

Julie

by Raymond Abbott

Persons from my own generation tell me I should not be offended (or even surprised) when somebody as young as Julie does not respond as one might expect a reasonable person to respond. Tom, my boyhood friend in Massachusetts where I was reared, is my age, 64. He says his son, Jacob, thinks only of the moment and that moment most often is centered upon himself and his wants and needs. Tom tells how in the winter he will be out shoveling snow and, of course, Jacob doesn't help out. Tom takes that as a given. But what upsets Tom and worries him some is this: if Tom were out shoveling snow and collapsed of exhaustion or more likely a heart attack, and Jacob was on his way someplace, Tom is convinced that Jacob would step over his prone body and be about his own affairs and worry little or not at all about poor Dad lying in the snow. I have met Tom's son, Jacob, and while the scenario Tom describes may be somewhat of an exaggeration, it is not much of one.

I don't feel the same way about my daughter, Carolyn, my only child. She is caring and kind to her Dad, moreso I think sometimes than perhaps she should be. She is definitely a worrier.

But this story is not about Tom's kid or mine. It is about a woman named Julie, my neighbor, and at age 32 exactly half my age. And it is about me. In addition to being half my age, common sense tells me Julie is not really suited to me in lots of other ways, including intellectually and culturally. She is a woman I knew something about before I even met her. What I first noticed was that she subscribed to the daily *New York Times* and seldom read it. I used to pilfer the papers after they sat weathering on her steps for a week or longer. I confess it made me smile to see those papers accumulate on her porch. I believe she was well intentioned in subscribing, but following through and actually reading the papers, well, that was something beyond her. Nevertheless, this sort of quirky woman had me spinning in circles and I had never so much as held her hand.

I am divorced, and I have been apart from my ex-wife for more than four years, divorced for almost two of those. I live alone and what I am about to relate began a few months ago.

I started up with Julie along about July. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say I began to escort her to dinner at that time.

I should back up a little. I first met Julie when I moved into my house four years ago, a house my ex-wife and I owned jointly and rented out for years. It became my primary residence following our separation. One day I ventured to introduce myself

to Julie, and the next thing I knew I was showing her the inside of my house. Why she accepted the invitation of a perfect stranger, I can't say. We even descended to the basement briefly where she showed interest in an old wind-up record player that had been given to me by my late aunt in Massachusetts. I have since dragged it every place I've gone. Julie was then living with a man, a much younger man as I recall now, maybe as much as eight years her junior, in her own house two houses up from mine. A house, by the way, her dad bought or was buying for her. Needless to say, I found her attractive. Mostly it was her pretty face, although the rest of her looked good to me too. She is on the tall side and slim. Her face is rather distinctive. It is a thin face, not classically beautiful, not a fabulous face as Frank Sinatra sang about in his songs. She is quick to remark that her nose is too large. I can't see that, but I know women worry about such things. My own daughter, who is now 24, feels that her ears are too small. Yet, she is strikingly pretty (much like her mother), a redhead with nice features.

So I started seeing Julie for dinner, always at the better restaurants in Louisville, and here the best does not cost a fortune as it might in Manhattan. Most evenings, seventy-five dollars or less pays for dinner and a tip (wine included). After the first dinner I seemed to have trouble getting Julie's attention for a second outing (I don't use the word date and deliberately so, and I will come to the reason why), so I wrote her a short message that our going out might be a mistake because, as I said in my note "I am too old for you or you are too young for me, take your pick." This brought her to my door immediately. Clearly she was upset. She told me she wanted to continue to go out to dinner with me even if she had to pay for her own dinner. I had to be impressed by that statement and I said, of course, she would not have to pay for her dinner (I am sure that was a relief to her). We then agreed, sort of, that the relationship should be platonic, which was fine with me. I had to admit that I wished for more, but then I had a new friend, someone comfortable in nice restaurants, reasonably well spoken, moderately interesting, well-traveled (she went to college in Egypt), and she was well-dressed, too. I told a married woman friend of mine, Linda, that I liked Julie's smell (later I learned to say fragrance). I suppose it was her perfume. Linda used to be my boss and she was about three years older than Julie. She also is quite striking as far as looks. Both women have dark hair, and there is something about dark hair that grabs me. I don't know exactly why.

After I told Linda I liked this woman's smell (I had already told Julie's age), she asked me how many times I had gone out with her. I said six or seven, maybe even eight. Linda looked at me incredulously and said, "And you say this is just a dinner partner?"

I swore that it was. I know Linda quite well and we have talked about subjects like sex rather freely. She had a rough patch with her husband, and when it ended she said happily, "Sex is back." So when I told her I had no sexual relationship with Julie she accepted what I said. But she must have been thinking, Why is this young woman going out with him if she didn't have something in mind, something more than what she had shown so far? I suppose I wondered that too.

I had not in the beginning told Julie just how much older I am than she is. She probably guessed mid-fifties (I do not look my age), old enough certainly but, my God, not the same as mid-sixties. I would soon enough tell Julie my age, realizing, however, that in this computer age a person's age (and a lot more) is readily available to anyone searching. One need only go online to the state license bureau, for example, to gather such information. There must be numerous other ways to collect such facts.

And so our dining outings continued, once a month or so.

Julie was youthful in more ways than chronological. She seemed to me to be a

young 32, and vaguely idealistic. She spoke often of becoming a museum curator but never spoke about how to get there, how to do such a thing. She was politically quite liberal, something that does not so much describe me lately. She leaned towards vegetarianism, though not strictly (she ate chicken but no beef or pork).

Still, I was getting a lot of pleasure going out with her. Maybe it was just because I was lonely and had not yet connected with anyone suitable. Part of my problem, I think, was that I had convinced myself that I was just too old to find anyone who would not look upon me and think, "Hell, he will probably be dead in five years or so, nearly dead, it won't matter." Obviously, I have not bought into the notion that people are likely to live longer and healthier lives these days because of medical advances. Maybe so, but scanning the obituaries, it seems to me there are a lot of people who barely make it to sixty. So sixty-four, fast approaching sixty-five, strikes me as ancient. Nevertheless, I was enjoying Julie's company and looking for more time with her, but seldom seeing her beyond the dinner encounters.

Come early in November I tried to withdraw—to step away from her. On Halloween I took her to the priciest, trendiest spot in the city, a place called "Proof On Main." With a tip, it cost me one-hundred-twenty dollars that night. The food was good, though. What prompted me to want to pull back from Julie after going to a good restaurant like Proof, was that at the dinner before this one I had mentioned in conversation, quite innocently, that we were on a date. She immediately corrected me, sternly informing me that we were not on a date and that we were not dating. She was very definite about this. I had nothing to say in reply, not that I recall anyway, and I suppose I became somewhat silent. I was offended by the remark, thinking, I might be spending a hundred bucks tonight and here my companion is upset that I am saying I am taking her on a date!

I remember when the comedian George Burns was alive (and he lived to be nearly a hundred). He dated much younger starlets, very beautiful women, and nobody, it was my guess, quibbled about calling his time with them something other than a date. Just as if I go to lunch with my boss (who happens to be a man), that is by my reckoning a lunch date. But for Julie, and I guess many of her generation, a date suggested eventually going to bed with the person. I had never encountered this sort of thing before and for good reason. I was married when I was about 35 and still dating age, I guess, and I was divorced at about sixty, so the issue never emerged until Julie brought up the subject so abruptly, and I must admit, a bit cruelly. At this time Julie did not, so far as I know, know my real age. I had not yet told her. I figured she was guessing mid-fifties, and even mid-fifties obviously evoked such a strong response. What would mid-sixties bring? I will tell you. Once she knew my real age, while we continued to see one another periodically, it was never quite the same. Since then, she has not once knocked on my door or phoned except for one instance, which I shall soon recount.

After the Halloween feast at Proof on Main, I more or less stopped seeing Julie. I was deliberately mysterious. I said I had something to take care of (which wasn't entirely untrue). I left the something I must do completely blank. I added that I had to go out of town to do this thing and remarked, "Some things are better left unspoken" (Boy, does that line get a woman curious, let me tell you). What I had to do was in the medical realm, and it was to have a colonoscopy (in two weeks or so). My doctor was pushing me to have this test, and so I did it early in November. The results were quite unremarkable, as they say in medical terminology. It was during all of these goings-on that I wrote Julie a note ending the dinners and fessing up to my actual age, 64, and saying again I was much too old to be with her. I said, Maybe you have discovered my age on your own. It was as I noted certainly easy enough to do. Maybe, too, I wrote a

few silly things in that letter about how much I had enjoyed our time together. I had, too. She wrote back to say she had not indeed checked on my age and made some comment about the Beatles being as old as I was and was I a Beatles fan?

That's sort of the way things stood for several weeks until just before Thanksgiving when Julie called me at work. I should preface this with the confession that from time to time I had given Julie money, never a lot, maybe ten or twenty dollars when she seemed especially broke in midweek. She never asked for it. She does not handle money well, even though she has no mortgage (her father pays it) and he paid off this year in excess of ten thousand dollars in credit card debt. When she told me about this debt and how it was overwhelming her, I suggested she go to her father. While he is not a rich man, from what she has said of him, he is not poor either. She is an only child too, but still, she was afraid of his reaction (I am sure she has been to him before in this way). She did, however, face him and he did pay off the debt and she plans to pay him back in installments without credit card interest, which is an enormous help.

So on this Wednesday before Thanksgiving, Julie called me at my job at about 11 a.m. I was at a meeting. She left a message to the effect that would I please call her right away? I could hear worry in her voice. I hadn't spoken to her or even had a glimpse of her in about three weeks. There had been no dinners since the expensive one at Proof On Main, and I figured we were done. No more dates. There, I've said it! The prohibited word. I took her on a date that last time and as far as I am concerned, every other time too. She could call the time together whatever she wished, but to me they were dates.

God, it was hard being sixty-four, single, and trying to go out with women, although, in my lowest moments, there was no nostalgia about being married to the woman I had married. I did not miss that world, not even for one moment.

What Julie wanted—and it was as if we were a couple suddenly—was money, a loan for three-hundred dollars until payday on Friday, two days away. It was not just a loan but she needed for me to take three-hundred dollars in cash to deposit in her bank (not the same as mine) before noon to prevent her account (a debit card account) from becoming even further in arrears, and thus generating huge fees. A three-hundred-dollar infusion of cash would save her, she told me.

“Okay,” I agreed, a bit surprised at the request, yet sort of pleased too that she came to me with her problem. I suppose most of her friends did not have three-hundred dollars. And going to her father, well, that would have to be the last resort.

So I left work in somewhat of a hurry, went to my bank, stood in line because it was so busy just before Thanksgiving, and withdrew three-hundred dollars cash from my savings, took it to her bank several miles away, and deposited the money in her account, and all of this before 11:45 a.m. Julie is a bookkeeper for a large restaurant in town (a temporary job she is always saying) and the restaurant isn't very far from where I work, so I went by her office with the bank receipt and told her all was well. The money was in her account, and because I knew she had to be broke, I gave her twenty dollars in cash. I don't know what possessed me to do what I did next, but in my expansive mood I said, “Look, Julie, why don't you pay me back two-hundred dollars on Friday and consider the other hundred an early Christmas present.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Yes, I am sure,” I said. She thanked me profusely, and I left feeling pretty good about everything. On Friday she would repay me two-hundred dollars and be forgiven one-hundred.

When Friday came, there was no Julie. I spotted her car on the street in front of her house, and then it was not there. She was off for the evening without having at-

tempted to repay her debt to me, her reduced debt, reduced by one-third. And no call to explain why. I was offended, hurt, and disappointed. When by early afternoon the next day she had not come around to see me, I thought, What the hell. I will wait until next week and see if she repays me then. Suddenly, it occurred to me that the money might well be gone come Monday and a bit of anger kicked in. I knocked on her door and she came to an upstairs window. I hollered up to her. "Did everything work out all right with your bank?" I asked, figuring by asking in such a way she had an opportunity to say, "Yes, and I will have your money for you directly." She didn't say this, however. She just said, "Yes," offering no more information, whereupon I said, "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"Oh, you mean your money? Do you want me to go to the bank now?"

I told her later would be all right, but as I turned to leave, I didn't do so, instead saying, anger in my voice, "Yes, I think you should go now." She did exactly that and was soon back with two-hundred dollars in twenties, asking me if I wanted the entire three-hundred returned because she could go back to the bank machine and get the additional one-hundred dollars. "No, two-hundred will do fine," I said a bit sadly for I was convinced at that moment that she would never have mentioned the money again if I had not asked.

My own fault, I thought, for seeming so flush, so easy with money, acting the big shot. The truth is that the three-hundred dollars would not have been very harmful to my budget had I given it to her outright. But I felt very used the way things unfolded. On occasion I don't especially mind being used, but not in this way.

Through all of this, Julie looked hurt, suddenly very fragile and about to cry. I emerged from what I viewed as a positive gesture in the beginning, not feeling good about it at all, as if I had done something sly and underhanded somewhere along the line. I kept telling myself, you gave the woman more than three-hundred dollars in a crisis and asked for only two-hundred back. A bank would view such a transaction as anything but positive. Well, all the same, I just felt like crap, and I did not see her for some time. Somehow we soon ran into each other (remember we live only two houses apart) and damned if another dinner date was not set up for a few days before Christmas at another fine Louisville restaurant. We never went back to a place twice. Years ago that would have been difficult to do in Louisville, but not so today. These days there are many fine restaurants in the city.

Before this dinner scheduled for just before Christmas, Julie had a Christmas party. How I came to know about the party was quite by accident. I drove up in my car one evening just as it was getting dark, and I saw Julie putting Christmas lights on her porch railings.

"I am having a Christmas party tomorrow night," she announced, "and you are invited." It was then Friday night. I must be the last person invited, I thought right away, and maybe just by chance did I get an invitation at all, although it would seem a bit awkward, I would hazard to say, to have such an event with people coming and going and me nearby at home witnessing all the celebrating.

I told Julie I was planning to go to my cabin at Rough River the next day for an overnight stay but maybe I could change my mind.

"Good," she said, "it will start at 7:00 p.m."

I went to my house, thinking, Do I really want to go to her party when I wasn't sure I was wanted to begin with? She kind of had to invite me, didn't she? Still, I believed she wasn't wild about the idea of my being there and if she was at best neutral about inviting me, and since she was probably awkward and uneasy having me among her friends, therefore similar feelings within me would surely surface. I decided not to

go. Later that evening I stuck a note under her door explaining I had writing work I just had to get done at Rough River. I also included a fifty-dollar bill to help with party costs. In addition to the possible awkward situation that might have ensued, I expected I would be introduced to her real boyfriend, the one who got to sleep with her. She had made it a point to tell me about him recently, maybe to reinforce the limits of our relationship, if I might call it such a relationship. He was a photographer by trade, she told me, about 35 years old, and the chemistry between them was good, she said, which I interpreted to mean she considered him good in bed. I was a little jealous, not so much of him as to what he was getting and I wasn't. The party went well, she told me somewhat later, and the fifty I had given her saved the day because she didn't know how she would have paid for everything without it. That was as close that day as she got to saying thank you.

When she told me about the new boyfriend, Jeff, she was wearing a silver necklace with a garnet stone set in it. It was an attractive enough piece, not awfully expensive I would have guessed, but attractive, just the same. I told her so. She said he told her he got the piece in India where he had just come from a photo assignment. She wore the necklace constantly, even at the last dinner we had after the Christmas party. I commented upon how much she wore the necklace. "Yes, I do like it," she said, "very much so."

I then reminded her that the expensive sweatshirt I bought her while traveling in Wyoming last September cost about sixty dollars, and I had never once seen her wear it.

"Oh, I wear it in the house all the time," she said. I suspected she was lying.

At this last dinner, probably the last we will have for a very long time (but with Julie, I can't ever say that with certainty), she spoke a bit more about Jeff (not that I wished to hear it), telling me his plusses and minuses. I gathered that he, like me, had been married before. But from the way she spoke, his marital status was a bit clouded which could mean, of course, that he was still married. I didn't explore that possibility with her. Already, she was thinking the same thing, I am sure. My only advice to her was to go slow with him. Perhaps it was the wine talking, but I told her that no matter what happens, we'd be friends through it all. We'd see each other on occasion. We had spoken earlier of going to the ballet together and perhaps the opera this coming season.

She said, "Even if I were married or living with Jeff, we would still go out like this, I hope." I thought it an odd thing to say at best.

"I don't know about that," I replied. "I think if you are married or living with some guy, it would not be right to be going out with me. He might not understand." What I was really thinking was that I would hope he would not understand. If I were forty or forty-five, I am certain he would object to such an arrangement, but if she presented me as this harmless older man at almost sixty-five, where was the risk? I don't need that kind of thing in my life, for sure I don't.

Then she said, "If I can't continue to go to dinner with you or to the ballet, I will just have to dump him." She then laughed a laugh that indicated she did not intend to do any such thing. I laughed too, or tried to, in any event.

Again, maybe it was the wine taking over or just that I am a damn fool. It was very near Christmas so I ventured, "There must be something you want for Christmas."

"You already gave me one-hundred dollars at Thanksgiving (actually, it was one-hundred-twenty dollars, but who was counting?) and fifty dollars before my party. That's enough." It was, too. Still, I pushed on. I confess that it was entirely my doing, not hers. Somehow the word massage came up, and she had a place in mind that she had frequented

in the past, a natural or organic sort of massage parlor. It has a name, but I can't now recall it. The next day, though, I found myself in a neighborhood called Butchertown, and went up some narrow streets to a back door where I gave a woman seventy dollars cash (including ten dollars for a tip) for a one-hour massage for Julie. A couple of days before Christmas I took the gift certificate to her house and gave it to her. She was as pleased as could be. I carried the certificate in a little gift bag I had come upon and in this bag I placed a wrapped gift, an ornament for her Christmas tree, which I had seen in a little shop in one of the neighborhoods I frequent for my job (I am a social worker). The ornament was hand-painted and quite unusual, I thought, and only six bucks. It was wrapped beautifully too. She told me that day she was taking some time off from work and hoped to go someplace special. She didn't say where, and I didn't ask. I left soon thereafter and I didn't see her again until well after Christmas—two days before the new year, in fact. Well, I didn't get so much as a Christmas card from Julie. I decided I cannot rank very high with her by such an omission, but then, too, the signs had been there all along. I just chose not to see them. Maybe for her, or so I rationalized, to give me even a small gift or even a card suggested she was encouraging me somehow. I am more inclined, however, to believe as my friend Tom in Massachusetts says of his son, that when you're dealing with someone as young as Julie, you just may not get the response you are hoping for or are used to with other people. Tom would argue that she is probably thinking only of how she is feeling at that particular moment, and it is no more than that.

The no-contact-whatsoever at Christmas I took as a bad omen. No more of this silly business, I decided, even if this inconsiderate brat stirs me in a way I just didn't think possible anymore. It all took me back to when I was about sixteen and a fifteen-year-old dark-haired beauty named Louise stole my heart and stomped on it without mercy (perhaps it is a little dramatic to lay that on a fifteen-year-old). It is amazing, though, that after almost fifty years I have that memory so close to the surface, and how the two females seemed connected. Julie is even close to how I remember Louise. A sort of space cadet (a dork might be today's word), and very inconsiderate, thoughtless, even a bit wacky. Louise had the excuse of being only fifteen. With Julie, well, who knows? And me, what excuse do I have? I was just along for the ride both times, it seems, and both times on uncomfortable trips. The first time I was sixteen and had pimples and could never have had sufficient confidence to keep very long a girl such as Louise B. But now I have confidence aplenty, as well as experience, but perhaps too much of both. I am simply too old for what I am doing or trying to do, or so it feels a lot of days.

This account isn't quite over. It was a couple of days before the new year, and as I have already said, Julie was back. I was walking to my car that Saturday, again heading for Rough River, and who did I see waving at me from her porch steps but Julie. If I am not mistaken, she was wearing the blue sweatshirt I gave her from Wyoming, the one I had never seen her wear. She signaled for me to come over and I did, although not too close.

"You were away," I said, saying the obvious. "You got to go someplace after all."

"We spent the week in Monroe County," she replied, "in a cabin there. It was very nice."

I don't know where in Kentucky Monroe County is located but wherever it is I imagine it is quite rural. Much of Kentucky is rural. I assumed she meant herself and Jeff. I didn't ask who she was with, however.

"Speaking of cabins," I said next, "that is where I am going, to my cabin."

“Oh, you’re leaving,” she said, acting surprised and a little disappointed. “When will you be back?”

“Probably tomorrow, possibly longer,” was my reply. I was sure I would be back the next day. I didn’t stick around and talk to her more, something that I sensed she wanted me to do, because I might have said in a prolonged conversation with her, that in spite of the many times I had invited her to see my cabin in Grayson County, even for a few hours, she always said no, and my cabin is on a bluff overlooking Rough River Lake. It is as scenic a spot as one could wish for in Kentucky. No, she was never interested enough to see my place or be with me the several hours it would take coming and going. Of course, I said none of this.

So I went off to Rough River more determined than ever to end this painful experience I was having with Julie and for what now seemed like the longest time, and to so little purpose.

When I got home the next day there was this message on my phone machine: “This is Julie. I just wanted you to know, Ray, that while I had a good time in Monroe County I did miss seeing you.” Then she hung up. Later there was a note thanking me for the gifts and dinners over the past few months and telling me how she looked forward to going to the ballet with me and perhaps the opera in the coming year.

When I gave Julie her Christmas gifts, I also wrote her a note of advice. I said, more or less, “If this guy, Jeff, is worth going after (if he is a keeper), be wise and do not tell him everything about yourself immediately. Remain a little aloof, a little mysterious. Knowing everything about you does not really matter with a man at my point in life, but if Jeff is serious about you or might become serious and looking to settle down, you do yourself no favors by telling him how broke you are or that your father is buying the house you are living in, and so on. You can’t expect him to be impressed with such revelations. I would not be at his age.” Then I told her of an experience I had when I first met my wife. I was living in a small Massachusetts city north of Boston and there were lots of gorgeous women available, but all I ever met were the ones who were broke (much like Julie is). Then I met Mary, who was eventually to become my wife. She was a nurse. One time I was to meet Mary in a bar and she was there ahead of me and on the table in front of her were two twenty dollar bills, change from a fifty. All that evening and no few evenings after that, she paid, insisted on buying, and, well, I was impressed. She was lovely like the others but clearly she was not broke. “Remember, Julie,” I went on, “serious guys are not just looking at your ass, they are also looking at your purse. So if you have to fake it a little about your situation, do so. Everything need not be revealed about yourself in the first few encounters.”

Julie will probably ignore my advice, or not hear it, or for that matter, may not be interested enough to have read my note. Who knows! So what if she does not heed my advice (or even read it). Probably along about February she will call me and say, “Didn’t you say we could go to the ballet?” And I will reply, “Sure, Julie. Anytime, but remember to pick out good tickets, and I will go around and pay for them.” I will by then have forgotten all the slights I’ve felt, real or imagined, in the interest of seeing how spectacular I expect she will look dressed up, dressed to the nines, so to speak. She tells me her mother often took her as a child both to the opera and to the ballet and currently she knows no one (save me) willing to go with her, or more likely knows no one who can afford to take her (more to the point, I suspect). She worries out loud that I might not like the length of the events. My answer is that while I am not a regular at the ballet or the opera either, I have been once or twice in my life. What I don’t say and won’t say is that I like her smell, and so to sit next to her for several hours, well, I cannot think of too many other things I would prefer to do this coming winter.