The Nightingale Sang On

By David Williams

Martin switched on his bedside lamp and pulled back the covers. Fluffing his pillow, he climbed into bed for what he knew would be the last time. He could feel it—not pain, not fear, but something deeper. The hush before the last note in a long, beautiful song.

He sighed. Happiness tinged with melancholy.

Wrapped in silky sheets and the quiet grace of home, he lay on his side of the bed, as he had for five years since Julia died. He'd never once strayed into the space she once filled. It remained sacred, undisturbed.

Sometimes, he still reached for her hand in the dark, and they connected.

Martin picked up the book from his nightstand and opened it to the mark:

"Wives create their husbands. They begin with that rough raw material, that blundering, well-meaning and handsome youthfulness they have fallen in love with, and then commence the forty years of unstinting labour it takes to make the man with whom they can live." – Niall Williams, Four Letters of Love

He smiled—admiring, enchanted. Niall is the kind of writer he might've been if he'd started earlier. Or maybe, if only he still had time.

He read for more than an hour, alert, savoring the story's lyrical imagery, soothed by the nightingale that sang outside his window. He knew he wouldn't finish the book, but allowed himself to drift into the world Niall had made, a place he'd never visit in life, but could fully inhabit in his heart.

Maybe, he mused, if he could stay awake till morning, he could finish the book. The nightingale would complete its song. And he, Martin, might continue to live. He smiled at the absurdity.

After drowsiness insisted that he reread the same paragraph for the third time, he set the book aside, switched off the lamp, and surrendered to the quiet pull of age. He noticed the stillness in his limbs, how the night seemed to hold him gently, almost as if the world itself were tucking him in.

Sleep came easily, as he knew it would. Final things often do.

Yes, there are clouds. Of course there are.
Billowing fleece, white and fluffed—clouds shaped by invisible air wisps that swirl into being and fade at the edges.
Changing.

Constant.
Clouds, exactly as you'd imagine, if only you could.
Clouds pierced by shafts of sunlight more golden than gold, whiter than pure.

And sure there's rain, if you believe there is. It falls soft as dew and lands like a blessing at daybreak—
Cool but never cold.
Like the kiss of angels, it soothes without soaking.

And of course there's a breeze, lighter than breath, bearing the scent of lavender, if you wish. Or jasmine. Or vanilla.

As always, his dreams folded into a collage of places and people he half-recognized. He usually floated inside the story as a viewer, somewhat detached, just as he'd lived.

Tonight was different.

In the deep cradle of REM, near morning, Martin dreamed in images so clear that they felt borrowed from another lifetime, yet they were unmistakably his own. Each steeped in memory, shaped by feeling.

The emotional details endured. They flashed by without fading, moving yet remaining.

He relived an insignificant yet extraordinary moment with his loving childhood collie, Charlie. In a green field of tall grass beneath a large native oak, they looked lovingly into each other's eyes. A gaze that would be eternal.

He laughed again with Becca, his beautiful little sister, taken too soon by the brutal curse of addiction. In his heart, she was still a child.

He buried himself waist-tall in the group hug of his parents, young and happy as they had seemed before he learned they were not.

School days returned like a series of snapshots: his first day of kindergarten, a large purple ball bouncing across an asphalt yard. Dizzying chatter. Life-sized blocks. Naps on towels.

Fingerpainting—how he loved fingerpainting!

Mrs. Armstrong was kind. He remembered that, although he only had a vague memory of her face, it was young and pretty, with a smile that always lingered. She made him feel safe and happy, even in his first day away from home.

The years swept past—teachers, classmates, family gatherings—threaded together like a quilt sewn in Martin's sleep.

He and Perry Singleton scooped pollywogs into glass jars from the irrigation ditch that ran behind Perry's house.

In third grade, Lorraine Russo kissed his cheek behind the library.

Pam was his first crush. He relived each exciting laugh and flirtation between the fourth and ninth grades. Then Pam moved on.

As a teen, Ben Garcia's Mexican family welcomed Martin into their home often, with open arms, spicy food, and laughing voices pointing at him in a language he didn't speak. He didn't know what they said, but their laughter was kind and he laughed with them.

Dreams move fast. All of life is a dream.

In high school, Martin met the best friends he would carry with him through life: Danny, Dane, and Rudy. He also met his first love, Kathleen, who would become his first wife and the mother of their magnificent child.

Baseball was the passion of his youth. In old man dreams, it still stirred his blood and returned to him the legs of youth, swift enough to fly. Arms that powered the perfect crack of wooden bats, shooting balls across acres.

And then, thirty years on stage: drama, laughter, mistakes, applause.

The pain of divorce. A second act: a new career, new friends.

And finally, Julia. Blessed, beloved Julia.

All of it returned, the thousands of small details that had slumbered in memory, now bursting awake, fully formed, stable though fleeting.

Seventy-eight years flowed through the hourglass of a single night's dream, down to the final grains of sand.

Ultimately, he dreamed of his children and theirs, angels as bright and different as the stars in the universe. His sons grew with the strength and admiration of his life, and he in theirs. The little ones were shining promises. He couldn't quite remember all their names at once—too many, too far—but he remembered their voices. Each one a chord in the song of his life.

I sense sounds without hearing them: the gentle twitter of eternity—Chirps of birds, the soft buzz of insects, a trickling stream. The small things we miss in life.

I am alone now, but not. Perplexed, yet understanding. I know everything and nothing.

At peace, at rest.

He had a long, lovely life and left it with no regrets.

The Nightingale sang on.