

Charles Hayes

Mandy Black: A Love Memoir

No matter how many bridges I had burned, there still came a time in life when I looked back to their ashes. They were the important connecting points of my travel. Fire and distance alone could not obliterate what happened there. In those ash dumps scattered along life's path, like the breadcrumbs of Hansel and Gretel, laid the real happenings of existence. They only awaited the gentle winds of my revisit, however long in coming, to shed their cover.

Along that same path, sturdily built monuments, large and small, served as counter balances to those places that once held flame and burned hot. The monuments received all attention, getting dusted off every now and then. But their shine remained ever cold and insignificant when likened to the hot coal of real life. Monuments had no passion, and consequently little if any love. However fire, or even its glowing red remnant, could transfix my vision and thoughts of a time that I had loved, or hated, or went crazy over. Obituaries were sometimes the hook that unwittingly brought me back to sift through those passionate places, looking for the glowing ember of such a time. It was one such obit that suddenly squeezed my heart as I sat on the rickety porch of my Appalachian shack reading the Boston Globe. The squawk of a feeding squirrel and the incessant shrieks of a marauding blue jay were my Sunday morning hymns. But suddenly, when I saw her picture and the announcement of her death, I couldn't hear them. I returned to another time. I was a young man who had just burnt my bridges of war and marriage and fallen for a love like none I had known.

After the Marines and Vietnam, while finishing up school, I met and married a co-ed from New York City. She promptly drug me off to Boston and let it be known, for the first time, that she was for all things sophisticated and properly ambitious. No way I could join up on that lead. When it became necessary to love it or leave it I was out and living alone with only a big sense of loss for all that I had put into it. Yet, despite the loneliness and alienation of the big city and no real experience at urban living, I managed to hang on to a decent job and get by. I could negotiate Boston and the New England countryside enough to hold myself in comfortable esteem with my peers. Even so, I was only on the fringe at work because they were all from the Boston area and had gone to school there. That left me as the only bona fide Southern Appalachian and war veteran among them. But it was a good workplace with expansive grounds where occasional small social activities, like picnics and softball games after work, took place. It was at one of those softball games that I discovered the young woman that would deliver me from the fringe to the main in such a way that all would become mine. Still young, and in many ways inexperienced--some might even say undeveloped despite the whirlwind of the war, college and a broken marriage--I really had no idea of what a beautiful young woman could do to me. An artist who was practiced and accomplished at what she did, she liked me the moment she saw my natural abilities on the softball field. Consequently, efficiently and artfully, she built a bridge for us.

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My feet barely touched the planks as we crossed that span. Her name was Mandy Black and I didn't need her picture in my hands looking out at me from the newsprint to recall. I could see and remember her as clearly as if she were climbing the steps to my porch that very instant. She just might have been the time of my life.

Mandy was the sister of one of my co-workers and just happened to be visiting her brother that day of the softball game. Born and raised in the Boston area, she had a strikingly fair, almost Nordic appearance, except for her stature. She was of average height and weight for a fit young woman in her early twenties. With her short blonde hair that framed a face set with the purest crystal blue eyes, dusted underneath with a hint of freckles, she was plainly beautiful. Yet she carried herself in such a way that it seemed she was a little embarrassed by it. But, as I soon discovered, when she locked her eyes upon something or someone there was no covering the beauty that looked out. It simply was, and when she approached me after the ball game, the excitement and afterglow of the game suddenly paled.

"Hi, I'm Mandy. That was really a great throw Charlie, bet you used to play a lot of ball back in West Virginia," she said as she extended her hand and playfully did a little half curtsy.

Charmed and unexpectedly elevated, I let my fascination show.

"How did you know that I was from West Virginia?"

"Kevin told me," Mandy replied.

Kevin was her brother who worked just down the hall from me.

"There's a lot of similarity between that part of the Appalachians and the mountains just north of here," she continued, "but the cultures are a little different. Some real diehard Yankees up here, and the winters are a little colder. No joking, that really was a great throw. You did play a lot of ball didn't you?"

I only heard about half of what she said. She was dressed in a very unremarkable sweat suit. It did not attract attention to her figure but as I watched her eyes, I saw a kaleidoscope of different crystalline shades of blue winking and blinking at me. So beautiful were they that I had to steel myself a bit in order to just respond to her conversation.

"Yeah, I guess you could say baseball was my first love. I did ok, got to play a lot. There wasn't a lot of other things to do--not like around here."

I paused just long enough to see that Mandy really was interested in what I had to say and was waiting for me to continue.

"I've made a couple of trips up north and you're right. The lay of the land there is a lot like where I come from. 'Course here around Boston it's quite different--don't know if I'll ever get used to so much city."

"You will," Mandy assured me. "Boston has a lot to offer one who is keen enough to pick it up and by your moves and the work you do I'm sure you qualify."

Why this simple compliment had such an impact on me, I probably would never know but it did. I had been more than a little lonely and the way Mandy seemed to hint that I was not destined for more of the same

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allowed me to settle down some and reply, "Thank you, it's really nice of you to say that."

Mandy just looked at me for a moment and said, "Nice is ok but it's not where I'm really at Charlie. It's been a real pleasure to meet you. Kevin's waiting for me so I better go."

With that she turned and walked toward the edge of the field where her brother was. As she hurried off she looked back over her shoulder with the damndest smile and yelled, "Charlie Hayes, I hope you keep doing as good as you did today!"

I stood there looking after her, trying to figure what had just happened. I knew that something had taken place, yet it was so undefined and beyond my normal interactions that I was at a loss to know just what it was. Slowly, I walked off the field, climbed on my motorcycle and headed home, stopping off at the liquor store for a bottle of tequila. Tequila to sit at my kitchen table with and replay the moments when I had met a really beautiful woman who seemed to like me.

In my kitchen, under the glow of the tequila, I figured that maybe the simple but hard way I came along would bring about those beautiful things of life after all. For a change, I actually felt a little pleased with myself and experienced the hope that came from realizing that my bad marriage could pass. Life went on and new relationships seemed possible.

Although a few years younger than me, Mandy had not spent those years locked away in the military performing to the rigid standards of a group that was not known for its social acuity or its humanity. Mandy had been growing, developing, and learning about the turning of the times that had overtaken the country. With interest, she saw it all as the artist's palette of human diversity and the key to greater expression.

She attended art classes part time at a local community college near the Wayland home of her parents and worked most weekends pumping gas at the north shore in Marblehead. Marblehead was exactly the kind of place you would expect to find lots of artists, very picturesque, and well known for its beauty.

Mandy definitely had the artist's way about her, and that made her a shoe-in for me. I yearned for those things that I had been drilled to degrade. However Mandy, not being ignorant of the power of her beauty, was an adventurer when it came to meeting and getting to know different kinds of men. That put me, with my Southern Appalachian lilted speech and reluctant delivery, in an interesting spot for her. She had recently broken up with her boyfriend, a Vietnam Vet and ex-army green beret, and moved out of the house she had shared with him. She had learned from Kevin about my Marine Corp service and perhaps that was why she was drawn to me. Whatever the reason, it was of no consequence to me.

The next day at work when Kevin stopped by my work shop and told me that Mandy had been asking a lot of questions about me I was delighted. I got her phone number and, after Kevin left, called and told her what Kevin had said. I added that I had some questions that I would like to ask her, would she come over to my place for dinner that evening? She

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laughed and said that that would be fine, she would bring some artichokes to cook and make some hollandaise sauce, her specialty.

That evening Mandy hustled into my kitchen and showed as much command of its instruments as she seemed to have for all things, except perhaps softball. We ate baked cod and potatoes with artichokes dipped in the hollandaise sauce. It was the first time that I had eaten artichokes that way. Mandy seemed to take particular enjoyment in my initiation which made the meal really good and kept the air light.

After dinner we had a couple of beers and chatted a while, trying to get to know one another. It was the first time that I had sat at the kitchen table with a woman and the time flew by. It was time for her to go. We stood and silently looked at each other as I moved closer, kissed her, and let my hand explore her breast through her shirt. The heavy firm globe of flesh that I caressed and gently lifted surprised me. It was one that any pinup would have coveted. I could only hope to more fully enjoy the pleasures of this beautiful woman another time.

While we were walking to her car she told me how to get to her house and to stop by anytime that I wanted--her parents were traveling and she would be around there for the next few days.

Watching her drive away, her taste on my lips, I knew that it would not be long before I would get to know her better. The weekend was just beginning and I knew that she would not be at the shore for the next few days. With my head in the clouds, I slowly returned to the house and looked forward to the morning ride to Wayland.

The next day, through the morning fog, I could barely read the Wayland exit sign on Rt. 128, the beltway that surrounded Boston. The motorcycle and its low hum of kinetic power felt good as I geared down and took the exit toward the address that Mandy had given me. It was only 9 AM but I just couldn't wait to see her again and she had said anytime, so why not?

When I pulled into the driveway of the three story shake shingle house I noticed the pond beyond the backyard and figured that it probably had some fish in it. It was quiet and natural out there among all the green.

Mandy must of heard me pull in for she came out the side door with a big smile and a warm greeting before I had time to dismount. She began admiring my bike as she joked that I would have to let her do some wheelies on it. As she poked around the bike, just a common but speedy 750 Honda, she again made me feel special by playing on our differences in a way that complimented me. Maybe it was the artist's way of capturing her subject but whatever the reason, I was unused to such things and appreciated her social grace.

When she invited me inside we settled in the kitchen to drink some tea and make a little small talk. I felt relaxed in the little kitchen--just like the experts recommended, it faced south and through the windows I could see the fog lift and the sun break through. By the time we finished the tea the fog was gone and the sun filtering through the kitchen curtains created a homey, warm, and bright atmosphere that seemed to call for move-

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ment. Mandy took my hand and led me on a little tour of the place while she explained that she didn't live there, she was just staying there until she found her own place. In fact she hadn't even bothered to unload her things that were still stuffed into her Subaru station wagon parked outside. When we got back to the living room where we had first come in she commented on the open and unmade hide-a-bed and indicated that it was where she slept. I already knew that, and as the birds sang just outside the door, and the new sun dried the dew from all the green, I kissed that charming and lovely young woman and took her to that bed. After some first time awkwardness, and in the absence of any stoked passion, Mandy accepted me in simple missionary fashion.

I stirred as Mandy continued to nap so I wrote a note with my phone number saying that anytime she wanted to see me, just call. Closing the door on my way out, I paused to gather in the sight of her sleeping. Like a naked nymph caught unawares in the late spring sun. It was a sight I would never forget.

I had been home no more than a couple of hours when Mandy called and asked if she could bring over some leftovers to warm up. I gladly accepted and drank a beer, considering our relationship, while I waited. Happy that she had called, I figured that meant I could risk some involvement, and that my lovemaking had been at least adequate. I knew that the earth had not moved for either of us and I pretty well knew that Mandy had had enough experience to know about such things. Those things were important to me, since I didn't get around a lot in that way.

Mandy arrived quickly and we hungrily ate the leftovers, not saying too much, just looking at each other and smiling. We finished eating and, as new lovers so often do when there is no agenda, we ended up in my bedroom. I had a king size mattress and box springs that laid directly on the floor, a couple of pieces of old furniture, and not much else. This time when we took to bed it was not in the missionary fashion. While we were kissing and fondling each other and removing our clothes, Mandy intimated things to me that helped create a union that ranged far afield as we enjoyed each other.

In the after aura of sex we talked. Real and candid talk that, like a picture, was worth a thousand times more than usual conversation. .

"That was really nice," I said, "did you get as blown away as I did?"

"You mean did I come," replied Mandy.

I studied her for a moment.

"Yeah, that's what I meant."

"It was very nice and felt really good," Mandy said, "but I didn't have an orgasm like you. I never do. Probably I just can't."

Feeling a little crestfallen I thought about that.

"What makes you think that you can't?"

"Oh, I don't know. I've had men tell me that they could fix that but they never could. Why is it so important? It was good enough that you didn't really know the difference anyway.... until you ask."

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Sorry that I had brought it up, I tried to objectify the subject and get it away from the emotional realm.

"Mandy, I've had a few women too. I guess your brother has told you that I have an ex- wife somewhere. But none of them were as beautiful as you. You seem so special to me that I just don't think I will be able to hold you without the sexual connection."

Mandy pressed tighter against me and nuzzled the hollow of my neck.

"You can hold me Charlie, never fear. Just don't squeeze."

Again we came together until more talk was all that was left. She told me about her first time. At 16 and still in high school she simply decided that she didn't want to be a virgin anymore. She went to a concert and picked up a heroin junkie. They went to his room where she watched him shoot up before giving herself to him, never telling him that it was her first time. Nor ever seeing him again afterward. When she got older and more mature she got into long haul truck drivers while they rested from the road. One married driver had wanted to rent her an apartment and keep her just so she would be available when he was not on the road. She mentioned that he was very large sexually, and when he was about to come it would hurt because of his size. She had not loved any of them nor stayed with them for very long before she was off to get a taste of other kinds of men.

Her butterfly-like movements among men had caused considerable damage to her family. She told of an older sister just as beautiful as she who, according to her, had brought home a lover some years before. He couldn't keep his hands off the other two women in the family. He had three affairs going by pretending to be exclusively in love with Mandy, her mother, as well as her sister. It almost destroyed the family, and the way it was described to me I didn't wonder why. But I remained cool while I listened to the story and kept my astonishment at the behavior of this proper New England family hidden. It was a tragic tale and I wondered how anyone caught in such a duplicitous sexual quadrangle could ever fully get over it. Yet it seemed that Mandy had moved through those times and paired with her picks quite naturally.

The green beret that she had just rebounded from had sent her packing because he wanted freedom more than he wanted her. She told me that the soft ball game and the throw that I had made from center field was what had opened the window for her to emotionally break from that relationship. I didn't care about her past nor did I consider myself as any part of a pattern. She was just too loving, intelligent, and beautiful for me to care about what might lie ahead. I loved her that quick and couldn't get enough of her.

Mandy never really left my house after that day. A couple of days later I helped her store her things in my garage, taking from them only what she needed to live comfortably. Without a hitch our lives went on as before, only now I had someone to come home to. And Mandy would not be alone.

However we were not always the only ones living in that part of the two family home. I shared the lower part of the up and down house with a

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guy named Ted. He was gone most of the time on business involving computer programming. Computers were beginning to break big at that time. Ted was not actually there when Mandy moved in. When he did arrive from one of his business ventures he was warm and friendly. He totally accepted her as my roommate and lover. Although Ted said that it wasn't necessary, I did some calculations and paid a larger proportion of the rent. Ted accepted that in a manner of goodwill and with that everyone got covered and accounted for.

Ours was a nice neighborhood in a close in suburb of the city. Our rather odd threesome lived quietly and comfortably within that residential middle class township. Most people kept to their own business. However the mix got even a little more unorthodox when Ted also met a woman. When he was in from business the four of us would keep the bathrooms, bedrooms, and kitchen busy. It was a real change of atmosphere for the house and everyone got along in fine fashion. It seemed that Ted and I had found real lives for one thing and the presence of women seemed to elevate our standing in the neighborhood as well. The owner and his family, who lived above, never said anything or intruded in any way. They obviously knew what was going on. Yet when I would occasionally pass them on the front porch they seemed friendlier and closer than before. It seemed that they liked the new large "family" on the first level that somewhat matched their large family above. It was a happy situation with Ted still being gone a lot. His girl only stayed there when he was around, giving Mandy and me the best of both worlds.

However Ted's relationship didn't last long. The oldest by a few years, he was like me, having been married before. He appeared to be gun shy about commitment and his girl couldn't handle that. Pretty soon Mandy and I were again the only couple downstairs as Ted continued to travel extensively.

Spring turned to summer and Mandy and I would take long rides on the motorcycle, mostly up and down the coast. Or we would just hang around Boston. Mandy would show me the things that only a native would know. Plus we enjoyed the beautiful gardens and summer concerts that often played there. Once we rode up to Marblehead where Mandy introduced me to the young men she worked with at the gas station. They were several years younger and seemed like ok guys, perhaps just out of high school or starting collage. There was one little thing however, more like a feeling, that I noticed when I met them. Mandy kind of steered the conversation as I noticed a look in one of the guy's eyes. It seemed that he was experiencing something that was not normal and he was trying to disguise it. I just let it pass at the time. But looking back on it, I suspected that my mountain manner and speech had generated an inherent contempt in the young well bred boy of the affluent Marblehead community. Because of the way Mandy behaved, I believed that she had seen it as well and also tried to disguise it. Or perhaps she observed it because she was looking for it and used it as some sort of measure of me. Mandy was interested in character, perhaps to a fault, and she would sometimes create situations to indulge that interest.

The meeting quickly passed however, and just being with someone I was in love with filled me up enough that I gave it no real consideration.

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Being with her, it all seemed perfect in a world that was developing exactly as it should.

I was beginning to free himself of many of the things that had plagued me in the past. Life was good.

As summer turned to fall we loaded Mandy's station wagon with a little road gear and headed up to Maine. We met her parents near Portland and went sailing. I had never been sailing before and, while anything I did with Mandy was fun, I was particularly looking forward to it. Although it did cross my mind that Mandy had an inordinate amount of tug on the reins of our experiences.

On the way up, in a little pull off just across the border of Maine and New Hampshire, we spent the night in the back of her station wagon. In the morning we continued on up to the Portland area and located Mandy's parents at the home of a family friend who owned the boat.

Their house was situated in a pretty place right on the cove. The sailboat was anchored just offshore. Several other people were gathered there. The group standing around on the lawn reminded me of movie scenes about high society people and their little lawn parties by the sea. Mandy and I were introduced around by her parents and found that most of the guests seemed more interested in their particular conversations. They paused only long enough to smile and shake hands or nod, then returned to their conversations. There was not much interest in the new young couple in simple dress. That was fine with me. I was there for the boat and the sea. Mandy was not really the society type either. It didn't matter to her. She stayed near my side, which alone would have enabled me to confront and overcome any uncomfortable situation. Her parents, whom I barely knew, seemed of a different ilk as well. They were more down to earth as they helped the busy owners with the preparations around the house. In the brief time that they spent with us they were courteous and respectful without being parental in those ways that aggravate young adults. I appreciated that and was grateful for the absence of any fuss over us. I could easily see where Mandy got her poise from.

The gathering on the lawn did not last long after the owners, Joe and Sally, appeared. Strikingly different from most of the others in manner, Joe gruffly acknowledged his guest as he trudged through the gathering to the water's edge and the little dinghy tied up there. He was a short powerfully built man in his late fifties with short cropped hair and a curt way about him. He exhibited the minimum rote social stuff just enough to pass and still remain self contained. I liked him immediately and felt good about temporarily being under such a skipper.

Sally, Joe's other half, started rounding everybody up and shooed us down to the water, occasionally yelling something to Joe. The couple and their interactions while managing us landlubbers, and later with the boat itself, reminded me of Bogart and Hepburn in *The African Queen*.

Gathered by the water, we could clearly see the wooden friendship resting at anchor about 50 yards out. It was a beautiful 35 foot sloop with a large mainsail and a smaller jib forward. Highly polished with the sun making little sparkles along her wooden hull, she gently rocked in the swells. Her open deck was benched on both sides. It ran aft to the stern

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area and forward until it descended into a small cabin and sleeping quarters.

Since the dinghy was too small to fit everyone in, Joe made a few trips out and back using a short chopping rowing motion to move us through the water. I noticed that he rowed differently than me but failed to recognize why. I just chalked it up to style.

Joe ferried all aboard and motored the sloop out of the cove. Sally promptly told him to stop using the motor and set sail. Turning the sloop into the wind, Joe obeyed and popped the mainsail while Sally went forward and set the jib. Someone made a joke about how Joe would die if he ever got trapped in the mountains. Mandy and I just looked at each other and smiled.

The benches on either side of the deck were full of passengers as the sloop cut through the water. The tack lowered one side of the sloop to just above the surface of the water. While everyone else white knuckled the benches, I was unable to just sit there. I got up and swung back to the stern with Joe, grabbed a spar and hung out over the sea as a counterweight. This decreased the draft and seemed to increase our speed. Joe just looked over at me but didn't say anything.

It was a fine day with brilliant sun and sea as we lightly bounced and sped through the white tops. As Joe changed the tack and the boom came around, he tossed me a small rope to belay near my perch. I didn't know what the rope was for or anything about knots but I'd seen enough Popeye stories to know what he wanted. I wound the rope around a davit several times and tied a granny knot. For the first time since we had met, Joe became animated.

"Good Lord, man, how is anyone going to quickly get that rope free?"

Joe untied my knot and, in two quick reverse moves, belayed it properly.

Mandy laughed and yelled above the wind, "Yeah, but Charlie gets an A for his enthusiasm, doesn't he?"

Joe just frowned and gave no indication of what he might be thinking while some of the other men aboard looked like they were tasting sour grapes.

That was one of the things that made me feel that Mandy was special. She could jump in to rescue her man with a humor that cut any ugliness out of the moment. Plain in her attitude but beautiful and intelligent in her performance, she was the kind of woman that I considered a treasured mate.

It was not long before Joe dropped the sail and anchored just off the back side of Peak's Island, the home of an old World War II gun battery. Again, Joe had to ferry the passengers ashore and this time I insisted upon helping him. I had rowed many a boat and was sure that it would not be a problem despite Joe's reluctance to turn the dinghy over to me. Finally Joe relented and I rowed one load to shore, accidentally splashing some of the passengers. They acted like I had done it on purpose. With their snoots in the air, they hurried away without a word.

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On the return trip to the sloop I began to see that the dinghy, amid the ocean currents, was very different from a rowboat. Using long strokes to move the dinghy, I couldn't stay on course and ended up nowhere near the sloop. Plus I was unable to correct for it.

"Just hold it there," Joe yelled.

Trying not to act embarrassed, I yelled back, "How convenient!"

Mandy, still on the sloop, laughed.

The sloop came to me and I turned the dinghy over to Joe who, stone faced and without a word, took us to shore.

We spent about an hour visiting the relics of the last great war and imagining what it must have been like during that time. Later we all ferried back to the sloop and had a couple of drinks, depending on your pleasure. Joe and most of the others had drinks while I had a couple of beers. Mandy had a beer as well. Shortly, as the sun got further west over the mainland, we weighed anchor and sailed home.

It was a very nice experience. I got a chance to see and experience a little of the old true Yankee spirit as it was contrasted with the modern Yankee crowd. Joe, his wife, and Mandy's parents taught me a thing or two about the Yankee people. Foremost being that they should not be taken lightly. Perhaps it was then that I became a little more aware of the baggage that I carried and how it affected my life in New England. The sailing experience and a few other things shifted my perspective a little. I knew that Mandy had engineered our invitation and, although I only slightly knew the parents of the woman that I loved, I felt that maybe they were far more involved in my life than I knew. For some reason that made me a little uneasy. Maybe I wasn't cut out for it.

As soon as we got ashore Mandy and I headed for the Green Mountains of Vermont. After our many philosophical discussions about the mountains and the sea our trip seemed like a spiritual God send to me. Mandy seemed uplifted as well. Similar in our propensity for the melancholia that the city could foster, we just enjoyed being together in a natural environment, free of the distractions that often hurt us.

It was not a long drive to the northern reaches of the Appalachians from the shores of Maine. We reached the Green Mountains in the early evening and located a private campground along the rural highway. It was run by an old man who told us where to camp plus he loaned us an axe to cut firewood.

Solitude and quietness were plentiful. We were the only campers on the grounds of an evergreen forest.

I used the axe to send chips flying as I cut up a small log while Mandy watched. She commented on the beauty of my swing, adding that it was not hard to see where I belonged when it came to the mountains and the sea. That surprised me some, her tendency to take a small fragment of something and from that come to a larger conclusion. But I loved her and anything that looked good to her I considered valuable.

We ate some canned food, a few slices of bread, and sat by the fire

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drinking beer and talking about how nature could influence people's lives if they only gave it a chance.

Eventually the fire started to die down and darkness settled over the little campsite. The old manager stopped by just long enough to tell us that it was going to be a cold night. Since we were sleeping in the back of the station wagon we didn't have to bother much. We promptly turned in when it became too dark to see. The temperature plunged.

Somewhat to my frustration the cold kept my affectionate advances from going anywhere. I accepted Mandy's declination and we slept warm and sound through the night, having adjusted well to our bedroom on wheels.

Snugly spooned together under several blankets, we woke up at first light to frost on everything. We were not in a hurry to leave our warm nest but we joined together by lowering our clothes just enough to do it. Mandy wondered aloud why we hadn't thought of that last night. I knew that the reason was mostly because my ardor had not been shared by Mandy. It mattered not. To have her with me and in harmony trumped all that. Waiting for the right time for love making was small potatoes.

Fully awake and in key, we hopped up and hustled around in the cold, gathering up our gear while the car warmed up.

On the way out we thanked the old man as we returned the axe. He had seen us coming and was standing by the road as we approached. He took the axe, leaned down to look through the car window, and asked if we had stayed warm enough. We assured him that it had been no problem. He chuckled and told us to remember the place if we ever came back--said that he liked the young people best because they never made a fuss. After shaking hands, we drove off and picked up the interstate southeast into Boston.

Back home our lives picked up pretty much where we had been: work, school, and the domestic trivia of living together. It never seemed trivial to me however. I had pretty much all that I wanted with Mandy. That was something to always be excited about.

As the autumn grew more chilled, we would sometimes sit on the back porch just off the kitchen. We watched the trees in the park change colors and relaxed while talking about our days. Mandy would drink a little beer and sometimes share a joint if I had found some at work. My use of those things were much less than they had been so I was a little surprised when Mandy voiced her frustration with my use. I had felt that the things that I brought to our relationship were valuable enough to compensate for my use. It was a part of my cultural identity and the semi-outlaw attitude that I had held toward American society. Things rooted in very personal parts of me, half born of my Vietnam experience. I wouldn't consider changing that. Maybe I couldn't change that. We never argued about it. In fact we had no real fights at all. After the wars with my ex-wife, I was more the peacemaker when we encountered rough spots. I had never lost my temper with her, not even close. Once she had become so upset and frustrated about something to do with me that she kicked a hole in the wall. I only cared about calming her down and making her feel better. It caused no anger in me. It only hurt that she felt so bad. In less than an hour it was

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over and she apologized, no big deal. I would repair the busted sheetrock myself, good as new. But under the surface Mandy had something going on and it was about our relationship. I was in so deep that I was blind to the gravity of it. Besides, she seemed to come out of her funk when we decided to go to Martha's Vineyard for a night and a day.

Martha's Vineyard was an island about seven miles off the shore of Cape Cod. Just south of Boston, it could only be reached by plane or boat.

Mandy and I drove down to Woods Hole, parked the car, and caught the ferry over to the small town of Vineyard Haven. All the towns were small because the year round population was small. However, during the warm months the population swelled with tourists. It was well into autumn and the tourists were mostly gone. We were able to find a place at a reduced rate quickly.

After eating at a nearby restaurant we returned to our room, a very nice place right on the harbor. Through the large sliding glass doors we could lie in bed and watch the diving gulls among the bobbing sailboats. It wasn't long however before Mandy got up and closed the curtains over the view. Amid the clean nautical décor, the sound of sea birds, and an occasional distant boat horn, we enjoyed each other until the water lapping against the nearby piers lulled us to sleep. If one word could be used to describe our relationship during that time, it would be harmonious. We were complete and attuned to the time and each other. At least that was certainly the only way that I could see it.

The next morning after coffee, toast, and chowder we rented bicycles and set off across the island to visit Gay Head and its famous white clay cliffs. They were a good twenty miles away. At first we made good time along the little paved road. There was little traffic and the morning air was clean, crisp, and cool. However, as it began to warm up, Mandy started to flag and I had to push her. We were in the middle of nowhere and there was no alternative.....I thought.

Finally we arrived at the cliffs which were magnificent, but Mandy, red faced from the sun and exertion, was wet with sweat and not so enthralled. I was sweaty as well but I was more than used to such things. I had spent parts of my life drenched in it. But Mandy was the cool New England beauty who had never learned the ins and outs of real physical exertion. She was not, nor had ever been an athlete. That was the gulf between us that I should have been sensitive to but I dismissed it. I knew something was wrong when she failed to deliver up the artist's eye at the clay cliffs. I was the kind that liked to keep moving when going somewhere. It was something that I had picked up under the marine pack and radio. Something that was ingrained. Consequently, my insensitivity to her condition killed all the previous harmony that we had established.

We rested a while and ate a packed lunch before heading back at a slower pace. With the objective accomplished, it was easier for me to lend more consideration to the gentler nature of my mate, but it was too late. The damage had been done. The look of resentment remained on Mandy's face until we finally got back and turned in our bicycles. I knew how she valued women's standing in American society and how she wanted it to improve. So did I. I also knew that Mandy did many things with that in

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mind. Wrongly, I believed that if she thought that a sheer principle was enough to close the athletic gap between a male former athlete in his prime and a young New England female art student, she was being foolish. I assumed that she had no reason to feel resentful or defeated. As a result of that assumption, I treated the issue insensitively. If that was indeed the straw that brought the camel down, oh how I would pay for my ignorance. It had hurt her pride and caused more strain on a relationship that, unbeknownst to me, was already troubling her. It would have cost me nothing to have given her more consideration and set a slower pace. Though it probably wouldn't have mattered in the long run.

I was the fool that had been stamped "made in the USA" by the marines. I behaved poorly on that occasion, in part, because of that. Got to push on and all that. Mandy and I were good together but Mandy was in the bloom of full development while I had obviously become arrested in that far away American interest that had caused so much pain. That difference between us was one that was beginning to tell.

We settled back into our Boston life. Thanksgiving came and went and winter was fast approaching. The Garden of Eden that Mandy had enabled me to enjoy began to crack and for the first time I had to admit to myself that she was not as much mine as I had thought. To say that that scared me would be an understatement.

One day when she returned from school she told me that one of her professors had invited her to his place for dinner and I absolutely couldn't handle it. That further threatened her sense of independence and mucked up the situation even more. Later, through the years, I could imagine that she had concocted the dinner invitation as a test of my desire to control her. But right then, all of a sudden, it seemed that things had terribly changed. It had been so nice and uncomplicated but now Mandy and the events surrounding her were pushing all the wrong buttons of my psyche. I was beginning to unravel.

For a while, I stomached it all as best I could, knowing that to lose her would be the end for me. When she decided to move out and share an apartment with a woman that we knew, I helped her move and get set up. While doing that one Saturday, my motorcycle was stolen in broad daylight. I still owed a year of payments on it, which I paid, yet I never saw the bike again.

The loss of the cycle meant nothing to me beside the breakup of my life with Mandy. Kevin gave me a nice 10-speed bicycle and backpack to use and I never missed a beat on my transportation to work. I found a more direct and residential route to get me there and back.

I only got to see Mandy a couple of times after that. She still acted like she enjoyed me, but I was sorely wounded and had a hard time just functioning. My drinking again began to get heavy and then Mandy wrecked and totaled her Subaru. Luckily she didn't get hurt but I had always been scared of the way she drove sometimes. And now she had almost been injured because of it, she could have been killed. What was she doing without me?

Things had changed so hard and fast that the devastation I experienced finally caused me to sometimes miss work.

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I had been invited to a holiday Christmas party by her parents before our break up. I had bought them a gift wrapped bottle of Chivas Regal but I couldn't go. Mandy and I didn't see each other any more and the party, with her parents viewing my demise in their crusty New England way, would have just been too painful. Instead I took the gift down the hall at work to Kevin and ask him if he would give it to his parents. I handed over the scotch and was suddenly paralyzed by the feeling that my insides had been hollowed out. For a moment I just couldn't move. As I dumbly stood there, tears suddenly filled my eyes and I said the only thing that I could think of.

"I don't know what happened."

Kevin looked up from his desk and simply said, "Charlie, Mandy is an independent woman. No one has ever been able to tie her down. She will do as she chooses."

It was all I could do to nod, do an about face, and mechanically walk from the office, feeling broken beyond repair.

Also before our split Mandy and I had planned a Christmas party at our house for the people I worked with. I tried to busy myself with that. Not a lot of people came, mostly just the people I knew well and had some social contact with. They didn't stay long but many people were still there when Mandy made an appearance. Everyone well knew what had happened with our relationship and kindly stayed in their little circles. She and I spent a few quiet moments together in the hallway. We knelt down against the wall and had a conversation about how we were doing. Mandy was sympathetic and attentive to my poorly disguised attempts to keep my chin up. She was doing good and back in full possession of herself and seemed sorry that I had been hurt. But her demeanor said that she was sure of where she was and confident of the future. It was one of the hardest conversations that I would ever have. Harder than anything I had ever known. She left right after that and I knew that she was gone from me. Neither did I see nor hear from her again. Merry Christmas.

Life in Boston was again on the back side. As the winter blew by and the intense hurt subsided into an ever present dull ache, I found that I could not use the tricks of the war to make it go away.

I felt like I could never get back to being at home in New England. Uselessly, I searched for an explanation. What was it that could bring on such destruction? Was it the Yankees and their absence of soul and depth? Or was it the naiveté of the dumb hillbilly who had thought surviving a war and a bad marriage had made him immune to heartbreak? The answer to that question, asked by one who could not develop, would never be known ... until he saw. Surviving was the best that I could hope for, and in order to do that I must know the lay of the land and be able to intuitively navigate it. I had nothing left inside to do it any other way and the hand that I had been dealt didn't come with a draw. For me it was not going to change. There was only one place where I had been able to develop before my path had taken me out of the known to that which must be learned or suffered. Suffering, I had done enough of. But once upon a time I had learned the Southern Appalachians enough to know how to survive their

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plain and loveless challenges. Getting there as soon as possible was the only way that I felt I could go on.

From a friend I had known in college I learned that there was a job opening in the hospital psychiatric and alcoholism unit in my old hometown. I applied for it and scheduled an interview when they seemed interested. Taking a day off from work, I flew down and interviewed for the job. They offered it on the spot. I could start in a month which would give me enough time to give notice and get myself back down south.

It was with a lot of mixed feelings that I was leaving Boston. I had gotten over my ex-wife and learned to love again there. And I had developed an appreciation for the people and the countryside. But I was really scared that I would never get over Mandy if I stayed. Sorely crippled and feeling that I must leave in order to get better, I moved on. Facts would be that I would never would get over Mandy, just as I would never get over other things in my life. Sadly, I had never realized that some things just were and you couldn't run from them.

I purchased a little female beagle from a pet shop after Mandy left, hoping that the beagle would help some with my despair. I named her Jennie and she did help some as I became attached to her.

Ted, my housemate, had a huge old Mercury that looked like a tank. He sold it to me for \$50 so that I would have something to get me and my things down south. Also there was a black cat with twelve toes that he wanted me to take because he was never home to take care of it. I loaded the animals and my stuff into the old car and headed out to the 128 beltway. From there I picked up 95 south out of Massachusetts. Changing jobs and getting a place to live gave me a lot of things to do but the sense of loss was still there in my gut. With Mandy by my side I had danced with the Gods. Always I would love her.

The shrieks of the arrogant jay again pierced the Sunday morning air calling me up from my stupor. My back hurt and at first I thought that I must have fallen asleep and dreamed while sitting hunched over on that old porch. That was only until I again saw her photograph looking up at me from the newsprint that laid at my feet.. For all that time she had been gone from me. Now she was just gone. Had I actually lived all that time without the known pain of her absence, only to now feel that it was yesterday that I loved her? I was old but I was not dumb and I knew that she had always been there in me, however silent and remote the relationship. Yet the knot in my gut and the intensity of the recall still surprised me. I had often wondered about where she might be and what she might be doing, but only in flights of fancy. Or while nodding off by the wood stove after visiting the graveyard where my wife and child were buried. The separation from them had hurt fearsome. But now they were only up on the ridge and easy to visit and stay in touch with. No surprises there. I expected that it would always be so. But Mandy was now also gone, like them, and I knew nothing of how it might be. Only that the love I once had with her could not grow cold and die. I might not have recognized it for many of these past decades, but despite the ones that I had buried and the revisits that I had made, that old glowing ember where Mandy and I had crossed proved that some things will be. And damned be any attempts to pretend otherwise.

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I grabbed the section of the newspaper with Mandy's picture in it, shuffled into my shack, and settled down in an old rocker. Opening the door of my Buck stove, I deliberately wadded up each sheet of newspaper, except the one with Mandy's picture, and mashed them low down in the stove. Neatly, I stacked the kindling over the pile of paper, closed the door, and rolled the remaining sheet tightly into a suitable starting torch. Gently, I laid it atop the stove. That evening, when the chill had returned and the jays had disappeared, Mandy and I would set our evening fire.