. He passed the meal in a trance as Carol talked, and he listened, nodded, paid court, growing intoxicated by the sight of her beauty.

“She's a lovely girl,” said the proprietress as she cleared his table once Carol had left. “So lively and young!”

The following days were spent in an ecstatic stupor. Martin had Carol totally to himself during those all too brief lunchtimes. His life consisted of bleak, empty, periods spanning between the piers of their meetings. Rapidly their relationship drifted from formality to friendship as they talked their way through a wide range of subjects.

He learned she worked in his namesake's Bank across the road, and lived some twelve miles away. She commuted by bus daily and Martin envied the passengers, wishing it could be his good fortune to travel the same journey. He was tempted to offer to collect her daily. What was twelve miles when you were in love? As those first days passed, Carol's naive gaiety infected Martin with a blossoming confidence. Her spirit dominated his thoughts and he lived only for the sight of her beauty and the sound of her voice. The weekend, when it came, formed a cruel and unjust desert intruding into his lush paradise.

"I haven't brought a packed lunch today," said Brian when they met the following Monday. "If it is OK, I'll join you at that little cafe you go to." Martin's heart shattered at his feet. Brian's words were impregnated with significance and betrayed a knowledge of what happened during that magical hour. A particular malevolence had attached to the words "little cafe".

Thoughts raced wildly through the jungle of his mind. Had Brian followed him, prompted by Martin's undisguised morning anticipation and post-meridian satisfaction? Had he actually seen Carol? Had he been seeing Carol at the weekend? Was he seeing Carol? Martin quelled his expanding inner fury and sought an excuse to avoid a communal lunch, but Brian had already confidently loaded the surveying instruments into his van. Martin set out on that morning's work in the grips of a horrible doom, facing the realisation that at one o'clock the death sentence could be executed. It was inescapable, yet the catastrophe was set to occur much earlier than he anticipated.

Just before eleven, Brian's van drew up alongside and he leaned out of the window. There was a problem. Would Martin come and give him an opinion? "How about a coffee, first?" asked Brian as he drove through the town centre. "There's your little cafe along here somewhere." The trap encapsulating Martin's mind snapped shut. There was no doubt that Brian knew.

"I've been in here a few times," announced Brian over his shoulder as he opened the door and, with Martin reluctant in his wake, strode in. If there had been such a thing as natural justice the world would have ended there. Martin succumbed to an agony as he was consumed in an apocalyptic fire of passion and terror, yet life continued. There, sat at his table, sipping a coffee, was Carol. She saw him and seemed to smile. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the proprietress approaching as the room grew darker and darker and spun momentarily. He gripped the edge of a display case. There was no escape.

"Oh, hello!" said Carol, brightly. Martin stared. For a moment he did not believe that she was addressing him.

"Hello," he responded, weakly, aiming to sit down at another table with Brian.

"Hello!" said Brian, with great emphasis, stretching the word between his teeth. "Hello, hello," he repeated, sitting down beside her. "I like it!" he added, looking at Martin.

"It!" exclaimed Carol, bathing him in a cold stare. Confused, Martin tried to summon up some appropriate words, but failed.

"I know you," said Brian, reaching for Carol's hand. "You work in the bank across the road, don't you?"

"Very observant of you," said Carol, avoiding his clutch by picking up her coffee. His hand fell, out of sight below the table. "I must be getting back," she added, closing her handbag and rising.

"I didn't expect to find you here," stammered Martin, his eyes following her every movement.

"Oh, I was in early this morning," said Carol, recovering her customary gaiety. "See you at lunch time?" Martin nodded. Some of the weight peeled away but a bitter core remained,

unmoveable and potentially cancerous, in the shape of his companion who was always, thenceforth, at his side. The nature of the lunchtime conversation was corrupted. It became abrasive and the intimacy that Martin had cultured and cherished was eroded away as his role was progressively downgraded. In a few days he became an onlooker and the fire that had once raged red now burnt with a green flame.

The following Monday morning was fine and sunny. Martin was not surprised when, midmorning, Brian's van drew alongside. "Coffee?" he said. Martin had to go. Whatever he might suspect happened during the weekends and the evenings in between, he could not miss the opportunity to play chaperon. Even if he could not bear listening to the conversation, he could sit at another table and worship her from what would be as good as afar.

Carol was there, sat this time at a small table at the rear of the room adjacent a window through which the morning sun streamed across her golden hair. To Martin she looked like a Goddess. To Martin she was a Goddess, but of what? "How are you, beautiful, this fine morning?" greeted Brian.

"Fine," said Carol, brightly.

"Nothing could be finer, than to be in Carolina, in the morn....." Brian suddenly broke off singing. For the first time, Martin saw Carol's peach-like cheeks flush as her lips tightened. It would only happen once more.

"I can tell you are married!" she snapped. "I can always tell the married ones," she continued, frigidly. "Sooner or later they give themselves away."

Brian beamed. "It doesn't make any difference if you're not, does it?"

"Married?" echoed Martin, his head full of confusion. Carol looked at him and her glare moderated.

"Yes, married," she said, softly. "You are not, are you?" Martin blushed whilst Brian, perceiving his discomfort, laughed. "You sod!" she said, and strode out.

For the next couple of days, marriage became the principal topic of conversation. Carol expounded that single girls should avoid married men. Brian clung to the view that married men could teach single girls more than single men. Martin listened, subscribing innocently to the morality but not understanding the practicality. But Carol's robust attitude endowed him with a sense of security and, alongside this, he nurtured a smug secret. Brian's work was nearly at an end.

"All right," conceded Brian. "If not married men, what about ones who are engaged?"

"What do you mean?" asked Carol coldly with an uncustomary scowl.

"What about engagements?" continued Brian. "Should blokes who are engaged keep away from unattached girls, and vice-versa?"

"Yes," hissed Carol. "Yes they should!" She stood and, fifteen minutes earlier than normal, thrust her handbag under her arm and departed.

During the balance of Brian's stay the conversation was reduced to safe subjects, mild platitudes, and the weather. All taboo subjects were avoided and Martin guessed that Carol's interest had waned and that she would have stopped the tête a trois had she been able to. But the day for Brian's departure came, and he went.

The following Monday, Martin renewed his lunchtime acquaintance with Carol after spending the weekend in a frantic state of wild anticipation and anxiety. His work was coming to an end, too. The necessity for his presence there would cease in no more than two weeks and during that period he had to re-establish the former relationship as well as a basis for meetings thereafter. Perhaps he could even negotiate a permanent one.

Carol was strangely subdued at lunchtime. To his disappointment, there was no sparkle, no gaiety. It was plain that she was heavily preoccupied and Martin found he could not take any

initiative. "I had a very bad weekend," she said, in response to his gentle questioning. "I had a row with my father. That always upsets me."

"What was the row about?" he asked, innocently. A dangerous glint appeared in her eyes.

"Nothing!" she muttered glumly, and the subject was dropped. Carol's preoccupation, however, with the problem did not subside. It continued to inhibit their lunchtimes. With it there, in the background, Carol was a changed person and Martin sensed that it was driving a wedge between them. If he was going to succeed, the problem would have to be identified and removed, drawn out like a bad tooth.

Cautiously he tried to ask her about it. "You ought to share it with someone. Talk it out! My mother always says that a problem shared is a problem halved." Carol shook her head and clutched her handkerchief.

"No," she murmured. "It's my problem. I'll solve it in my way."

On Friday Martin found Carol in a state of distress when he entered the cake shop. She had been crying and her eyes were red and swollen. She clutched a damp, crumpled letter, and held it out in his direction. Martin had no need to ask the question. "It's my fiancé," she blurted. The letter waved before him. "It is from my fiancé. I don't know what to do! Oh, it's such a mess! Such a mess!"

"Your fiancé?" echoed Martin in undisguised disbelief. Carol swallowed and took a deep, sobering, breath.

"I am engaged," she began, "to a regular soldier in West Germany. We grew up together and we became engaged fifteen months ago because he had been posted there. It was our parents' idea. Mine think he's suitable for me and I didn't mind it. I didn't really think about it. I mean I have barely seen him since he went, and people change."

"I am not sure that I understand the problem."

"The problem? My father wrote to him and told him I'd been seeing another fellow. This is Frank's reply, full of untrue accusations. What is worse, he's on his way home now to see me and sort it out! Right now! Oh, God, what a mess!" Martin's senses of loyalty and ethics were torn asunder. He wanted to expose the situation and capitalise, yet he found that the words would not come. He had to be correct in what he did and said. His future happiness could depend on it.

"You can try to talk it out with me," he offered. Carol's lips moved but she did not reply. Her glare moderated and she lowered her eyes, shaking her head slowly. Martin did not know what was expected of him and lapsed into silence. A full five minutes passed before she spoke again.

Martin spent an uncomfortable weekend, retracing and re-enacting their short conversation. He had failed to take his opportunity. He could have been more positive, more incisive. There had been openings but he had missed his chance. He was to have no opportunity on Monday. A cruel trick of fate in the form of a telephone call summoning to the London office for an interview with one of the senior Partners took him away. Time had run out. Other than odd occasions, the next day would be his last visit.

She was there and smiled at his approach. His heart leapt. It was the original, carefree and gay girl whom he had first met. With a blend of enthusiasm and anticipation, Martin sat opposite her. "I missed you, yesterday," she said.

"How did it go?" he asked, eagerly.

"What go?" she mused, playfully.

"The meeting - you know. With your fiancee!" Her smile disappeared.

"I wish you hadn't asked that!" she said.

"Why?"

"I don't want to talk about it!"

"But we must talk about it! It matters to me. This is my last day here. I mean - well, I thought, perhaps we could see each other?" Carol was shaking her head.

"No," she said. "It's no good. It has all been settled. Frank discussed it with my father over the weekend and the engagement stands."

"But, Carol, you don't want to be engaged to him, do you?" Her head drooped glumly as tears gathered and her face appeared flushed. "You don't love him," he continued boldly. "Why hang on to an arrangement that upsets you? You should break it off!"

"No!" she insisted.

"You should break it off! You must!"

"No!" Carol repeated with increased emphasis.

"You must! You must write to him and....." Martin never completed the sentence. Like a spring uncoiling, her hand lashed out across his face. He bit his lip and felt it start to bleed. "I think I am in love with you, Carol," he said weakly.

She blushed deeply and her anger was gone. "I was right when your friend was here. Girls who are engaged should not get involved with unattached men! I am sorry," she whispered, smiling sympathetically. Her hand reached out across the tablecloth and closed over his, reassuring. "You're a nice boy, Martin. I like you - perhaps it is more than that, but I am not right for you. I have thought about it, and I'm not the type of girl you should marry."

"I don't think I'll ever marry," he said, darkly.

"You will," she insisted, looking beyond him as if she could see someone standing there. "Somewhere, today, there's the girl who'll marry you. She's a brunette, short, plump, and cuddly. She'll look after you. That's the kind of girl you'll marry, not a tall, lank, thoughtless, blonde like me."

Martin could not in any way conceal his overflowing dismay as he surveyed her countenance. The sparkling smile appeared once again, radiating joy, but the last lunch hour had run its course. "It is good-bye, then?"

"I am afraid it must be," she said, nodding. "But think of me and remember the lunch times we've spent together. I won't forget you, Martin."

Martin never saw Carol again. He revisited the town several weeks later but she was gone. He learned that she had transferred to another branch of the Bank shortly after his departure. For months he went everywhere nursing the vain hope that they might, by chance, meet. It was several years before he ceased to search for her in public places, and he did not forget her. Never.

THE END

© Paul S A Redmond 2007