

NELLIE AND PHOEBUS

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Nellie-Ann Armstrong, aka Nellie, came from a poor family. Her grandparents were sharecroppers, and her parents worked menial jobs. Her father worked as a janitor at a public school, and her mother as a nurse's aide. She was brilliant in school from the very beginning. She excelled in all subjects but didn't care for math. In high school, she was a member of the debate team. When she was younger, she didn't participate in the "Spelling Bee" because her teacher then didn't think she was good enough to compete at that level, even though she kept acing local contests. The optic of a rotund, brown girl besting the Anglos primarily influenced that decision. If truth be told, her parents wouldn't have been able to cover the expenses of her travel and accommodation. What she lost in grade school, she made up for it later at the high school level. She sought out opportunities instead of relying on a guidance counselor to inform her. Hence, she partook in summer programs for disadvantaged students and quickly learned the ropes.

Learning the ropes entailed becoming aware of the offerings of the outside world, a paradigm far different from the confines of her rural, destitute, and sleepy community. It also meant playing by the rules of engagement. The bean counters give lots of weight to grades on standardized tests. She plunged full throttle to meet the challenge and came out on top. She missed being a Valedictorian by a hair. Based on her academic record, she was eligible for a full scholarship for the entire four years of undergraduate study. Mindful of the obstacles she faced because of her ethnic background, she held views on the liberal end of the spectrum, favoring social justice. Needless to say, her world centered around the lives of African Americans.

Phoebus, on the other hand, was from a working-class background, and financial obstacles littered his path on his way up. He grew up in an environment where the "N" word was a common occurrence, and membership in supremacist groups was not unusual. Hence, he sincerely believed that America was the product of the hard work of white patriots who fought and thought. Those of a different hue needed to remain a few pegs down the hierarchy per the natural order of life. In his world, only those of Aryan ancestry were worthy of consideration. He was a good student, a lousy athlete, and unsuccessful with members of the opposite gender. His social skills were wanting. He was book-smart but not street-smart. He was of small frame and wore thick lenses as he suffered from myopia. He would proudly refer to himself as a "card-carrying sympathizer of the Conservative movement." He pursued a doctorate in History and wrote a thesis on the successful model of the Southern way that relied on cheap labor to maximize profit and create wealth. In essence, his point of view can be summarized in the following few lines: "Profit always reigns king. Its generation justifies economic activities. To this day, a chasm exists between the Northern states and the Southern ones. In the South, right-to-work laws give more leeway to employers and keep at bay the nettlesome unions that keep seeking higher wages, encroaching on profit and overall wealth creation." This type of reasoning in certain corners gains plaudits but will be readily gainsaid in some other circles. Groupthink tendency would explain his hiring at a conservative bastion where such dogma would be common currency without any fear of a challenge.

Two whiz minds from two different worlds met on a university campus in Tennessee. One belonged to a professor, and the other belonged to a student. This collision had its first skirmish when the student dared to differ from the accepted Gospel by writing in a term paper: "The notion that the nation's conflict started with the errors of judgment of Abe Lincoln is misplaced. The narrative that he was all against slavery runs counter to the facts. He was a complex man and a good case study of the nuances that take place in the course of a long political career. He still

remains the most studied figure in American history for the seminal decisions he made and the twists and turns of his positions. At one time or another, he managed to upset southern and northern whites; he irked abolitionists just as well as freed slaves. This probably represented the delicate balance he had to establish where no group was completely satisfied. Still, he was able to enforce a policy that he was even at first reluctant to consider until it gathered speed, gained a life of its own, and attained a critical mass of credibility and acceptance. Shifting commitment among northern white soldiers forced him to rely more and more on slaves and freedmen and enact concomitant policy decisions....”

This was one of many salvos by a student who had the gumption to offer an alternate view and start challenging his core beliefs. Over time, she participated in three classes of history that he taught, and just like Abe Lincoln, his views evolved. In his specific case, the change veered from a dyed-in-the-wool conservative who wouldn't listen to an opposite perspective to a believer of limited government intervention but acknowledging that racial superiority is a flawed concept based on hidebound iterations and conceits. His crossing of the Rubicon occurred with a final paper that Nellie wrote, and the following paragraph caught his attention with the might of a battering ram:

Quite a few people hold the view of a God-given advantage of being a member of an unadulterated or pure race. One would have to wonder, how many of them would pass a genetic test to see if, indeed, they are as pure as advertised?

Professor Phoebus took this rhetorical query as a personal litmus test, a challenge he ought to meet head-on lest he be considered a spineless wuss. Well, the result was not as advertised. His genetic imprint was far less than 100% Aryan but a hodgepodge of Amerindian, WASP, and, shame of shame, North African ancestry. The initial surprising result begat a second test at a different lab. The outcome didn't change. This sea change impacted him like the reset wrought by an epiphany. His entire life, he considered himself only through the lenses of being pure-blooded and privileged somehow. Having North African blood ran counter to this. Nellie began to have a different meaning to his eyes. She was smart, and her essays kept striking a chord that made him recoil and the cumulative effect amounted to a softening of his heart feelings to his surprise. Since there was an asymmetric association between the two, he kept her at arm's length, but his feelings toward her grew in intensity as time passed.

He didn't choose to act on his feelings and share them with her until she became a graduate student and was some ninety miles away. Phoebus, who had never fared well with women socially in the past, pulled all the stops to court Nellie. The first move was a bouquet of roses she received the first week of school: “I want to wish you the best on your new journey in life.” He signed it as “Skipper.”

Nellie, on the other hand, was hard to come around, and the very idea of chumming with a white person was just about anathema in her world. Her parents always warned her about this group of human beings as “our enemies who don't deserve to be trusted.” Skipper being Phoebus was a surprise just as life-changing to her as his discovery of his genetic background. “We don't choose our parents, and our hearts can jump all fences to seek solace and warmth in a pattern that defies our upbringing and long-held beliefs or prejudices. By the way, my genetic test revealed I have North African ancestry.” Skipper's helping Nellie obtain a spot at a prestigious university and his avowal of romantic leanings toward her mimicked the path of a roller-coaster. For sure, Nellie was not so successful with men because her wits and smarts intimidated quite a few. A courtship was an unusual event in her life. Her head was spinning nonstop that someone of Skipper's

background and political leaning would have any interest in her. Her knee-jerk reflex was a negative response across the board; initially, Skipper's attempts mirrored the empty-handed efforts of Sisyphus. But just like Wilberforce, he persisted. Part of the courtship relied on Skipper's use of Nellie's arguments in assessing Abe to make the case of the evolution of one's feelings or political leanings over the span of time "through twists and turns." "Hatred and love have a way of morphing into one another. In our case, it started as pure hatred, but I learned to appreciate you through your writings, and for reasons I can't explain, but feel very comfortable with, the thought of you makes my heart flutter." Such sentimental sharing would gravitate from email to phone conversations that would last longer and longer. From want to wont, the pattern of communication blossomed. As usually happens, the whole spectrum of intimacy succeeded, from dates to trysts to sleeping over, from strangers to lovers. Each one was changing the other, never mind what others thought of the relationship.

Nellie and Skipper became a well-known open secret, one of many paradoxes of life. He encouraged her to pursue her dream of writing a biography on Theresa Granville. When the rumor mill caught fire about their unholy alliance, neither felt any need to divulge any details about their private life. Nellie and Skipper knew they would face significant headwinds but were willing to face them. In so doing, they have joined a group of brave souls who face disparaging comments or pointed stares from strangers from either side of the aisle. They choose to keep going, well-hinged, unperturbed, like buoys that keep calm in rough waters.