

*Charles Hayes*  
**Louise And I**

**R**ain pounds the tin roof like a blanket of hammers being shock dusted along its metal furrows. The dry is out. And about time too. My plants, kept alive by furtive irrigation, hang on. That's the nice thing about weeds, they don't care if you love them or not. Streams of water flow from the roof, out the front yard, and down the old overgrown logging road to the waiting creek bed below. I can almost smell the resin developing on the flower buds as their roots drink up. Hidden among the dried up corn stalks and topped more than once, the bushy plants will be a good stash for Louise and me next winter when the cold bites and busting up firewood is the only way to counter it.....to begin with. Like Thoreau's wood that warmed when he cut it, and again when he burned it.

Emerging from sleep, Louise shuffles from the bedroom, thick dark hair amiss, and sleepy eyed.

"Did you save me some coffee, and are there any snakes in the out house," she mumbles.

Butt puckering cold in the dead of winter and warm enough to shelter anything in the summer, the outside toilet is part of our way of life. The hand pump in the kitchen provides groundwater enough without the worry of busted pipes in the winter when we are away. Moving from the city to this Southern Appalachian high spot ten years ago involved some learning and adjustment, which we enjoyed doing. But a snake is still a snake. Especially when one is surprised by its presence.

Pointing to the electric burner in the kitchen area of our rough cut cottage, I nurse Louise's slow rise.

"Fresh coffee that way and clean, snake free toilet the other way. Better take a roll of toilet paper though. The other one's getting thin."

Sticking a roll of toilet paper in her night pocket after pouring a cup of coffee, Louise waits for the rain to subside a bit, then bee lines out the side door toward the outhouse.

Relaxing to the rhythm of the rain is good medicine. Detecting a methodical beat to it that seems to grow stronger, I suddenly realize that it's not the rhythm of the rain. It's the whop-whop sound of an approaching helicopter. A sound that still reminds me of loading the body bag of my friend on a dust off during the war. Doubly shaken with the added knowledge that around here helicopters are only used by the law, I rush to the front porch and watch as the chopper approaches. Flying low between the ridges of the hollow, it slowly banks and rises, passing directly above my withered corn and the pot plants growing there. It circles our property, and almost blows the tin roof off the outhouse as Louise, struggling with her panties and screaming in terror, emerges.

"My God Charlie, what the hell's going on!!?"

Rising a bit more, the helicopter is still low enough that I can see someone leaning out the door and taking pictures as it hovers above the corn.

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With my heart in my throat and the adrenaline pumping like it used to when I was doing the dirty work for Uncle Sam, I put my arm around Louise and try not to lose it.

“Guess I’m busted, babe. Just stay silent. I’ll take care of you.”

Her mouth dropping open as it all begins to register, Louise says, “Oh shit Charlie, what are we going to do?”

“Get me a lawyer,” I say, “and listen to what he tells you. Now go on and put some clothes on. This is just the beginning. The whole crew will be here very soon.”

Looking at me like our world is the Titanic flotsam and there is only room enough for one, Louise turns and goes inside.

Judge Reams, like his name implies, loves putting it to those whose misfortune it is to be standing before him. A fat balding man of fifty or so, he has a particular interest in the marijuana growers of his county. Using those that he has sentenced and bargained with over the years, Judge Reams has garnered most of the market share on marijuana. Becoming quite wealthy in the process, he is considered untouchable and well liked by the good ole boys of law enforcement. Only in this lost and forgotten section of the country could such a system still exist. And to our grief, Louise and I are about to find out about it.

Two weeks in jail before making bail is enough time for a thorough education in the workings of this justice system. I am told that I can get probation and community service if I show the proper attitude. Like pleading guilty to the sale and possession of a controlled substance. And, additionally, to grow “protected” pot for the judge. Taking the full charge, although the weed was only for personal use, I am able to exonerate Louise. But an attitude with a deference is always something I have had a problem with. Ever since I went to “free” the Vietnamese people from communist rule by killing them. I refuse to work for the judge.

At my sentencing, dressed in none of the proudly hailed rhetoric or star spangled contrition, I stand, my heart breaking for Louise and our boarded up home. Judge Reams looks over the courtroom, ending with a stern gaze in my direction. Finally looking back to the papers in front of him and seeming to discover some pertinent information that has been overlooked, he smiles, raises his eyes to the prosecuting attorney, and nods.

“It is the decision of this court that you be incarcerated in the Morville Penal Institution for a period of one year and one day, not to include time served. I hope this will give you, and any other people coming from the big Northern cities to pollute our fair land, time to think about the consequences if you end up in front of The Law. Bailiff, he’s all yours, out of here.”

Sobbing loudly and drawing many stares from the inhospitable herd watching the proceedings, Louise, sitting directly behind me and my “court” appointed lawyer, tries to reach me but is blocked by one of the bailiffs.

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"Charlie, I'll be there," she says. "Keep the faith, sweetheart, I'll be there."

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Busing the empty table, and at the same time slapping the hand of an off duty prison guard trying to feel her up from another table, Louise looks at the clock and sees that her shift is almost done. Living off the money of those paid to incarcerate me is bad enough without the sexual abuse. But it keeps her close to me and her visits go a long way to help carry the load. Three more months and we are out of here. But where will we go? If only there is a way to clean up the place where we loved and lived for so many years. Letter after letter Louise writes concerning this but so far nothing. Me too, but we both know that mine probably end up in the trash. Looking back at the clock and trying to stay positive, Louise tells herself, just five more minutes. Maybe there is mail at her little apartment over the gas station.

Aiming to avoid any sexual innuendo from the gas station attendant, Louise hurries from her old Volvo and up the steps to her apartment, grabbing a letter from the mailbox by the door before letting herself in. Exhausted from an overtime shift, she literally falls into an overstuffed armchair that came with the place and kicks off her shoes before examining the letter. Oddly enough, there is no return address on the envelope but inside, on State Department of Justice letterhead, there is a letter from the State Attorney General. Informing Louise that he is aware of the crimes of Judge Reams and his minions, the AG also states that he has followed my case and knows about my refusal to become part of the Judge's operation. Not a very long missive, but direct and to the point, the letter says that appropriate measures are being instituted and it gives Louise a number to call if she would like to assist in this matter. Not thinking twice, Louise gets her shoes on, grabs her bag of tips, and heads out the door to the phone booth by the highway. Going down the steps at a speedy clip, she sees her afternoon paper, half folded, on the bottom step. ".....Marijuana" is all that is visible of the front page but it is enough to pull her up. She picks up the paper and unfolds it. On the top of the front page is the headline, "*Governor Will Push For Legalized Marijuana.*"

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Waiting on the hard wooden bench in the judicially austere hallway, an old porcelain water fountain its only other adornment, Louise clutches her purse close to her body. Trying to keep her mind on the business at hand and off of her fears, she doesn't notice the nearby door open and a middle aged woman of considerable girth appear.

"Judge Reams will see you now," the woman says. "Just go past my desk and through the other door."

Noticing how a hasty retreat from this position would be impossible, Louise passes by the woman, steels herself, and enters the Judge's inner sanctum.

Behind a mahogany desk, socked feet up, and smoking a rank cigar, Judge Reams smiles and appraises Louise from her put up dark locks and

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smart short dress to her nylons and high heeled shoes. After blatantly pausing his gaze, he lets his eyes undress her on their trip back North.

"Oh my, this is much better than that stuffy outfit you wore to court. No doubt I can see why your boy lets you do his talking. And no doubt about why he wants to regain his freedom.....and keep it. Sit down."

Sitting down in a facing chair, Louise watches her dress ride up and squashes the urge to smooth it down. "Thank you," she says, lifting her eyes to find the Judge riveted on her crotch.

Giggling like a girl, Judge Reams replies, "No no my dear, thank you."

Putting on her best being a good sport smile, Louise says, "Will that be all? Can we get down to business now?"

Puffing up a fresh batch of poison and assuming a very studied look, Judge Reams replies, "Not yet, my dear. Drop your dress to the waist and let's have a good look-see."

Hesitating just enough to cause Judge Reams to urge, lest he lose out on the sights, "Don't be so modest dear. I have to see if you are wearing a wire."

Thanking God and obeying his wishes, Louise exposes her upper half and the sheer lightweight bra she is wearing.

Actually licking his lips, the Judge hauls his body out of the chair, slowly walks around Louise and returns to his chair.

"Nothing hidden in those canyons of delight I can surely see," he says, pausing long enough to gauge and enjoy the fear in Louise's face before continuing.

"You may cover up now."

Trying not to shake as she closes the clips to her dress, Louise says, "You don't really think I would do something that stupid, do you?"

"One never knows. Now let me lay out what I expect of my people, what they get, what I get, and the code. A code that far outweighs a year in the pen if broken."

Louise listens mostly, asking only enough questions to make sure there is a thorough understanding of exactly what is being said. Thirty minutes on, choked with foul smoke and disgust, she accepts the Judge's hand as he says, "I think that you will find that I am good to my people. And for one such as you, I'll go a long way out on a limb. Now see yourself out. I'll be in touch."

With the utmost relief and thinking about how this is all going to play out, Louise finds her way out and back to her falling apart Volvo. Getting in and settling behind the wheel, she sets her purse in the passenger seat, opens it and removes the small recorder along with the tiny microphone that is hidden in a rivet hole. Pushing the rewind button she lets it spin for a moment before stopping it. Briefly surveying her parking spot for any dangers, Louise punches the play button and listens as it plays loud and clear, "And for one such as you, I'll go a long way out on a limb." Starting

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the Volvo, jamming it into first, and sprinting off, Louise grimley states to herself, "You already have you son of a bitch, you already have."

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Hoeing corn is never such a bad job, but the ass hole with a rifle over his shoulder standing in the middle of my row adds ten degrees to an already hot sun. One more month and the corn, along with the peas and carrots, will have to live without me. The turn key with the gun will have to find someone else to pretend he is master of. Working the fields after a winter inside is good tonic though. I am not any good with body building or playing basketball on asnow covered court. Nice to be back in the summer sun. Must mean, too, that my record supports the more relaxed security. But the gun is an insult. With a month to go why would I do anything that would require it?

Noticing the prison pickup coming down the lane, I gauge the sun and see that it's too early to quit. Anything out of the ordinary around here draws a lot of review. Something being in stir requires--anything to break the monotony of doing time. Also it pays to be aware of little changes. Good for your health so to speak. Watching the pickup stop and call the guard over, I hoe a little faster, hoping to get closer and maybe hear a bit of the inside stuff. But before that can happen the guard leaves the truck and heads back in my direction, not planting himself off of me like before, but coming up close. Standing there a moment watching me hoe and shaking his head, he finally says, "Somebody must be pissing rainbows for you Chucky Boy. Gather your tools and get in the truck. The warden wants you checked out and ready to bird tomorrow morning. Your time is done, courtesy of the governor."

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Reflecting an opulence that borders on sham, the platinum capitol dome of the State House dominates the small acreage assigned to it by the city. Near the edge of one of the most polluted rivers in America, the smell from the chemical factories that line the river make the air hard to stomach. Coal barges linked together ply the river's waters and keep these grounds and those who walk them greased with the green stuff. And, by-God, tough on crime is more than a slogan around here.

Legalized marijuana, and a source of revenue other than coal, is the big national story of the day. An Appalachian fluke of even international interest, as evidenced by the many satellite trucks parked by the river waiting for me and Louise to emerge from the Governor's office.

Holding hands and walking lightly with my pardon held high, Louise and I come out of the capitol doors, down the steps, and into the fray. A reporter from New York matches our stride and fags us with his microphone and a question.

"After what you've been through, will you be glad to get back to the Big Apple?"

Louise and I stop, look at each other and smile.

"You tell them, Charlie," Louise says.

Dropping the smile, I look to the ground for a moment, then look up.

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"I'm going home, chase the varmints out of our house, and get my allotted six plants going. And Louise is going to make some of the best apple pies anywhere if the deer have left us our share of the apples."

"Does that mean you are going to stay around here?"

"If you mean this state, the answer is yes."

Louise puts her forefinger to my lips and says, "Our home is here. Why would we want to go through this all over again? Marijuana is illegal in New York. Now please excuse us. We have an old Volvo to gas and patch."

Making it to the car and off the capitol grounds, I catch the first ramp to the interstate out of the valley and into the fresh air of the mountains.

Just being, mile after mile in the quiet green humps of Appalachia is a beautiful thing. Lest we become too light for the bounds of earth, however, Louise ponders aloud.

"Why would you talk about my apple pies? I can barely cook let alone make apple pies."

"Image my dear, image. Hot Dogs, apple pie, and Chevrolet. Do you know the Governor did everything he could to stop legalization of weed? But all things must pass, and so goes tough on 'crime' for big bucks."

"I know" replies Louise. "Do you ever think that we can just live life and not have to look it. What a drag?"

"We got the corner on that babe, we earned it, and that's exactly what we're going to do.....for ages. Remember our favorite spot on that old fake bear rug by the Buck stove?"

Stroking my inner thigh and brightening a bit, Louise replies, "Do I ever."

"Well all my talk back there about things to get done didn't include number one."

"Really?" Louise says.

As shades of quiet green color the day, I let the silence spice the import of my reply.

"You can bet on it."