

Nolly Penderson receives a visitor

Nolly Penderson turned an upraised, inquisitive brow toward the open doorway where her secretary, receptionist and all around gal, Carol Patterson was standing slightly apart from a small, rather commonplace fellow. Nolly's well appointed, private office lay just to the rear of the front, window strewn vestibule area where Carol's desk, a bank of file cabinets, the copy machine and a massive cupboard of supplies, books and the like was situated. The single printed sheet of cheap white paper the large fair woman held in her hand was one Nolly had just removed from its holder from among the hodgepodge of envelopes lying on her jumbled desktop. "Excuse me, Mrs. Penderson," the girl said hesitantly. The always flawlessly clad Carol in her delicate silky, pink dress and high-heeled sandals looked exceptionally attractive this morning. Nearly as pretty as her own two girls Nolly had thought when the girl had first come to apply for the job. "I thought," Carol said in her gentle, feminine voice, "that you might want to talk with Mr. Wilson."

Nolly's large questioning eyes ran over the slight figure of the rumpled, poorly dressed young man standing just behind Carol. In his chilled red hands the fellow clutched a white shipping box. Nolly noticed 'requested material' had been handwritten using a broad red pen across the lowest section of the cover of the corrugated carton. 'Ah, a writer.' Nolly groped under the desk with her stockinged toe. Drat. Where **were** those shoes? Oh well. Nolly was dressed in her customary navy two piece. Made choosing what to wear in the morning a good bit easier.

Nolly's work 'uniform' was always something navy and always consisted of two pieces. The straight lines of the dark sleeveless dresses served to lengthen and serve to slim her silhouette; at least that was the theory. The jackets completing each ensemble provided little warmth, but did add a businesslike aura to her appearance. Gotta keep in mind that businesslike aura. The particular outfit Nolly wore at the moment was softened with a pretty lace trimmed, wide, white collar. A broad welcoming smile graced the full lips of the large, plain woman. Instantly her countenance became radiant, almost pretty. Nolly's cerulean eyes sparkled with interest and good humor. Everyone who came to know Nolly well believed her absolutely beautiful.

"Please," Smiling her customary sweeping open smile, literary agent Penderson said. "Come right in Mr. Wilson." The shoes would simply

have to wait. Can't see anything under the desk anyway. Nolly rose in a remarkably elegant manner. Who was to know she was standing in her stocking feet? Well, Carol of course. Nolly ignored the smile dancing in Carol's eyes, the child knew Nolly wore her shoes as little as possible. But, certainly not young Mr. Wilson. Her manner was friendly, her smile broad and sincere. Why, she noted, the kid couldn't be a day older than Mike. Nolly extended her hand to the surprised Kevin Wilson. Her grip was firm. After his last go round with a literary agent Kevin Wilson was not at all sure what his reception might be here at this office. The blond woman's voice was surprisingly womanly for so large a woman.

"Carol, dear, will you bring us some nice, fresh coffee, and..." Nolly Penderson ran practiced eyes over the man's clothing, noted the stubble of beard, the discouraged, anxious look upon his face. "And some of those wonderful little sandwiches we have hidden away there in the back of the fridge," she noted the silent widening of Carol's eyes. Nolly's eyes twinkled, 'must not be a thing in the fridge at all.' Nolly Penderson's expansive honest smile never wavered. "And," she continued in that same cheery tone, "do we have any of that super chocolate cake left?"

Nolly noted the swift flash of appreciative gratitude appear in the man's slightly watery, wind reddened eyes. 'Down on his luck a bit it seems, suspect the youngster hasn't had a bite to eat all day, maybe more even,' Nolly reflected. "I'll just bet you could do with a good hot cup of this glop that I call coffee while we talk." Her manner brisk, purposeful, Nolly poured two cups of black steaming liquid from the small pot she kept on the sideboard just behind her desk. Nolly resumed her place behind the imposing oak desk she had brought with her from Riverton. The desk had been Walt's, made him seem closer and helped her feel not quite so alone. She smiled, leaned forward and said, "Now, please tell me what you have there for me why don't you dear?"

The young fellow hurried to seat himself in the chair Nolly indicated. Thankfulness shone plainly on the pinched, wind chilled face as Kevin Wilson reached a shaky hand for the mug of coffee. Nolly appeared to take no notice at all at the man's 'down at the heels' appearance. Without a word Carol smiled warmly at Kevin Wilson. She sent a small wink toward Nolly. The petite girl turned and walked calmly toward the small 'coffee' room located at the rear of the room. Once there, out of sight of the pair in the private office, she sprinted through the 'coffee room' doorway and sprang across the cluttered room before

darting straight through the outer door and dashing along the sidewalk toward the small sandwich shop located in the rear of the brick structure. Mary Herbert grinned when she noticed Carol come bursting from Nolly's back doorway. "Heads up Leo," she hollered to her husband of nearly four decades. "Nolly's done it again I reckon."

Without a word, the tall, balding Leo grabbed a handful of sliced bread and began expertly slapping Mayo and mustard upon them. He didn't need to hear more. Nolly Penderson was always needing refreshments for one more down and out, hungry writer or another. Good thing the old gal was so successful in finding publishers for her 'babies' or she would sure go broke with the feeding of them. Even before Carol entered the diner, Leo had a stack of hearty ham and cheese, and roast beef goodies put together and stacked in a flat, open carton. He looked at the batch of sandwiches for a moment.

'Oh what the he..' the retired chief petty officer muttered to himself. Quickly the big man picked up a huge handful of the steaming fried chicken he had just taken from the fryer. Leo wrapped the warm crispy chicken in foil before adding it to the box holding the sandwiches. Hmmm. Leo paused.

He looked at the three freshly frosted cakes on the counter before him. Herbert reached a tentative hand toward a coconut confection before stopping to reconsider. 'Probably chocolate cake..' He mused. 'Nolly likes to give 'em chocolate cake.' Deftly he whacked an uncut cake in half. Leo Herbert grinned as he added the dessert to the growing pile of provisions. He chuckled. 'May need a bigger carton.' A tub of potato salad and another of thick, fragrant veggie soup completed the 'care package.'

"Mary," Carol wheezed. The bell over the door chimed merrily. The girl was nearly out of breath. She leaned against the counter to steady herself. Carol gulped the cup of tea Mary handed her. "Thanks, you've saved my life Mary," the girl giggled. Carol Patterson had worked for Nolly Penderson for almost two years. This was not the first mad, hurried dash she had made to the nearby sandwich shop. Her eyes widened as the laden Leo came round from behind the half wall separating the cooking area from the rest of the shop.

"Saw you coming honey." Mary said with a husky chuckle. "Only one reason for you to come a tearing out of Nolly's back door and come a running here like you just did." Carol nodded; her smile brought deep dimples to her cheeks. Leo handed the food filled carton to the

breathless girl. "Here you go, sweetie. Reckon you don't have time for another cup of tea for yourself do you honey?" Leo Herbert patted Carol on the shoulder as she shook her head in answer to his offer. The big man chuckled again; his broad grin included both his wife and Nolly Penderson's dedicated secretary. "Reckon Nolly's got herself another 'baby' she needs to feed."

Carol smiled her thanks. She nodded as she accepted the well-filled box. Leo watched in concern as she struggled with the heavy carton. "Not too heavy for you honey? Need me to come carry it to the office for you?" She was already on her way to the door. "You know Nolly." Carol spoke over her shoulder. With any luck at all she would be able to get back to the 'coffee room,' get the sandwiches and chicken onto a tray and ready to take in to Nolly's office before Mr. Wilson became aware that she had gone. Nolly should be chatting away. Going over manuscripts and plying Mr. Wilson with coffee.

Watching the girl trotting past their wide street window toward the front of the building, the middle-aged pair standing together behind the spotless counter chortled. Both grey heads nodded. Well, what hair that was left on Leo's shiny pate was grey. Leo and Mary Herbert did know Nolly for sure. From the moment Nolly Penderson had moved into the neighborhood, **everyone** knew Nolly. There was no ignoring the tall, blonde, rawboned Nebraska woman who quite simply never met a stranger.

She, the three cats, two dogs, a parakeet and more boxes than any of them had seen in a long time had moved into the ample apartment located on the floor over the old sweet shop where her literary agency office was these days situated. Leo still got a chuckle each time he thought about the sign Nolly had hung in the window. The big X across the word literary and the word 'book' handwritten beside it left little doubt as to the plain, no nonsense nature of the woman whose office this was.

Within hours of moving into the spacious second story apartment, Nolly Penderson had come striding into the sandwich and soup shop Leo and Mary had run for nearly 40 years. Both Herberts had liked Nolly immediately. How could they not? Nolly introduced herself, explained what she was about and became instant friends with the pair. It did not take anyone very long to realize that there was not a deceptive bone in Nolly's large body. What the woman said was truth, as she knew it. And, she was not a bit too proud to come tell you when she had been mistaken.

Nolly had begun feeding her 'babies' nearly from the first day a hopeful writer had entered her downstairs office. Not many literary agents actually met personally with unpublished, expectant writers. Most of Nolly's colleagues only received amateur's manuscripts by mail. Nolly advertised locally and in 'writer's' publications and any hack that had bus fare was welcome to come and talk with her in person. And, Nolly's record of getting things published was becoming almost legend. She was fast becoming one of the busiest agents in the business. It was Arlington's gain when Nolly Penderson had decided to make the move from Nebraska to New York City to Virginia.

The hum of voices met Carol Patterson as she stepped through the doorway. 'Excellent, Nolly and Mr. Wilson are still talking and he is none the wiser.' The girl soon had the sandwiches ready to carry into Nolly's office.

Tries to talk with Toby Alberts

Nolly Penderson sat with her full pink lips compressed for a long moment before she slowly replaced the telephone receiver to its cradle. Without saying a word the aggrieved woman accepted the cup of steaming, fragrant jasmine tea an ever-perceptive Carol carried to Nolly's desk as the short-lived, unsettling conversation was coming to a close. The fragile porcelain cup strewn with violets was the one Carol brought out whenever a rather distasteful circumstance had arisen. And, if the situation was *really* distasteful, then Carol brewed up some of the aromatic jasmine. 'Happiness tea' the bubbly girl had called it that first time. And, 'happiness tea' the brew remained.

The pair continued to bring the concoction out whenever they needed an encouragement 'pick me up.' "Well," Nolly sat gazing into the steaming broth. She did consider the just completed call sure had been a bit distasteful, that and more than a little disquieting. Toby was one odd duck. Carol quietly refilled the cup. Nolly sipped her tea silently. But, she mused, at least the conversation with Toby did completely settle the question of what was to be done with the pile of manuscripts Kevin Wilson had brought to her a week ago.

"Toby dear, this is..." Nolly had begun.

The voice, which broke in abruptly on the other end of the line, was flat and it seemed to Nolly that Toby's tone was unresponsive and without either interest or emotion. Toby Alberts' indifferent, staccato

statement stabbed at Nolly's ear "I do recognize your voice Nolly." The pause before the word voice had been slight, but very apparent. Nolly smiled, she heard the meow of a cat sounding faintly in the background.

"Wonderful." Nolly replied in her too loud, too hearty plain's drawl. "Well, dear," Nolly reached across the desk to move the box holding the manuscripts closer to where she was sitting. "I wanted to talk with you about the most extraordinary thing that has just taken place here." Nolly had smiled her large, honest smile, waiting for Toby Alberts to reply she next slid her fingernail under the edge of the cover and opened the manuscript box. There on the top of the stack of compositions was the cover letter from the author. It, along with the carton itself was addressed to Toby.

The line remained absolutely silent. At last, Nolly took a deep breath, "Toby?"

"Yes," Toby Alberts' carefully cultured voice came sizzling through the telephone line. "I'm really awfully busy Nolly." Impatience dripped from her tone, "Do excu..."

Nolly had immediately gotten to the matter of the small cardboard box Kevin Wilson had brought to her the week before. The youngster had told the book agent how he had found the package lying in a trash bin behind an apartment building across town. Kevin had been baffled. As young Wilson looked into the tall, fair woman's sympathy filled blue eyes he had felt no need to hide the facts from her. Kevin felt he might be totally open and honest with the large, uncomplicated woman. Kevin just knew that Mrs. Penderson would understand and would not judge him badly when he told her exactly why he had been rummaging around in the trash bin.

He took a breath, then confessed to Nolly that he was in fact scavenging the bin. He had been looking for something he might be able to sell, when he had come across the small, corrugated carton. He said had peeked inside and found the box was filled with manuscripts for children's stories. At first the youngster thought there must be some mistake. He was sure that the carton had been put into the bin by mistake. But, upon going up to the apartment listed in the address on the lid of the container Kevin had soon been turned away by the tall, imperious woman who answered the door.

No, she had said. Her voice was firm, chilly, and filled with ire that he dared to question her decision. There was no mistake the woman insisted. The manuscripts were not what she expected if an author were going to be accepted as her client, and she told Kevin, she had indeed put the lot into the bin to be carried away by the trash man. Without another word, Kevin related, the slim, cultivated woman standing in the apartment entrance had firmly shut the door. Kevin had been left holding the white manuscript box and standing in the hallway outside her closed entry door. Kevin told Nolly he had stood staring at the doorway that had been shut firmly in his face for a moment longer before he shrugged and walked away.

At first the befuddled young man had thought perhaps he should just put the carton right back into the bin. But, after thinking about it for a while, Kevin decided he would try to take it to another agent. He decided he would just look in the phone book and if he found a literary agent listed he would call. Kevin thought the writer had obviously spent quite a bit of time preparing the work. Maybe another agent would be more receptive to them. Couldn't hurt. And, that was how he had found Nolly's name, by looking in the phone book. And, he had been surprised to discover that she actually had an office right here in the area. And so, here he was. And he sure understood how it is to hope and wait for something good to come along.

Not like he really had anything else to do right then anyway. Might as well try to do something to help someone. The pickings from the bin had been might slim, 'if I can't help myself,' he had considered, 'at least I can do something for the woman who had spent time writing and mailing out the package.' Kevin Wilson had lost his job nearly a month ago. 'Downsized.' The last of his money was sitting in his checking account. That was the reason why he was scrounging around in the trash bin. He had to find something to sell. There was not enough left in the account to pay this month's rent. Not that it mattered much. His building had been condemned and was slated to be razed. Without the money for a deposit for a new apartment the matter of rent became moot.

Nolly Penderson had willingly accepted the small mailing package filled with manuscripts from the slight man. He sat drinking mug after mug of strong, hot coffee and hungrily munching sandwiches, fried chicken, the tub of soup and most of the potato salad while Nolly quickly read through several of the smaller compositions. They were not as polished as some she had read, Nolly considered, but they did not seem all that bad. Nolly read the cover letter and found the hopeful

writer of the lot lived in Southeast Missouri. Apparently she had taught school, many of the manuscripts seemed to be children's stories and were meant for young children.

Kevin gratefully accepted the last of the sandwiches, cake and potato salad to take along home with him as he left Nolly's agency office. At last Kevin said good bye and set out on foot for his own modest apartment. After the slender young man had left the building, Nolly continued reading through the last of the manuscripts he had delivered. Nolly finished her reading, carefully replaced the papers back into the carton and considered what she might do next. It had taken her a week to decide.

It was then that Nolly had placed the call to Toby. Actually, Nolly had rather suspected the call might go pretty much as it had. But, disturbing as it was, the consultation did clear up any mystery as to the carton and why it had been where Kevin might find it. Toby's voice was icy, she assured Nolly she had no claim or interest at all with either the finder, the box or it's contents. She had, Toby stated, already sent a post card to the writer of the pieces explaining that the manuscripts were not ones she would be able to place. And, with that said, Toby abruptly said good by and hung up the phone.

Nolly sat with the dial tone buzzing in her ear for several moments before she made her decision regarding the manuscripts.

Nolly talks with publisher

"Hello Hugh, Nolly Penderson here." Nolly's cheery voice and lilting laughter accompanied her words; "I've got a nice little batch of manuscripts I would like for you to see." Her merry laughter rang. "Kind of a fun little tale around how I came to have them too."

Hugh Allison was one of those dapper gentlemanly types Nolly had most enjoyed meeting since she had decided upon becoming a book agent. Following Walt's death the large plain woman had been torn as what in the world she was to do with herself. At forty three Nolly was still a young woman. She was she thought too young to just twiddle her thumbs or to fade off into obscurity. Twenty plus change

years as a bank officer were as many as Nolly Penderson had ever intended for that particular endeavor. And, Walt's death had come during Nolly's twentieth year at State Bank and Trust of Riverton. Sitting around the house with nothing more stimulating than a new knitting stitch to master held little allure for tall pleasant woman.

She could continue to live in the big old two-story house in the town where she and Walt had lived for so many years. It was the house where the Penderson kids had grown up. What a noisy, fun time that had been Nolly remembered, especially when they were all teenagers, yes, noise and teenagers sure went together. And, Harry at the bank assured her she need not consider giving up her position, even though her resignation was typed and laying on his desk for a full month before Walt's death. No, the decision to leave the bank had nothing at all to do with the fact that her husband had died. Now the decision to leave Nebraska, that was another matter.

Staying in Riverton held a certain attraction to be sure. It was where she was known, respected. Both she and Walt and their parents before them had been born and grew up right there in the little farming community. Her kids, her's and Walt are had been born there as well. But, Nolly thought she needed to step out. Try something new. It would have been easy to settle into a routine where she was known and loved. But Nolly was sure she would learn to deal with living without Walt sooner if she had a brand new life somewhere else. The refuge and security of the bank and the town where she was so well know would allow her too much time to think. No, Nolly decided she had to have something brand new. Something she had never done before to cause her to work hard and not spend too much time thinking about Walt's death.

The Penderson's four children were grown and did not need her 'mothering' or 'smothering' them. The two girls were married and Mike was soon to be. Terry laughed and said he was married to the Navy. Not that Nolly had disliked her existence with Walt and the kids. Nolly had always enjoyed her life as wife and mother, but at the moment, both of those situations were now gone. And, she reflected, not just for the moment. Walt was dead, the kids grown and that part of her life was gone for good. No, it was time to move on. Walt's lingering illness and ultimate death coupled with the last of their four children moving from home to begin his own life had left Nolly alone and seeking something altogether new for herself to do.

Although she had not been aware at the time of their first meeting, publisher Hugh Alliston was originally from the next county to the one where Nolly Penderson herself had been born and raised there in central Nebraska. Nolly had thought she might enjoy trying her hand at being a book agent. Thus, during the year following Walt's death nine years ago, she had first moved to New York City. And there she had lived for three years. The years having been lived in New York City had never completely erased the 'small country' attitude from either Hugh or Nolly.

The chieftain of Harlen Publishing grinned. He immediately recognized the warm and friendly, womanly voice on the other end of the line. That Nebraska accent came across the line as clearly as a bubbling spring bubbled over the stones on his grandfather's farm. Nolly Penderson. There was never a doubt when Nolly was on the other end of the line. He heard her happy girlish giggle. Well why not. The day was not hectic enough or busy enough already was it. Nah, not his day. Why, didn't Hugh Alliston always have more than enough hours in his day? Hugh's already wide grin broadened. There was not another literary agent anywhere for whom Hugh would take the time.

"Another of your hopeful babies, Nolly?" He chuckled. "Sure honey, you go right ahead and send them over. I'll take a look at them for you." He paused. Hugh had known Nolly long enough to realize the woman was now grinning from ear to ear, waving the phone around and giving a thumbs up to Carol Patterson whom would be waiting nearby. "Umm, Nolly," a wicked mien settled upon the man's handsome countenance. Hugh just had to add, "How bad are they?"

"Now Hugh."

Even before she had reached for her telephone, Nolly had felt quite positive that Hugh would accept at least a part of the manuscripts to look over for her. Actually, Hugh had never turned down a single one of the projects, which Nolly had sent to him. The pair continued their friendly, some professional, much of it non-business, chatting for the better part of an hour. Hugh and his wife Elaine, as was Nolly, were the parents of four grown children. Widowed now for nearly a decade, Nolly was not merely chattering.

Making 'small talk' was a positively useless endeavor as far as Nolly Penderson was concerned. She was truly interested in Hugh, his wife and in each of the young Allistons. Actually, it soon became quite

evident to all those who came to know Nolly well, that Nolly was truly interested in everyone and in everything she came upon.

"Tell you what Hugh," Nolly's affable, cheerful voice vibrated with good-humored pleasantry. "I was thinking," she said, "thinking that you and Elaine might be in the mood for some fine home cooking. Nebraska style. Reckon you two might be just a bit tired of the Nooo Yawk City stuff." Nolly's husky cackle shot from the receiver. Hugh grinned. "How about Friday, say about sixish? You kids can plan to spend the weekend. Just take it easy, sleep in, let me bribe you with some good decent grub."

Hugh and Elaine could board the train and zip right down to Arlington. Be good for him to get away. He had been so busy recently; the journey down to see Nolly would provide a nice break. Elaine would be delighted. She had been after him to take a few days off. A pleasant weekend in Virginia would be just the thing for them. The fact that Nolly was such a great cook was just an added bonus. Hugh would have been delighted to go for the visit if he knew they would only feast on take out hamburgers.

Hugh Alliston waved a wildly frantic hand toward his secretary. Marla had already begun going over her appointment schedule. Hugh Alliston's patient administrative assistant was used to being expected to suddenly cancel appointments, pacify and smooth things over and the like whenever Nolly Penderson called her boss. Well, if it were anyone else Hugh would not cancel, and, if cancellations were necessary for any other person Marla would not feel nearly so kindly disposed to do so. But, for Nolly Penderson. Well, that was an altogether different matter.

Smiling warmly at Hugh, Marla nodded. Picking up the calendar on his desk, Hugh pointed to Friday's date. A bemused expression settled upon her lips. Again she picked up the appointment book. Oh good, only five calls to make, a luncheon meeting to reschedule and three agents to pacify. Could be worse. A whole lot worse.