

# OH, NELLIE

By Jo Ann Moore

I am driving through the beautiful countryside on my way to Charlottesville, Virginia. It is a cool crisp morning in December and the sun is shining on the barren trees. This is not my first trip to Charlottesville; I have been here twice before with my friend from New York, Adah. Adah Anita Lotti is a medical student at the University of Virginia. She will be graduating next spring and she will be the first woman to become a doctor at UVA. We are old friends, and she is quite a remarkable woman. So remarkable that I have found myself moving down here. Even if nothing develops between us, we will still always be friends. Moving down here is a good decision either way because I have a job and an apartment waiting for me. On one of my previous trips, Adah and I visited a local speakeasy, The Town Club. That's how I met Nellie, the owner of the club and the drug store that is the legitimate business upstairs. Nellie and I became instant friends and she offered me a job as the bartender in The Town Club. Nellie is the type of person that makes you feel warm and welcomed as soon as you meet her. When talking to Nellie it feels like she's giving you a big warm hug. I don't know if it's her smile or the way she looks at you, but it seems to come from deep inside. I'm looking forward to the change; it is time for me to leave the city.

I park my car on Main St. and I see several locals sitting out front of Miller's Drug Store. Some of them are down on their luck, and Nellie makes sure they don't go without food and that everyone has a warm place to stay. It is a comfort

to them, sitting outside her store. I think the feeling is mutual between them and Nellie. She is well liked and respected by everyone in town, but you can tell she is a lonely soul and helping them brings joy to her already big heart.

I get out of my car, walk up, and nod good morning to the gents. They nod back. I wonder how many of them know what's going on in the cellar of the drug store. As I walk into Miller's, I see the stairwell that goes to the two apartments to the left just in front of the main door. That's where I will be living, on the second floor; the third floor apartment is vacant. In the drug store I am met with a variety of fragrances that are overwhelming my senses. I can't distinguish the perfumes from the soaps. On the left is the counter and behind the counter is Nellie. I have never seen her in the daylight before, but she is still a striking woman for her age; she must be in her early fifties. She has not had an easy life; her husband died of influenza just six months after they were married. That was thirty years ago and she has never remarried. She has no children. The only thing her husband left her was this drug store and a lot of debt, but that didn't stop Nellie. She is a fighter who has done everything to survive, and she has done it well. Behind the staircase that goes up to the apartments is a broom closet and when you open the door you see the mop, bucket and brooms that are used to clean the drug store. You would never see it unless you knew, but if you push past the cleaning supplies and knock on the wall in a special way; one slow, hard knock followed by

three fast, tap, tap, taps, the back wall miraculously opens and you walk down the steps into another world. This other world is not available until later in the evening, after the drug store closes and the streets are empty. She opens every day but Sunday because Nellie would never open The Town Club on Sunday; after all, she is a good Christian woman. She goes to services every Sunday at the First United Methodist Church and spends the rest of her Sundays helping at the church.

Nellie sees me come in and comes around the counter to greet me. She throws her arms around me and gives me a great big bear hug. "Boy am I glad to see you, but you must be exhausted

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after your long trip. Why don't you take today and go get settled in? Take your time and relax; I don't need you to start work until tomorrow night. It's Friday and the drug store will be busy. Come down at 5:00 and you can help me close up while I show you around." She gives me a wink, and I know that not only am I helping her close up the drug store but I am working downstairs and starting my new job. Let the good times roll.

I unpack quickly; I only have one suitcase and one box. I decide to take a walk around the town and have dinner on the corner near the university. After a much needed good night's sleep, I wake up in the early afternoon. After all, I am a bartender, and I am used to being up until the wee hours of the morning and sleeping most of the day.

At least now I am back on schedule for the new job.

I get dressed in my best black pants and a new pressed shirt. I want to look good, and it doesn't hurt with the ladies or the tips. I go down the narrow stairs and walk into the drug store where Nellie is again behind the counter. The druggist has left for the day so it's just me and her. Millers is a long narrow store with tile on the floor, a long wooden counter on the left and wooden shelves all around the room filled to capacity with pills, bandages, soaps, lotions, liniment, and what seems like everything else you can imagine. Nellie is in her usual attire, a muted gray-blue dress that is modest and unflattering. "Well hello there," she says, "I thought I may have lost you; haven't seen you since you got in yesterday."

I respond, "I was just taking it easy and getting ready for tonight."

"Well I will be done here shortly and then I will show you the ropes. Why don't you give me a hand and sweep up the place. You know where the broom is, don't you?" She gives me a big knowing smile and I get busy.

At 6:00 pm on the dot, Nellie and I walk out and she locks the drugstore door behind us. The apartment door and cleaning closet are on the other side. She takes a quick glance up and down the street and we disappear into the broom closet. Inside she pushes past the brooms and there in the top left corner is a keyhole. You would never see it if you didn't know it was there. She unlocks the door and hands me the key, saying, "from now on this is your job, every day except Sunday, same time. Okay?"

"Yes ma'am," I respond, both out of respect and just a little fear.

"Don't call me ma'am," Nellie snaps back at me followed by her big smile. I respond with a smile but make a mental note not to do that again. We descend down the dark stairs and when we reach the bottom, Nellie reaches up and pulls the cord to the light.

The room is big, long like upstairs, but much wider. The basement must be the length of three buildings on the street. A good place for a good time, as I see it. As I look around the room, I see it is not fancy. It has a wooden floor with ten to twelve tables and eight wooden chairs around each table. There is a big dance floor and a good size stage with an upright piano. On the walls are hung interesting paintings of buildings and scenes from around Charlottesville. I recognize a painting of Lee Park because the park is right around the corner. Along the left wall is the bar which is about half the length of the room and looks similar to the wooden counter in the drugstore upstairs. Behind the bar is a big mirror and a small ice box. I walk around behind the bar and start pulling out everything I will need for the night. "We open at 7:00 pm but it doesn't start getting busy until around 9:00. If you are ok, I will be back later."

"I'm fine," I answer, "I know my way around a bar."

"Good," says Nellie, "Oh, I almost forgot: the guys will be here in about a half hour with the liquor. Their names are Kermit and Sam. They're a little rough around the edges but they are good guys. They are coming from Franklin County; just listen for their knock at the door upstairs. It's the only way in or out. The money is in the cash box

under the counter."

"Don't worry, Nellie; I'll take care of everything."

I continue to work, polishing glasses and putting out what I will need for the night and before long I hear the infamous knock at the door: one slow, hard knock followed by the tap, tap, tap. I run up the stairs and unlock the door. Two big burly guys are standing there wearing overalls, big heavy coats and hats, and they have a dusting of snow on them. The taller one steps forward and introduces himself, "Hey, I'm Kermit Shifflett and this here is Sam Coles. You must be the new bartender from New York City that Nellie was tellin' us 'bout." He sticks out his hand and gives me a great big smile, a genuinely warm and friendly smile even though three of his front teeth are missing.

I shake hands with Kermit and offer my hand to Sam, "Nice to meet you both," I say to them. Sam smiles warmly but doesn't say anything. "Well come on in; it's cold out there and it looks like the snow's coming faster."

Sam finally speaks, "Let us get this stuff in here, there is nobody on the street now, just leave the door unlocked and we'll bring it down." I do as he says and go back to work. Sam and Kermit bring in six wooden crates of quart jars that all contain what appears to be the same clear liquid. Right behind them stands another fellow that introduces himself as the doorman for the evening and a woman who is to be the waitress. She is a pretty young thing, thin with a twinkle in her eye. I bet she can cause some trouble given half a chance. Working behind bars for the last ten years you get to know people and you have a sixth sense about them just by looking at them.

I offer the envelope of money to the men and Kermit quickly reaches for it and puts it in his pocket without counting it. They both have a seat at the bar and order a drink of their own 'shine. "Nellie don't charge us nothin'," says Kermit. I don't doubt him but I will check with Nellie when she comes in.

Looks like this is going to be the easiest bartending job I have ever had. We only have three things to serve, moonshine, moonshine with water or moonshine with Coca-Cola. Not like in the New York bars with all those fancy 'cocktails' and the ten or more different liquors we could get from the mob. At least here I won't have to worry about those gangsters anymore. I think I'm going to like it here.

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Around 9:30 the knocking at the door is getting pretty steady and the crowd is getting bigger and louder. Not long after, Nellie comes back and she is all decked out for the evening. She is looking good for her age; shoot, she is looking good even for a younger woman. Dressed in a bright red dress and high heeled shoes, her face and hair are all done up. She walks up to me and I give her a long slow whistle. I ask, "Something special going on tonight?"

Nellie ignores that comment and says with a wink, "You don't know me well enough for that, young man, and what would my fellow say if he heard you whistling at me like that?"

I respond, "I think he would agree with me,"

and we both laugh. Before it starts to get busy the waitress tells me about Nellie's boyfriend who is the pastor of the new Methodist church on the other side of Lee Park. No wonder she spends so much time at the church. Pastor Robert Deloy was born in Delaware and raised the son of a drunk. He had a hard childhood and left home as soon as he could and eventually went to seminary school. The Methodist church sent him to Charlottesville about three years ago to oversee the construction of the new location of the church that opened last month. Nellie has been a member of that church before they began construction and started seeing Pastor Deloy about two years ago. Methodists don't mind drinking; they just don't always do it out in the open. Pastor Deloy is 'wet' by nature and he

thinks this whole prohibition thing is a farce. He thinks all those women in his church that belong to the Temperance Society are just wound too tight and don't have anything better to do with their time. Of course if they ever found out Nellie owns a speakeasy, and he is a patron and her beau, they would probably have him run out of town.

As the evening progresses the crowd is steady with a wide variety of people. There are farmers still wearing their overalls with mud on their shoes, townspeople, professors and students from the university and my dear friend, Adah. By day, Adah is an earnest, conservative student. She has to be or she wouldn't be taken seriously by her professors and the other male students. She has what it takes to make it. She works hard all day

and most nights, but when she gets a Friday night off from school and the hospital she takes the rare opportunity to let loose and unwind. When I knew Adah back in New York, before medical school, she was young and wild. A real roaring twenties flapper. She brings that other side of her down here: her dress, hairstyle, and make-up stand out and adds more variety to the already eclectic clientele.

A bunch of guys have come in and set up instruments on the stage, from what I can see there is a guitar player, banjo, mandolin and fiddle. Pastor is sitting at the piano; I guess he has many talents. They started playing some bluegrass music and I can feel the crowds pulse surge with the music as I continue to pour drinks and collect the money. The dance floor is full on the first tune; I have never seen dancing like this in the city, but everyone is having a good time.

Kermit and Sam have been sitting at the bar the entire evening and Kermit has really been putting down the 'shine. It should be ok; I'm sure Sam will look out for him. Nellie walks up to the bar, "How's it going on your first night?"

I reply, "It's going great Nellie, nice group of people."

Kermit turns to her and says, "Hey Nellie, how about a dance?"

She looks at him cautiously and says, "Ok, but just one, Kermit." They take off for the dance floor just as the group of musicians change. Now there are three different guys on the stage playing a guitar, a sax and drums and now they are playing jazz. Pastor is still hanging in there on the piano. Adah is sitting at the bar and starts talking to Sam. He has had a few drinks but he doesn't appear

drunk. Sam seems like a real southern gentleman from southwest Virginia. Before long Adah and Sam are headed to the dance floor. For a moment it feels like I am back in New York watching Adah dance in her flapper outfit to the jazz music, but then I look around the room and there is no doubt I am in Charlottesville. The jazz gives a buzz to the atmosphere of the joint; the place is jumping as the night goes on. The smoke in the room is getting thicker and the people are getting drunker. This moonshine is some crazy stuff; we don't see it much back in the city.

Nellie dances several songs with Kermit. I don't think she does it because she likes it; she does it because it's good business. Keep your suppliers happy and keep your supply coming and your prices down. I look over at Pastor once or twice and he doesn't look too happy about it. There isn't much he can do because he is here but he has to keep a low profile. He isn't the only one in the place having to keep a low profile; I see the mayor and the president of the university in the crowd. The customers here are from all walks of life, from rich to poor, and they are all here for one reason: to have a good time and a little drink.

It is a little past midnight and I hear shouting on the dance floor. I guess Pastor has had a few too many after all and Kermit is getting a little too free with his hands on Nellie. Next thing I know the Pastor dives across the dance floor and lands his fist right in Kermit's nose. Kermit is not expecting this and is taken back for a minute (him being so drunk doesn't help), but he is a good ole country moonshiner and he can handle his liquor and take a punch. He responds within seconds and gives one right back. Before you know what's happening every man in the bar is throwing punches.

I don't think they care much who they hit; they are just caught up in the moment. Most of the women are huddled up at the end of the bar except for Adah; she is by my side, and Nellie is on top of the bar yelling at the top of her lungs for everyone to stop fighting and sit down. At this point no one can hear her over the roar of the fighting.

Sam has been sitting at the bar this entire time and finally says, "I guess I better get Kermit out of here before he hurts someone." Sam moseys over to Kermit in the middle of the crowd and grabs Kermit's arm and out of instinct Kermit turns around swinging and lands his fist right in Sam's eye. Before he can recover, Sam gets punched by two other guys. As some of the people start to leave, I see the mayor, the university president, and a couple of local cops take off. No way are they going to get caught up in this.

Sam is raging mad after getting hit three times and he pulls a pistol out from his coat and points it at some guy in front of him. "Get outta my way. We're leavin'," he says, but before he could get out the last word, two guys see the gun and jump on him trying to get it away.

The gun goes off and everything stops. There is total silence. The men start moving away from the dance floor one by one. When the floor is cleared there is one man lying in the middle of the floor, face down in a pool of blood. It is Pastor Deloy. Nellie jumps down from the bar and runs over to him crying and screaming. She falls to the floor sobbing and lies down next to him. Adah comes from around the bar and kneels down on his other side. She feels for a pulse and then looks at me and shakes her head. He is dead. I come around and kneel next to Nellie. I try to get her up

but she would not let go, she grabs onto his coat and would not release her grip. I don't want to call the police; it would be the end of Nellie. The customers that are left are mostly locals and friends of Nellie. They think it would be best to move his body down the street and into the alley. It would be best for him and for Nellie. The church will never have to know where he was shot. Several of the men and I cover him up, then we lift his body and take it outside into the cold night air. One of the guys' checks around outside and there is no one around so we proceeded to carry his body down the alley. We lay him in the dark alley next to a bunch of trash cans. The alley is hidden on both sides by brick buildings. It will be late Saturday morning before anyone finds the body.

As we lay him down one of the men says, "We should take everything out of his pockets so it looks like a robbery." That is a good idea but everyone turns and looks at me. I don't bother to protest; I just want this to be over and done. I kneel down and go through his pants pockets and remove his wallet, keys and some change. I check his coat pockets and there is nothing else. "Don't forget his inside coat pocket," someone says. I reach inside his coat pocket and there is a small box. I pull it out and open it. Inside is a diamond engagement ring. This is the night that Pastor Deloy was going to propose to Nellie. ▲