

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/3

Charles Hayes
Always

Above the quietness of this little high hollow spot the high-pitched call of a Red-Tailed Hawk brings my eyes to the sky. Taking a break from the garden work, I watch the large bird float about on the updraft. There is something about watching a hawk on the wing. It draws up a feeling of freedom from the gut. Like hot smoke up a cold flue, it comes naturally, un-worked. Nice. But, telling myself that this sod is not going to get busted if I stand here and look to the sky, I go back to breaking up the clumps of dirt. That's when I see Julie Lewis walking up the dirt road. Dressed in simple jeans, an old hooded jacket, and sneakers, she crosses the little footbridge over the creek and right up to the garden. Stumbling while crossing the clumps of dirt, her unsteadiness betrays her weariness. I know that she has walked a ways to get here. Big brown eyes present to mine with a sincerity that is not that common around here. Around here it's mostly lore or ribald tales of one kind or another with a kind of sincerity that is saved for after the punch line. Like an innocent look with an "I swear to God" kicker. Perhaps most real sincerity is too soft for the hard sticks of this part of Appalachia. But even tired those haunting eyes in a face too young for wrinkles, together with her long coal black hair and comely figure, make Julie an attractive woman.

The last time I saw her was right after she married a guy from the next hollow over. I knew then that it wouldn't last. One day when I was visiting the area to look at some of her goats her husband, Jack, was at work and I hit on her. She liked it at first but when I tried to take her pants off she got cold feet and put an end to it. A little surprised that she had gone that far, I knew then that it was another one of those marriages that happen in this land of scarcity. I left on friendly terms with her and with a little more respect, though I knew her hardly at all. Just that, like me, she had come into this area from somewhere else.

At first I smile as Julie just stands there. But her face is so serious that it quickly melts my expression. Did my pass at her cause trouble that is now coming home to roost? As if to reassure me about that, she finally says, "Don't worry, nobody knows that you came on to me." Seeming to try to put together her thoughts while I quietly watch, she looks to the busted earth, bends down, and fingers an earthworm from the broken ground. Watching it wiggle in her palm for a moment, she drops it aside, stands and seems to brace for some kind of hurt.

"You've got no phone, Richard," she says, "else I would have called. So you can take the seriousness of my being here by the number of miles I've walked."

Thinking that this is the first normal talk that I've ever heard from Julie, and at the same time recognizing the intelligence and poise that she brings to it, I try to be encouraging, something I'm not used to.

"Yes, I can see that," I say. "I sure hope you're about to tell me what brings you so far up this way. Is there something that you need some help with?"

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Her eyes never leaving mine, like they are locked there by her need to miss nothing, Julie replies, "Jack and I didn't make it. I think you knew that we wouldn't. Else why would you have acted toward me the way you did."

Pausing and lifting her eyebrows, Julie makes her point before continuing.

"I don't know anybody other than you who is not a friend of Jack's. I could tell when you tried to bed me that you were not a violent person. From the ways I've been, that is no small matter. Can I live with you?"

Having gotten out what she carried miles to say, Julie steps back a couple of paces and looks to the ground.

Never in my days have I been called upon under such circumstances and, though it has been plenty lonely around here, all of a sudden that doesn't seem the bane that it was. When stacked beside a mismatch with another human being, it's suddenly small potatoes. But in this land of obscurity and want, there is in Julie and the way she touches me, something that tells me not to run from what isn't there. Dropping the hoe and feeling a favor pretty uncommon in my life, I say, "Let's go inside Julie. There's coffee, not so good, but coffee just the same. And you should see the innards of this place before we go any further."

I can imagine the edge of Julie's lips turning the smallest amount. As we walk toward the house we exchange glances, both of us continuing to inspect one another a bit. Trying to bring a little lightness to the situation, I offer up a pretty common question around here.

"Where you from, girl? Your speech and manner are not from around here."

"New York," she replies. "Where are you from?"

"Just a couple of mountain ranges over," I say, "in the Coal River Valley, little place called Dorothy, not big enough for a stop light."

As we cross the yard my two beagles are all noses and whipping tails as they inspect Julie. A good sign that she acknowledges with a couple of pets and kind words.

"Is that New York City?" I ask as we climb the two steps to the rough back porch and kitchen door.

"Brooklyn," she replies.



Moving in with her cardboard suitcase, Julie takes up the little cot in my spare room where I keep most of my gun collection. For the first week or so we sort of get used to having each other around. She is good with the little wood stove and up before me to start or stoke it on the cold early spring mornings. And if need be, she doesn't mind going to the well to draw water. The dogs love her regular feeding routine and, all and all, she is a good housemate. Plus, I have more time for my cartoons which a

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couple of papers pay me for. Not much, but enough for subsistence living. Neither of us expected more than that when we chose these hard rocks of living to begin with. But there is still that not so natural space between us. I try to show that I don't need to jump into her pants to get along, give her space to drop the load I know she arrived with. I am now living with her, not just passing by. To me there is a difference. Sometimes I think she knows this as we share coffee in the morning. There is a look in her eyes that reminds me of one of my funny characters--the would-be girlfriend of a shy boy from the same block. But Julie shortly puts an end to all this. After getting the fire going one morning, she strips and comes to my covers to wait for the house to warm up. The change is not big. But certainly enough to soften our steps a little.

As onion sets turn to glossy green shoots and cabbages begin to look like broad fanned bonnets, spring warms to summer. Pretty quick it seems, Julie receives her mail order divorce without any trouble. The local law center was glad to do it with only one visit by a paralegal. My presence was treated as if it's not uncommon to have divorces lagging behind new partners. Jack and his large clan were happy to be rid of the "City Girl" on an even-stein basis. Truly their differences were irreconcilable and neither had money nor property to fool with.

Having spent part of my life in resourceful areas, I know that one thing about the sticks that blessedly doesn't tick in divorces are battles over wealth of one kind or another. Maybe, I consider, that is one reason why conjugal unions here are not the capital deal that they are some places. So Julie and I become as married as many people around here ever become.... without the back speak of being married to someone else.

Kneeling on the couch and looking out the window to the far ridges beyond the lower end of the hollow, divorce papers scattered at our knees, Julie and I sip a rare cup of tea using the window ledge as our table. It is a time for reflection as we playfully clink our cups and smile at each other and the pretty view. Admiring the luster of her look as she gazes at the hazy mountains, I feel a goodness that moves me above the coarse, the practical. Something that would have scared the shit out of me before Julie.

Noticing my stare, Julie blushing laughs and locks me with those pools of brown.

"What?" she asks.

Thinking that to put into words my thoughts would be too wide open, I simply shake my head.

Julie places her tea on the window ledge beside mine, puts her arms around my neck and pulls me over her as we slide to the couch.

"Tell me Richard," she says, "I want to know about you."

A scent of lemon comes with her words and seems to float above her face and the nest of raven hair that holds it. My embarrassment melts as I realize that I cannot deny this woman.

"I was thinking how nice it is that we are here together," I say. "Like something made to be that way. You and me."

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Julie's eyes well up as her words catch in her throat. After a moment, feeling like she has been called from afar, she whispers.

"Come here you."

It's an easy stroll out of the hollow to the lazy Greenbrier River that meanders through the little towns and countryside of this part of the wrinkled earth. Imagining ourselves a little like the Seneca Indians that used to roam and live along these banks, Julie and I set a couple of fish lines, start a small fire, and strip down to our swimwear. Somewhere in that cardboard suitcase Julie must have found a beautiful rainbow bikini. The way she wears it with the high sun flashing from its colors reminds me of Frank Sinatra's *Girl From Ipanema*. However, I figure that Julie is just as nice as any girl along Frank's Brazilian beach.

Using an old rope swing in a nearby River Sycamore, I teach Julie how to swing out over the water and drop in. I have never seen a girl that was able to do this kind of thing because of the arm strength required but Julie picks it right up. So lovely and bright as she arcs from the tree shadow into the sunlight, she seems to leave a contrail of beautiful flesh and color to savor. We even manage to both ride the rope out together, dropping into the clear stream, the yellowish green glow of its sandstone bottom clearly visible before it swallows us. Far across to the other side and near a heavily wooded bank a beaver disapprovingly tail slaps the water.

By the time we are done with our water play our appetite is built. Cutting a couple of small green branches, we roast hot dogs and enjoy the thoughts that a slow stream of passing water can bring.

While reclining by the embers and admiring Julie's lithe figure for the umpteenth time, I see the small thin scar just above her bikini line. Something that I had noticed before but never mentioned, thinking that if I needed to know she would tell me. I trace the line with my finger and lift my eyes to her.

After holding my look, Julie looks to the river as a shadow passes over her face. Finding in the waters what she was looking for, she brings her eyes back to mine.

"I can't have babies," she says. "About three years ago I had stage three ovarian cancer and had to have my ovaries removed. They thought that they got it all but that's the price. I'm sorry, Richard."

The way Julie says this leaves me with questions that she must know are going to follow because she suddenly looks defensive. And Julie is not the defensive type.

"Hey darling," I say. "I'm not into kids. Child free suits me just fine. There's plenty around to take any of mine's place to start with."

Pausing to poke around in the coals with my stick, I too look for the words to go where I need to go. Where Julie, I can tell, doesn't want to go.

"You've become a pretty important part of my life," I say. "Thank God you got through it. Was this in New York?"

"Yes. It was all pretty simple. I was in and out of the hospital in a cou-

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ple of days. They wanted me to do a regimen of chemo then get retested but I refused."

Beginning to see where she is coming from, I can't help but get a little uneasy.

"Why babe?"

"Why what?"

"Why did you refuse?"

Taking a deep breath, then letting it go, as if the extra air was needed to continue, Julie opens the gates to a part of herself that had been closed.

"Because I'd had enough," she says. "I'd lost my reason to be a woman. Now they wanted me to give up even my appearance of being a woman. And get sick to boot. Plus they couldn't really tell me why except a bunch of mumbo jumbo. *Expensive* mumbo jumbo. I was just another poor Jewish girl with no health insurance to them, one that must have money somewhere in the family tree. But there is no tree. I am it. And until I met you, not much of an it."

For the first time, perhaps getting an inkling of what brought Julie to this obscure land, I can see all of her. And that makes her precious. Too precious to push because of my ins and outs. I can only accept this woman that I have fallen in love with for what she is. And this, indefinably, puts a little edge to who I am.

"Ok Julie," I say, "but if you decide that things aren't right we can get help. There are ways. Don't ever feel that you must go without."

Falling silent, we sit by the dying fire and watch the shadows grow long. I throw another drift log on the coals, watching the fast smoke chase the mosquitoes. Sounding like a .22 rifle shot, the beaver pops a tail, wishing us long gone as the sun kisses the ridge. But we are not moving. Julie leans her head on my shoulder and we stare at the smoking log, waiting for it to burst into living fire.



The mountains are aflame with red and orange colors as the autumn winds send their leaves tumbling across the garden. Picking and husking the last of the yellow bantam corn, Julie and I leave a trail of weathered husks and apple butter colored silk. Dropping the fat yellow ears into a shoulder bag, we move along, a duet of rhythm. Julie will eventually shave the surplus ears and can the rich kernels for the coming winter while I block and bust up some downed timber for the wood burner. The garden has been good to us and the Beagles, their favorite time of year at hand, have helped with bringing in some protein rich game to go with the vegetables. Fall has always been my favorite time. A time when past and future meet in one clear display. Thought is heavy, looking to the test of hard weather ahead, yet carrying the satisfaction of a recent harvest and vigilant preparation.

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Finishing up the last row and dropping her sack on the back porch next to mine, Julie suddenly holds her stomach and goes to her knees. Like a person I had once seen shot in the gut, she tips over to her side and curls into a fetal position, grimacing in pain.

Dropping the garden rake, I run over and drop to the ground next to her. Holding her head above the grass and seeing her face twisted in pain, I am scared shitless.

"What's wrong, Julie, please tell me babe, what's going on?"

With her eyes squeezed shut and her breath coming in short gasps, she reaches up and pulls my head to. In not much more than a whisper she says, "I think you'd better get me to the emergency room, Richard. I'm hurting something fierce in my guts. It feels like something ruptured down there."

Half carrying, half dragging Julie over to the old jeep that we use for groceries and emergencies only, I strap her in and get us to the hospital which is just down river a few miles and across a bridge. When the E.R. staff see her condition, they take her right in and have me wait outside.

Sitting in the waiting room for what seems like a couple of hours, first filling out paperwork, then just trying to come to grips with being in a place where people die, I am pretty anxious. Not since the war and its grind of human loss have I felt like this. And that was mostly for my own skin. This is new. What if I lose Julie. In a morass of emotions, I don't see the ER Doctor until he puts his hand on my shoulder.

A dark kindly looking man of middle eastern descent, wearing a white coat with a stethoscope sticking out of the pocket, he takes a chair next to mine. As he sits, I notice that his name tag says Dr. Amjad.

"You are Richard Jones," he asks, "the husband of Julie Lewis?"

It is the first time that I have ever been called a husband and suddenly I realize that this is about me as well as Julie.

"Yes," I say. "Is she ok? What's wrong?"

"I have admitted her," Dr. Amjad replies. "She is sedated and fine for now, but her preliminary tests together with her medical history suggest some serious problems. She said that you know a little about it."

Thinking that the only thing that I know about is her previous cancer, I ask Dr. Amjad, "Does she have cancer, can you fix it?"

"We suspect that a piece of malignant ovary was not removed properly," Dr Amjad says. "According to our imaging, it has grown into a sizable tumor. We will remove it as soon as possible, and that should help some with the pain. But considering metastasis and the amount of time that it has been growing, her prognosis is quite guarded."

Dr. Amjad pauses for questions but I mostly understand what he is saying. All of my what if thoughts have seen to that, so he quickly continues.

"She feels that chemotherapy will make her sicker and any benefit from that may be questionable to begin with. Once the surgeon has a look

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things will become clearer. But our oncology unit will do what it can. For now she needs all the support that she can get. She is in room 202. When she is able to talk, why don't you let her tell you how she feels. She has a great deal of concern about you. That is where I suspect you can help her most. Just go to the second-floor nurses' station. They will be glad to direct you. Now, if you will excuse me, I must get back to my other patients."

Watching Dr. Amjad disappear through the white swinging doors, I can feel my heart sink to my stomach. Suddenly I feel hollow inside, like a once full vessel ripped of its contents in an instant. Going to the bank of elevators, I press the up button and hope that I can be what Julie needs. All the way.



On the way home from the hospital, Julie and I detour to Sandstone Falls and its little park. Walking out a ways on the boardwalk, we sit watching the cascading water drop and pass below our observation bench. The trees are mostly bare with just a few scattered evergreens and die-hard poplars adding patches of green and orange to the steep grey timber around us. Watching the water swirl, spitting curls of white froth as it passes over the rocks, we hold hands and pull our collars close, the November nip reminding us of an approaching winter. Julie's faraway look, lacking the pleasant aura it used to wear, breaks my heart but I do my best not to show it.

Tracing a raised tendon on the backside of my hand with her finger, Julie breaks the back noise of rushing water.

"I hope I can make it without much pain," she says. "You'll have all the planting to do by yourself in the spring. When the time comes, I hope the earth can be the purest white of snow. I always loved the snow. It makes me feel clean and new. Loved."

Feeling busted inside and swept along like the waters beneath us, I try to put on a face.

"Don't be silly Julie, you'll be here. Of course you will be here."

Gripping me with her look, Julie lifts her eyebrows in that way she has. For a moment I feel like a liar and am ashamed. Dropping the sham, I can only say what is.

"Know that I love you more than words can ever tell, Julie. Just as the sun rises and beyond, I will always love you."

Dropping her eyes to my hand, Julie seems to see it for the first time. Lifting it to her lips, her face covered by falling hair, she trembles.

I cry too.



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The yellow daffodil bonnets seem to shoot from the earth daily as spring opens its door and a tough winter subsides. Redbud trees near the hollow's rising woods are glorious in their displays. And the grass has once again called the lawn mower out of my tool shed for its yearly maintenance. But I cannot feel the new life appearing all around me. There is no joy. Someone once said that April is the cruelest month and now I know for sure what they meant. Julie sleeps most of the time, the time is near. But we are both thankful to have been given the winter together and the small meaningful Christmas that we shared. A palliative care nurse makes a round every couple of weeks to make sure that we have the morphine injections necessary for the increasing pain. The other related medicines mostly just sit in the other bedroom along parts of the gun rack. It's a strange, almost surreal feeling I get on the rare occasions that she has a use for them. When I see them lined up there and paired with my guns I choke. I still let the dogs run for fun but I had to give up hunting. I only keep a couple of house guns now. The couch has become my permanent bed except when Julie wants company and that is not much now. And it's easier from the couch to feed the fire and stay attuned to Julie's needs during the night. Sometimes, like now, I just sit by the bed watching her. When her eyes twitch a little I wonder where she is and what she is dreaming. And I hope that I am there too. Being with her is everything.

Slowly opening her eyes, Julie looks to me and turns her hand for me to hold.

Taking her hand, I look out the bedside window and see an Easter snow beginning to rapidly cover everything.

Squeezing my hand slightly and with the barest voice, Julie says, "It's time, Richard. You be good and always know that I am here. I will help you. I love you. We will always be."

Suddenly grimacing in pain, Julie's eyes grow large for a moment as I reach for the needle on the nightstand. But before I can administer the morphine Julie stops me. In the clearest voice that I have heard from her in many days she says, "No Richard, now you must help me....in another way. Look under the window sill."

Moving around the bed to the window, I see nothing under nor on the window sill. Looking to Julie to tell her that there is nothing there, I am stopped short as she reads my expression.

"Lift up on the center part," she says, again showing a wave of sharp pain.

Pulling up on the sill, I see a small hidden pocket containing a large ampoule of morphine. Enough for a week or more. Knowing what it is for, I start crying but pick it up anyway.

Using only her eyes, those soulful brown lights of life, she brings me back to my chair and again whispers me close.

"Because I love you," she says, "I know you can do it. It will be fine. I'll still be here. Just let me go from the rest, Richard. It is time."

Julie's eyes follow my movements as I fully load the needle, leaving only a trace amount in the ampoule. I have to stop and wipe my tears

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away a couple of times to see what I am doing. And each time Julie whispers encouragement, helping me along with each of the little steps.

When it is done and both her hands are turned to me, I take them as she shows the faintest smile before her eyes close. Laying my cheek to her, I silently weep as Julie, in three shallow breaths, leaves her words.

“Thank you....my dearest.... love.”



Two Red Tailed Hawks, mates I suppose, circle high above the waters of the Greenbrier River as I stoke the little fire and make ready near the old rope swing and Sycamores. On a nearby river rock the old beaver perches and stares. It is the first time that I have ever seen it out of the water. New growth is all about from the spring rains and the current flows swiftly, cold but fresh and clear. Julie and I adopted this river as our own and loved it for its continuity---flowing, no beginning, no end. We thought of it like Siddhartha's flowing waters, and how they imitate life. Always here but never in one spot. Julie is like that and that's how we feel. Always residents together and in touch, but moving.

Removing her urn from my backpack, I carry it out thigh deep in the stream of current as the Red Tails kite their floats of freedom, sending shrieks among the ridges. The beaver turns to get a better view and starts sounding, like a crying infant.

Unscrewing the top of the urn, I pour a little of Julie's ashes into my hand and let them slowly sift through my fingers to the passing current. Looking to the sky, I see the hawks weaving peaks and dips around each other. The beaver, now in the water, salutes with a smart tail slap. Then they wait on, watching.

Pouring the rest of her ashes to my hand, I let them fall to the freedom of the current. No beginning, no end. Always a part of what is.

We love her.