

Charles Hayes  
**High Road**

**A**lmost like the hollow flash one gets in their gut after seeing a gallows do its work, I become less when I discover my former wife's obituary on the internet. Quickly I learn just how deep some things can run as I am snapped back to that time we knew together. Things that lie mostly dormant yet are a part of the main, always there just waiting for the right synapse. I thought that I had a much better handle on my past and what it makes of me. Thought that I would not be so taken unawares in my years. Memories of her flood my mind. And a lump in my throat tells me that it is not just in my head. Suddenly, out of the past, I am touched by what we were. Young and new, Southern Appalachian boy and North Jersey girl, mutual blooms along a common route.

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Plates of drippy spaghetti held beneath our chins while our eyes smiled across the room at one another, Julie and I were oblivious to the others scattered around the austere off-campus apartment. I knew that she wanted me. She had told others. And she knew that I was looking for a steady girl. All my friends knew that. In the small underground social groups of that time word of such things got out no less than in society at large. Perhaps even more so. That was one way that I knew Julie was not promiscuous like many other hippies.. Another was from my own interactions with her on a more intimate level. We were alike that way. Still I wanted to bring our relationship to the bed but Julie didn't want to go that far that fast. Our impasse was well known among our immediate early 70's counterculture. The others, most well into their own relationships, simply were socially aware. Situations like mine and Julie's were things to keep track of. It made for a smoother trip through those times.

Like two rare birds, Julie the colorful art student, and me a drab military veteran, we flashed our young wares. It seemed only natural that evening, among the community, spaghetti, and warmth, that I should try to make it with her again. And it seemed that Julie wanted that as well.

Moving to her side along the arm of the large chair where she sat, I searched her face and said, "Is it true that you really like me?"

Not surprised by my candor, Julie smiled and nodded.

"I feel the same way about you," I said. "But I want us to start with a commitment all the way. Can you do that?"

Her eyes suddenly a little anxious, Julie slowly looked down and said, "Yes."

My one room apartment was only across the alley in the next building so we set our plates aside and, hand in hand, quietly left the gathering and went there. The creaky old steps provided the only sounds during our climb to my place atop the house known as "The Ghetto."

Without saying a word or even turning on the lights we committed together and never looked back.

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Poor but fresh and continuing to blossom, we passed through our studies and graduation and began our travels along the same roads as most of the rest of the country: jobs, real living expenses to pay, and a crash course in after school life as we started out in New York City.

Much different from the freedom of academia, there were struggles and disappointments to begin with but we pulled together and found that, though times could be unpleasant, we were indeed young and stronger for the effort. We developed a rhythm to our ways, be they capital bound in Julie's New York or excursions back to my Appalachians and the nurture of spirit that they could provide. Eventually times became less arduous and more relaxed. Perhaps it was then that our bond began to flex and grow less tight. Some of the principles of our former counterculture began to yield to the pressures of a money driven society. Uncommon roads took on a different light and seemed to complement our growing confidence and changing priorities. We began to explore things that might have seemed too mainstream before. But not always together.

Because of her natural beauty Julie was frequently hit on by the customers of the Soho Arts Cooperative of lower Manhattan where she worked as a buyer. She would tell me of these encounters and laugh them off leaving me unconcerned. But the one that would do the damage was not a customer and was never mentioned until it was too late to gain a foothold in my priorities.

I had recently lucked out with a new and better paying job in the Behavioral Sciences Department of Bellevue Hospital. And, being involved with the switch from the gofer class to the class that gofers served, I neglected our relationship and perhaps set the stage for Julie's excursion into nude modeling. Mostly for one of the major backers of the arts cooperative. In other words, for one of her bosses. Since all the work was done in the cooperative studio and Julie was well paid for it she felt it unnecessary to tell me about it. That's what she later said anyway. But when the paintings of her became so well known for the lovely model that appeared in them, it all came out. She became so sought after that she began doing it full time, making a lot more money than I did. I was involved in my work and simply chalked it up to the Southern boy, Yankee girl thing. Just different styles but likes in the heart. Also I helped spend the money on a higher living along the path to wherever we ex-hippies were going. Too much my thoughts were about not checking the teeth of a gift horse and not enough about there is no free lunch. Julie's New York was lining our road with sugar plums while the beautiful colors and hardwood forests of my Appalachians received none of our once popular zen visits. We were happening.....and we were still young.

One late afternoon I needed Julie's signature immediately on an investment document. Quickly, I made the short trip from Bellevue across Manhattan to the cooperative. From the Subway exit near Canal Street I hustled a couple of blocks North on West Broadway only to find a sign in the cooperative front door saying, "Closed." However when I tried the latch the door opened into a dark shop but there was light coming from the walled off back studio where her work usually took place. I was a little surprised to find that the shop was closed during her sitting or standing or whatever it was called but I had no time to ruminate about that if I was

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to meet the investment deadline. I hurried through the shop to the connecting door and, without thinking, pushed it open. There, my beautiful naked Julie was, her arms gripping the hind quarters of a bronze pony, while one of her bosses pummeled her from behind.

“Nooooooo!” I screamed. A primal cry like none other

From a park bench in Washington Square, I first noticed the large Arch and where I was. It was very late. Though I had not eaten or drunk anything, I didn’t know how I got there. It was much later still after I walked many blocks up to what only hours before had been my midtown home. For a good while after that I was not all present. Just so much tissue going along by rote.

Julie and I never spoke much after that. It wasn’t long until I left for the somber blue evenings and smoky mornings of my mountains. Julie and her driver gave me a ride to LaGuardia and before I got out of the car Julie laid a hand on my arm.

“I never would have made it without you, Richard. You know that don’t you?”

“Yes, I know that,” I replied while getting out of the car. I was about to shut the car door when Julie suddenly slid across the seat, raised her beautiful eyes, and said, “Thank you for all your help.”

Feeling like a cracked and empty vessel headed for the scrap heap, I managed to reply without a hint of irony, “No problem, babe.”

As I turned and walked toward the terminal I heard her car door close. And then in my mind I heard that scream that haunts me still.

Landing at the Roanoke Regional Airport, I rented a car for the long drive to a property that I bought while in New York. I needed the drive to defuse, if possible. At needful times I had always been able to bet on the Appalachians for that. The scenery along the way was magnificent and I felt myself begin to ground a bit by the time I reached my new home.

A small but sturdy structure atop the Blue Ridge chain with a view across the valley to its parent Appalachians, my new home would be plenty enough. It was nothing like where I had been when it came to material resources but I had provided it with all the ways necessary to keep up with my investments. And it was thoroughly stocked for new beginnings. A short hike away was my familiar Appalachian Trail and the spot where I had scattered my Mother’s ashes not so long ago. A place where silence was familiar, cherished. One day, from here, I would continue my journey down life’s highway. But right then it was a wonderful rest stop

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I have come many a way since then and I have learned that most things will pass. I have new loved ones now and the peace that comes from that. But I can’t help but wonder if Julie had that blessing as well, on that other high road. And I grieve, trying to hide it from my wife. She thinks all my nightmares are about the war. I don’t ever want to try to put into words that which is better left alone. That’s the thing about growing old as the scars of travel are sported more clearly. More baggage, good and bad. The scream is not good certainly, worse than any I have heard. But I loved

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Julie, and that is more the constant. Her trip is over and I have to believe it was a good and kind exit. Our travels often befool us in many ways but if mine ever take me by the place where this obituary says she is, I will leave a Rhododendron bloom to pay my respects.