

Jimmy Stewart

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My grandmother Nanny and I were at the picture show. I hadn't reached two digits yet in age because I distinctly remember my feet couldn't touch the floor of the movie house. Nanny and I were still living in San Antonio, Texas. My mama and daddy had gone ahead to California, where Nanny and I would later wind up. The feature had just begun, and his face lit up the screen. I couldn't take my eyes off him. He was talking to a beautiful lady in a nightclub somewhere. I'm not sure what the movie was. It didn't matter. He had a kind of crooked smile and spoke with a soft . . . what kind of voice was it? A *drawl*? The camera followed him as he stood up. You could see how very long his legs were. I was sure *his* feet never had trouble reaching the floor. "Skinny as a string bean," Nanny said. After the picture show, we went home to the old house, and I couldn't get the man in the movie out of my mind. He wasn't just an actor like all the others I'd seen in picture shows. This man was different. *He spoke to me*. I tried to explain this to Nanny.

"Nanny, I know that man."

"What do you mean, you know him?"

"I just do. He's my friend; we just haven't met yet."

"That's nice, dear. Drink your Ovaltine and go to bed."

Years later in Hollywood—it was 1958, to be exact—I received a call from film director Mervyn LeRoy. He had seen me in a couple of appearances on television and asked if I would meet with him. I was in my early twenties and just getting started, so naturally I was thrilled by his interest. He suggested that I come out to the Warner Bros. studios the next morning and meet him on the soundstage where he was shooting a movie. "Why don't you get here a little before lunch, so you can watch us shoot a scene?"

Wow. I had never been on a real movie set. I owned one decent suit, one good pair of stockings, and one pair of re-soled high heels. My purse didn't match, but it was all I had. I took the bus to Burbank. The studio guard had my name on his list and pointed me toward the soundstage. I waited for the red light out side, which meant "keep out," to stop spinning. It stopped, a bell rang, and I walked into a huge cavern—cameras, lights, cables on the floor, ceilings as tall as skyscrapers, and catwalks everywhere you looked. At the far end of the stage I saw a small set. It was up on a rolling platform about two feet off the ground. It was an office—a desk, one chair, a filing cabinet, and a door. The stagehands were securing it under the spotlights.

Mr. LeRoy came over to me and introduced himself. "Glad you could make it, Carol. We just have a small scene to do before we break. Shouldn't take long." He motioned me to a chair out of the way. "Okay, let's go for one!" An actor climbed up onto the set and took his place behind the desk.

Mr. LeRoy called out to another actor behind the set door.

"Ready, Jimmy?"

"All set back here, Merv."

The voice. I knew it immediately. *Oh my Lord, I'm in the same space as my idol.*

Mr. LeRoy called, "Action!" and Jimmy Stewart walked through the door and presented a badge to the man at the desk.

That was it. End of scene.

"Cut! That's a print!"

The movie they were shooting was *The FBI Story*. Lunch was called, and Mr. LeRoy asked me if I'd like to meet Jimmy. He was still up on the set, and Mr. LeRoy gave me a helping hand as I climbed up onto the platform. We were introduced. I was inches away from the face I had loved since I was a very little girl. He smiled and said he was glad to make my acquaintance. He shook my hand. He looked into my eyes. He seemed in no hurry to go to lunch.

What was it about him that drew me to him in such a deeply personal way? I admired other actors—I was a big fan of a lot of them—but there was something about *him* that was different. I felt it every time I saw him in the movies. And now here he was. What I had seen on the screen was amplified a hundred times in person. The warmth. The humility. The humor. The heart. A lump popped up in my throat, signaling the beginning of tears. Overwhelmed, I knew I had to get out of there before I started to cry. I felt like an idiot.

Trying to be funny or flip or whatever it was, I gave a stupid little salute and piped up with what must be one of the dumbest things I could've come up with: "Well, guess it's time to tie on the ol' feedbag!" With that I whirled around and stepped off the two-foot-high set right into a bucket of whitewash. For a nightmarish moment I just stood there frozen, my back to them with one foot in and one foot out. Frozen.

Not wanting Jimmy Stewart or Mervyn LeRoy to realize this was an accident, I decided to head for the door, hoping (praying) they'd think I'd done this for a laugh. I didn't look back.

I proceeded to drag that bucket, my right foot still in it, clear across the soundstage, about five miles. The whitewash was squishing away in my ruined shoe, making gurgling sounds

accompanied by the scrape of the bottom of the bucket on the floor. *Squish . . . gurgle . . . scrape. Squish . . . gurgle . . . scrape.* I didn't hear any laughter.

I opened the door into the glaring sunlight and pulled my sopping foot and ruined shoe out of the bucket. I truly don't remember what happened after that. Obviously, I must've caught the bus and gone home. I don't remember hearing from Mr. LeRoy again.

Wait, though. There's a happy postscript. Years later I had a successful TV show on the air, which my husband, Joe Hamilton, produced. Hollywood is a small town, and my husband and I got to know Jimmy Stewart and his beautiful, terrifically funny wife, Gloria, through mutual friends, and developed a close relationship.

I remember one time when we had a party at our house and invited the Stewarts. Gloria called to accept, with a caveat. "We're going to be there all right, but I have to warn you, Jimmy doesn't like to stay up late, so don't be upset if we leave shortly after dinner. He likes to be in bed by ten o'clock." No problem. We were just thrilled they were coming.

Our guest list also included Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gormé, Jo Stafford and Paul Weston, and Mel Tormé—all fantastic singers and musicians. After dinner, we all went into the living room, and Paul Weston sat down at the piano. As the musical part of the evening began, I fully expected the Stewarts to say their goodbyes. But Jimmy Stewart didn't get up to go home. Instead, he walked over to the gang gathered around the piano and joined in. It was a sight to behold. There he was, harmonizing with the best of them. Later Gloria came over to me and said, "He's having the time of his life. I don't know how I'm going to get him out of here!" They were the last people to leave the party. It was after one in the morning.

Gloria called the next day to say that anytime we had another party like that to please invite them. Jimmy had had a ball. We saw each other fairly often in those days. Jimmy Stewart even surprised me on the final episode of my variety show, in 1978, by showing up and playing the piano, singing his favorite tune, "Ragtime Cowboy Joe." A few years later, in December 1983, I was thrilled to be in the television segment that saluted him at the Kennedy Center Honors. I sang "You'd Be So Easy to Love," which he had sung to Eleanor Powell in the 1930s movie musical *Born to Dance*. Afterward he sent me the sweetest note.

Dear Carol,

We had a fine Christmas. And the best Christmas present I got was you coming all that way to D.C. to sing to me at the Kennedy Center.

Bless your heart. All my love.

Jimmy

That note is framed on my desk at home.

Jimmy Stewart returned the favor a few years later, when I was being honored by the Variety Club. Again he surprised me. He pulled up a stool, held my hand, and sang “You’d Be So Easy to Love” right back to me. As you can imagine, it was a moment I’ll cherish forever.

At one point I did tell Jimmy the story of the bucket of whitewash. He was kind enough to say he didn’t remember, and maybe he really didn’t. No matter—I got a laugh out of him when I told him about it, even if it was years later.

I will always feel like Jimmy Stewart was a part of me.

There was some strange connection there that drew a little girl to him all those years ago in that darkened San Antonio movie house, when I first realized that I knew him.

And yes, Nanny, he was my friend.

And dreams really can come true.

But I’m getting ahead of myself . . .