Near Miss

A strange twist of fate had separated them. Would fate reunite them at last?

By Birney Dibble

Now, 58 years later, it's funny. It was anything *but* funny when it happened. I met Edna Baird when I was a junior in medical school. I was just about to make my first attempt at drawing blood from a live patient. Miss Baird accompanied me to the bedside, carrying a small tray that held a rubber tourniquet, a syringe with a No. 18 needle, an alcohol-saturated cotton sponge and two capped vials to receive the blood. She knew it was my first blood-letting, and she was all business.

She set the tray on the bedside table and handed me the tourniquet, followed by the syringe and sponge. I drew the blood without incident. Miss Baird whisked the paraphernalia away and headed for the nurses' station.

I called out, "Thank you, Miss … er … ."

"Baird," she called back.

A few moments later, sitting at a small desk, writing up the lab slips, I glanced up and saw Miss Baird in profile as she made her own notes on the patient's chart. *What a beautiful girl*, I thought. Clean-cut features, somewhat tilted nose, glossy black hair topped with a starched white cap. Big eyes, but not *too* big. Trim figure in a starched white uniform, white hose, white shoes.

I walked over to the nurses' station on the pretext of leaving the lab slips. Actually, I was trying to get a look at her name tag. Miss Edna Baird. *OK. Don't have to write that down.* I also wanted to get a look at the third finger of her left hand. *No ring. OK!* She probably lived in the nurses' home across the street from the medical school.

I called her that night. Yes, she'd love to go to a movie with me Friday night. So we did. And fell in love. Or at least *I* did. I had serious doubts about her affection for me.

We dated every Friday night for the next three months. I'd dated a lot of girls in high school, college, the Navy (1943–1945) and medical school, but no one like Miss Baird. I was calling her "Edna" by now, of course. I remember sitting on a drafty Chicago streetcar headed downtown to the Loop to see a movie when the thought hit me like a sledgehammer: *This is the girl I'm going to marry.*

So I proposed to her that night, she accepted, and we lived happily ever after, right? Not on your tintype (a common response back then).

Birney Dibble and Edna Baird, 1949.

A few weeks later, I called the nurses' home and asked for Miss Baird and was told, "She's gone."

"OK. Will you ask her to call me when she gets in? She knows the number."

"No, sir. I mean she's really *gone*. She moved out this afternoon. She didn't tell me where she was going, but you can probably find out from her roommate, Martha Corey."

I was stunned. She hadn't told me she was leaving, where she was going or when she'd be back. I didn't cry (real men didn't back then), but I sure felt like it. I felt betrayed, rejected. All those months of

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dates and fraternity parties and smooching in the frat living room with the lights out had meant nothing to her? She was the girl I was going to marry!

Martha Corey told me that Edna had taken a job as a camp nurse at a Girl Scout camp in New Mexico. No, Martha didn't have an address. Nowadays, I'd just go on the Internet, find every Girl Scout camp in New Mexico and send an e-mail letter to every one until I found her. Even back then I probably could have done a little research and found her, but it didn't seem worth the effort if she wasn't interested enough in me to let me know she was going away.

School let out for the summer a few weeks later, and I got a job with a trucking company. I started dating other girls, all the time wondering what had happened.

That summer passed without any serious romantic entanglements, and I returned to school around the first of October to begin my senior year. One of my assignments was the orthopedic surgery ward at the University of Illinois Research and Educational Hospital adjacent to the school.

I reported to the ward with several other students and—bingo! One of the first people I met in the corridor was Miss Edna Baird. She took a quick look around (for the head nurse, no doubt), then rushed up to me and took both my hands in hers.

"Birney, why didn't you write?"

"*Write*? How *could* I? I didn't have a clue to where you were!"

Unfeigned dismay crossed her face and she said sadly, "But I left a note. …"

Then she explained what had happened: She had gotten a call from a friend who was spending her summer vacation as a counselor at a Girl Scout camp near Albuquerque, N.M. The camp nurse hired for the summer had turned out to be totally unsuited for the job. Could Edna come down, preferably today or at the latest tomorrow?

She had called my fraternity house, but no one was there to take the call. She was afraid she'd miss her train, so she wrote me a note, giving me an address and imploring me to write. She ran back to the ward where she knew there were patients that I saw every day. She picked out an otherwise healthy young man with a broken leg and left the note with him to give to me the next day.

I remembered the man. But when I went in to see him the day after Edna disappeared, he was gone. The head nurse said he had developed severe psychiatric problems and had been transferred to the psychiatric ward during the night. He never came back to the ward, at least not while I was assigned there. We never found out what happened to the note.

At that point, we had to break up our reunion. There was nothing very professional about a white-clad young man and a white-clad young woman standing in a hospital ward, gazing into each other's eyes. But we made a date for that very night and made up for lost time.

I did ask her to marry me, and she did say yes. Nine months later, we got married, and we stayed married for 52 years.

She's gone now—not to New Mexico, but to her heavenly home, where someday in the not-too-distant future, she'll take my hands in hers and say once again, "Birney!" ❖

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