

Sisterly Advice

By Scribblesinink

A tail of its own dust chasing it, a truck came puttering up the road as the Stewarts finished supper; Martha heard it just as she and Ruth were clearing the last of the dishes away. It being the end of another hot June day, Martha had opened every door and window in the house to allow the evening breeze to blow away some of the heat.

Heading out onto the porch, she lifted her hand to shield her eyes against the setting sun.

"It's Uncle Ray." Ruth followed her out, plopping down on the bench under the kitchen window.

Martha offered her a quick nod of agreement—she too had recognized Ray's green truck—and turned back to wait for her brother to park the truck and climb from the cab.

"Hey, Ruth. Martha." Ray tilted his hat back as he came up the path to the house.

One glance at her brother's face and Martha knew this wasn't just a social visit. Much as he tried not to show it, she knew him well enough to see he was thrumming with nervous excitement. "Ruth, dear, why don't you make your uncle some coffee?"

"Mom...."

Martha pinned Ruth with a sharp look, forestalling the rest of her objection. "And get your father."

Her daughter pursed her lips into a pout before she slipped back into the house; she knew full well she was being dismissed.

"Thank you, honey," Martha called after her. Inwardly, she smiled. Ruth was growing up so fast, yet she still was very much a child—even if she didn't think so herself.

"There's a storm comin'." Ray jerked his head at the distant horizon, where thunder growled among billowing clouds that were painted red and orange and purple with the setting sun.

"Sure is." Hank appeared in the doorway and leaned a shoulder against the jamb. Martha made herself comfortable on the bench, and patted the seat beside her, inviting Ray to sit. He didn't seem to notice, but remained standing, shuffling his feet against the porch

boards.

For a long minute, nobody spoke. The edge of the sun dipped below the horizon, and the wind stirred up a dust devil in the yard. The thunder rumbled again dully in the distance. From the kitchen came the sound of the kettle whistling and cups clanking as Ruth readied their coffee.

It appeared as if Ray wasn't going to explain why he'd come, so Martha prodded gently, "Ray?"

He gave a start, as if he'd been miles away in his mind, and swiveled back to her. "I'm gettin' married next week." He blurted out the words so fast that at first Martha wasn't sure she'd heard him right.

She wanted to ask, *What? Who...? When...?* but the words failed to come, and she could only gape at him, dimly thinking she should snap her mouth shut before a bug flew in—as she always warned Chester might happen.

"I'll be—And you never told us?" Hank was quicker to recover from the shock than she was, though Martha noticed his voice sounded a little squeaky.

Ray snorted, his laugh seeming more self-deprecating than amused at their surprise. "I didn't know myself till this morning."

Though Martha tried not to show it, she felt a little hurt: Ray had never mentioned he'd met a girl. But at the same time, to her surprise, she also experienced a sense of cautious relief: Ray's news alleviated her nagging worry that, after everything that'd happened, he might never find someone to share his life with, start a family with, like she had with Hank. Curiosity overcame her initial shock, and she finally regained her voice. "Maybe you should tell us everything?"

Before Ray could explain further, Ruth came back out, carrying their coffees on a tray. Martha thanked her, before chasing her off again, telling her to round up the boys and make sure they'd washed before bed. Ruth hesitated a moment, her gaze flicking from one adult to the next, and Martha knew she was burning to find out what was going on. She could practically see the questions on Ruth's lips. But she'd taught her daughter better: with a slightly exaggerated sigh the only outward sign of her frustration, Ruth skipped around the house to where the boys' excited voices drifted from the backyard.

"So, Ray." Hank pushed away from the door and took the empty seat next to his wife, picking up his coffee and blowing on it to cool it. "Where did you find this girl?" Martha smiled inwardly; leave it to Hank to ask the question that was foremost in her own mind

as well. Especially as the list of young, unattached women in the area for Ray to choose from was uncomfortably short, with so many young people these days trekking to the cities and jobs in the factories.

"I didn't." Ray offered them another rueful half-grin. "Reverend Case found her." He proceeded to explain: how the reverend had come out to the farm that very morning, and told Ray about this young woman in Denver, the daughter to his good friend Reverend Dunne. It seemed the girl had found herself in the family way, and the child's father wasn't around to make her an honest woman.

Martha wasn't sure what to think about it. Surely, she felt for the poor girl—motherhood was hard enough *with* a husband—but she had so much wanted for Ray to find love: to find someone to cherish him, and whom he could cherish in return, and who'd add the laughter and feminine touch to the old farmhouse that had been missing since their mother had passed.

Pursing her lips, she studied her brother, his shoulders hunched over his coffee mug, and wondered if she'd badly misjudged him. Had Ray truly grown so unhappy, so lonely after Daniel had died that he was willing to marry a stranger and raise another man's son? "And the reverend thinks you'll make a good husband for her?"

Ray darted a sharp look in her direction, before he turned his gaze down and studied the toes of his boots. "I thought.... I thought, maybe this is part of God's plan."

Martha contemplated him for another moment. The way Ray kept glancing up from beneath his lashes at her, Martha realized her blessing was important to him. With Danny gone, she was all the family he had left. She tried to determine how she should feel.

She thought about what he'd said. Faith, and the belief that nothing bad happened without good reason, had been one of the few things that kept them both going after Daniel's death, even if attempting to understand God's ways was often mystifying. Though not entirely convinced by Ray's argument, she allowed herself to smile. "Maybe you're right."

Ray blew out a breath, his features relaxing, and Martha knew she'd made the correct decision. Taking his cue from his wife, Hank got back up and stuck out his hand. "Congratulations, Ray. May you find as good a wife in Miss Dunne as I have here." Martha had gotten up to join the two men and she gave a slightly embarrassed chuckle as he hugged her close with his other arm.

Disengaging herself from her husband's grip, she leaned forward to squeeze Ray's hands

between hers. "Yes, Ray. I hope you'll find what you're looking for."

"Thank you." He cleared his throat. "Um...."

Martha cocked her head. Apparently, Ray wasn't done, and she wondered what else he had to get off his chest.

"I, um, Reverend Case said I need witnesses? For the ceremony? And I was wondering if you and Hank—."

Martha smiled. "Of course we will, Ray. Won't we, Hank?"

Hank nodded. "Happy to."

Ray let out another heavy breath, and finally took Martha's offer to take a seat on the bench. On the horizon, another bolt of lightning struck across the sky; in the grass, a cricket started chirping.

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Despite Martha's initial reservations about Ray's agreeing to marry the unknown Miss Olivia Dunne, she was as busy as any of them as the next few days passed in a flurry of activity to prepare for Miss Dunne's arrival. Ray and Hank hammered and sawed from sun-up to sun-down to put in the oft-talked about but never yet installed indoor plumbing—with hot and cold running water!—while Martha and Ruth scrubbed and dusted the house from top to bottom, making sure it'd be spotless once Miss Dunne—though she'd be Mrs Singleton by then—arrived.

Martha kept herself so occupied that the day of the wedding arrived almost before she knew it. In the morning, she drove by Ray's farm one last time for a final inspection, to make sure everything was in order, and to put the bouquet of wildflowers Ruth had gathered in the master bedroom. "To make Aunt Olivia feel welcome," Ruth had said, and Martha had hugged her tight until Ruth pushed her away with an embarrassed laugh.

After a last review, and right before she returned home to put on her best Sunday dress, Martha reminded Ray, "Don't forget to bring the ring!" He nodded, absently wringing his hands as a sign of how nervous he was. The ring was only their mother's engagement ring, since the time to buy a proper wedding band had been lacking. Besides, they didn't know the girl's size. But at least it'd give Ray something to slip onto Miss Dunne's finger and mark the moment at the ceremony.

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They left the kids at home so as not to overwhelm the newest member of the family. Not having to round the kids up meant Martha and Hank got out the door sooner than usual, and they arrived at the church with about an hour to spare. Reverend Case had just departed for the train station in La Junta to collect Miss Dunne, but Mrs Case allowed them wait in the parlor. Even though they were early, Ray was already there, wearing his best suit. He kept pacing back and forth between the piano and the bookcase, looking more agitated than Martha had ever seen him. "Ray, will you please sit? You're making me dizzy."

He gave her a startled look, before he nodded once. "Sorry." He perched on the edge of the bench next to the piano, rubbing his palms on the knees of his suit. He uttered a quick laugh. "I guess I'm a little nervous."

Hank snorted in amusement. "You think?" He grinned at Ray to convey his sympathy. "It's not every day a man gets married."

"Ray, just remember that Miss Dunne will be quite as nervous. Probably more so." For the first time since Ray had told them the news, Martha properly stopped to consider the plight of the young woman who'd soon be her sister-in-law. Plucked from her home, her family, and sent off to marry a man she'd never even met.... Martha shuddered involuntarily, seeking Hank's hand. He gave her fingers a quick squeeze in return, as if he knew what she was thinking.

The clock on the wall ticked away the seconds, loud in the uneasy silence. "What—?" Ray cleared his throat. "What should I do? When she gets here, I mean."

"Be yourself." Martha straightened her skirt and adjusted her gloves. "You're a good man. She's very lucky, even if she doesn't know it yet."

Ray squinted at her uncertainly, as if he wasn't quite sure whether to believe her. Before he could say anything more, Mrs Case came scurrying back into the parlor, reminding them breathlessly the reverend would be returning soon, and that Miss Dunne's arrival was imminent. Martha and Hank took the hint, and got to their feet.

Hank was already striding from the parlor, but Martha leaned forward to put a hand on Ray's arm in silent support. She could feel him trembling. "We'll see you in a little while," she reassured him

Ray swallowed. "What about...." He blushed and lowered his voice, darting a quick glance at the doorway to make sure Mrs Case was out of earshot. "What about marital duties? Will she expect—?"

What...? Oh... *that*. Martha felt her own cheeks start to glow; it wasn't the sort of thing she'd ever expected to discuss with her brother. But the answer wasn't difficult. "You're a stranger to her, Ray." She kept her voice soft as well. "Give her time to get to know you first. Get to know her."

"Yes." Ray nodded. "Yes, of course." He sounded so relieved that Martha had to bite her lip to keep a laugh from escaping. But Ray was anxious enough as it was; the last thing he needed was thinking his sister was making fun of him. Instead, she gave his wrist a last encouraging pat, and followed Hank out toward the church. Maybe this wedding was part of God's plan; she didn't know. But Martha had every faith that things would work out. After all, she knew her brother.

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