

THE PATH
by NOVA SPIVACK

10TH grade

Written by Nova Spivack, in 1985, at age 15 or 16, Beaver Country Day School
10th grade American Literature Class Assignment to write in the style of Hemingway

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Contact: nova@novaspivack.com

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Ellie was a beautiful woman really and I admired that. And the hazy sunlight reflected gold in her hair. I admired that too. In fact, I admired nearly everything about her except when we weren't together. Then I would get to thinking.

She was a smart girl too. I had known many smart girls but the only one I ever liked was Ellie.

"This IS a nice room you found, Jack."

"Yes," I said.

"The windows are so..."

"Broad."

"Yes, I like these broad windows. What a view."

"The sun is getting low," I said.

"I wish it were hot outside, love."

"Soon."

"Dinner will be grand," she told me, gesturing with her hand.

"Mr. Viggen is a generous host."

"It is so nice of you to bring me," she said.

"I didn't want to eat out tonight."

She looked at me.

I smiled at her and then looked to the left at the mahogany bookcases which covered one wall.

The dinner table was long. We all sat along it in our jackets and kept our elbows on our laps.

"Thank you all for coming tonight to celebrate with me, the publication of my newest novel, 'Stretches,'" Mr. Viggen began. "I hope that you will find my humble cuisine to your liking." He paused and we laughed. Viggen was a very extravagant man.

"A toast!" shouted Barnaby after the third course. He was a little tight. "A toast to Viggen's book!"

We all raised our glasses and Barnaby stood up.

"To a great success in the States!"

"Here, here!"

"To a great success here!"

"Here, here!"

"To a magnificent royalty, God knows the man doesn't need it!"

We all laughed and clinked our glasses.

The dessert course was as fine as the others. And when Ellie finished her chocolate covered strawberries she and I rose.

"Come with me and meet my friend Barnaby," I said.

We walked over to Barnaby who was dipping a strawberry in the last of his champagne. "Oh, Jack, how good to see you. I hear you were travelling?"

"Yes."

"The boys at your office told me you had correspondent work in Berlin."

"Yes. Political rubbish," I told him.

"Did you enjoy yourself?"

"Oh sure."

"How was the country?" he asked. Tom was the truest traveller I knew.

"Grand. Very grand."

Ellie smiled at him while we spoke and I saw his eyes glance at her a few times. Poor fool.

"This is my friend Tom," I said to Ellie.

"Tom Barnaby. Tom, Ellie Arnaud."

"How very pleasing to meet you," he said and kissed her hand.

Ellie laughed.

"Don't mind him," I said to her "He's a little tight from all that toasting."

"Am not."

I chuckled.

"Am not tight," he said.

"It's good to be back in town, Barn."

"Oh sure," he agreed. "You have work here still?"

"Always," I said.

"Good old Jack."

"How was the mountain?" I asked him.

"It fought well."

"Are you a climber?" Ellie asked.

"No, a drunkard."

"But in all seriousness, Mr. Barnaby."

"Tom to you, my dear."

Ellie was smiling and I could see that she enjoyed Barnaby.

"Were you in the Alps?"

"Yes, but we had to turn back."

"Terrible. I didn't know," I said. It was, too. The

expedition was in the papers before it left.

"The winter is not a good time."

"No," said Ellie.

The gardens were smooth and private. We walked between two rows of lilac bushes. The buds were hard still but the snow was all melted.

"The air is beginning to have that smell to it," Ellie said.

I breathed in. "I'm glad."

We were far away from the guests. The band was playing in the mansion. The air slid over us; it wasn't cold anymore. I kissed her.

The stars were out. There were crickets near the path.

I kissed her again and held her against me.

"I missed you, Jack," she said.

"Will you be staying long?"

We walked further on the path. Her heels clicked on the slate.

"I have made many friends these past few weeks," she told me.

"Congratulations," I said.

The trees along the path curved over us like a tent. The leaves weren't out yet but the branches had sap in them and they swayed loosely in the breeze.

"Why?" she asked.

"Do you remember their names?" I asked her.

"Why are you so bitter?"

"I'm not. I'm just low. Frustration probably," I said.

"Oh, don't be frustrated my love."

"I am though."

"Not because of me; I love you too much."

Last summer, I remembered, when I met all the locals and we walked together on the streets and sat in the smoke in cafes until morning and slept with the windows open all day, Franc had killed himself. Franc was a swell man. I taught him to play bridge and he beat me. He had a passion for riding.

"When you feel the animal underneath you, Jack. When you feel that power; when your blood is pounding at the same rate as the horse, and his hooves are throwing the dirt to your knees, then Jack, you will know freedom."

"Freedom? You have to get off the horse sometime."

"Yes, Jack, but while you run you are so free."

"Have you ever drunk yourself silly?" I asked him.

He nodded.

"Have you said what lurks in your deepest heart? Have you fought with three men in one night and then gone home with a girl that you can't remember?"

"Yes, but it was not freedom; I always got in trouble by it."

"There's no such thing as freedom," I said.

"Yes there is, Jack, you just have to grab it."

"It always seems to be slipping through my fingers."

"Ride with me Jack. Sometime I will take you."

We rode one day. I had never ridden a good horse before. When we were done we got drunk and had headaches the next day. My legs had ached for a week. That was not freedom.

Franc had one day seen Ellie. The food was bad at the club we were at but I don't think he even noticed. When I danced with her he watched and when she sat at the bar he watched her.

Ellie danced with a lot of men that night. I got very tight. Franc was very quiet.

For the weeks that followed I saw Ellie at the clubs and often Franc would be there too.

"You know, I think he has designs for you," I told her.

"That little man?" she said. I noticed a fascination in her voice.

The black drummer smiled at her.

"Bonjour, Charli!" She called over the trumpet.

"How're you, how're you Miss Anraud?" he said.

"Grand Charli, and you?"

"I's fine; just fine!"

"Come on, let's sit down," I said.

The waitress brought us chilled wine.

"I am going to Italy," she said.

"When?" I was surprised.

"Tomorrow."

"On no notice?"

"Oh, love, I have been thinking about it for a while," she said.

"You didn't tell me."

"I didn't want to ruin the moment."

The tablecloth was dirty, there were ashes on it and a red stain from burgundy.

"I'll not be gone forever," she told me.

Ellie had a swell time in Italy with Franc as her guide. I felt sour but I had work and I got it finished. She told me all about Italy when she returned. I had been there.

"Franc is very sweet."

"Did you like Rome?" I asked her.

"Yes, but the country was better."

"Where is Franc?" I asked. I was angry at him but I missed him too.

"I don't know," she told me.

"I haven't seen him at the cafes."

"Oh, Jack I met the most wonderful chap. You will be grand with him. Name's Pierre, he's a pilot. He runs the mails to the south and to Spain."

"I should like to see Franc. Good old Franc," I said.

"Pierre is here for Independence day, so that gives him a week."

"Poor Franc," I said. I knew how he felt.

"I think the wine is cold now." Ellie went over to my sink. They found Franc hanging in the stables.

"No, I guess, you're right," I said. "It would do me no good to be frustrated." The path turned gracefully to the right and I held Ellie's hand. There was a glistening film of water on the slate that brought out a dark gray.

"No, and not in such a lovely garden."

"You are a fine girl, Ellie."

The music from the party drifted to us in patches that swelled and drained away in the breeze. There were the muffled sounds of voices and then a lot of laughter and then voices again.

"I want to travel," she said.

We stopped on the path. "You do all the time."

"No, but travel far."

"Where haven't you been?" I asked.

"India."

"You want to go to India?"

"Yes," she smiled, "To ride The Express."

"That isn't cheap."

"Neither am I," she said.

"Only the British ride The Express," I said.

"Grand."

"Britishmen have wives, my dear," I said.

Sometimes I wished that I did too. Sometimes I would look at Ellie and get to thinking. I looked at her and thought.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

I began to be terribly afraid. "I am just thinking."

"Oh, but you must tell me what; you know how I adore your thoughts."

The fear was bigger than me and so real and clear that I didn't feel strange.

There was that day on the Aegean. We had travelled by steamer from Athens to Mykonos. There was a monastery with its hunched, Orthodox brothers high on a stone cliff above the water. I knew that from the top the water was clear and I imagined the view.

Tom Barnaby, Vios and another friend: Appel from Seattle, and I were staying in a dive on our last Drachmas. There was an outhouse and lots of Retsina and the other guests smoked dark, Greek tobacco that burned your nose to breathe.

I didn't have work. Appel had wired for money in Athens. We had five days.

The way to the monastery was steep and it was dark when we arrived. We stayed up late drinking Ouzo with the monks and they gave us a room to sleep in.

The water was clear and aqua from the top and four days was

a long time then.

"I don't think I ever want to go back," Tom said.

"I like it up here very much," Vios said. He was a Greek that we had met in Florence.

"The poor monks," I said.

"Celibacy stinks," Appel said.

"Funny, but I don't miss the girls now."

"None of us do, Jack," Tom said. Appel looked at hands.

"This is the true life isn't it, Barn?"

"Oh, sure," Barnaby said to me.

We had breakfast with the monks and they seemed sad to see us go.

We sailed. The wind in Greece is stiff and it changes to a gale with no warning. The clouds over the water stay white and thin, and the sky turns a darker blue. But that is all. There is no thunder and the sun still shines. Appel didn't like the storms. Tom and I went out though, even when the weather was strong. We reefed the sail and made a go for it. Good old Barn, he's not one to turn from a challenge. He's an enthusiast.

Then Appel left. We didn't mind. He had a fiance and sometimes he was dull.

The three of us sat in a white, plaster cafe and talked.

"Maybe you get work here, no? You can stay," Vios said. He was a friendly boy and he could fish his waters well. I had never dragged a net before.

"No, that wouldn't do," said Tom.

"No?"

"No, we still have money," he lied. We had some.

"You find women, then you stay!" Vios laughed.

The sunlight in Greece is clear and white. It bounces off of the olive leaves and the pistachio orchards making their oval leaves flash lime. You had to squint in the village from the white walls.

"No, that would take the fun out of it," I said.

"Well, if it is so private," Ellie said.

"No, it's nothing. I don't even know what it was."

"I feel cold," Ellie said.

"It isn't chilly."

"Do you love me?" she asked.

"Sure. You're a swell girl."

Ellie looked hard into me with her blue eyes. I felt like one of those poor fools who meets her in a bar and sees those eyes.

"Do you love me so much that you could...that we could..."

"I will be travelling too, I hope," I said.

"Sometimes I remember my parents."

"Your mother stayed with him?"

"To this day," she said.

"You are an unusual girl. Do you surprise them?" I asked her.

"They don't know me."

"Who does."

"Oh Jack, don't be a cynic."

"You're right, there's no use in being a cynic when the world is so crummy."

We laughed.

"Sometimes I remember when I was a little girl and they, my parents, were so happy," she told me.

I held both her hands and closed my eyes.

"It was a warm feeling like neither of them needed anything."

Ellie was looking to her side at the damp grass which was becoming green with the ripeness of spring.

"I don't have it," I said.

"No, I don't either."

"I suppose it would be nice." But I didn't really mean that. My writing would suffer. I knew that my writing would suffer from it. Some of my friends had lost it all to their women. Some had still managed to feel inspiration. But they wrote poor novels.

"Sometimes I almost think that I could settle down," Ellie told me.

"The world would keep moving," I said, "and you'd fall behind."

"Sure, but someday a chap just has to stop."

"You're not that old, love. I looked at the stars. They were dim, little flickering things. The light from Paris glowed just before the horizon. "Isn't Paris grand?"

"No," she said. "It gets dull."

We were deep in the gardens but still I could hear that the party was quieting. It would be rude to stay too late. Vigen was a generous host but I didn't know him so well. "I think it must be late."

"Your friend Barnaby is a fine fellow. I should like to have a drink with him," she said.

"He gets silly when he's tight."

"Oh Jack, it is so hard for us."

The path ended at the foot of a rolling hill. The grass was damp. Our feet got wet but the view from the top was fine.

"We'll make it." I felt rotten then and tired.

"I do love you Jack."

"You say that to all the men."

"But I mean it with you. I could just melt into you right now." Her eyes were shiny.

We kissed.

"I feel low," I said.

"You always do." Ellie ran her fingers through my hair.

"You look swell in that dress."

"They tell me."

"I feel low."

"I'm sorry," she said.

"No."

During the war I was in a bar at night. We were gambling because there was no enemy to fight. We were drinking too, and that way we didn't fight with ourselves.

"Soldiers on the border of war," said Marclionni.

"To Hell with the war!" I said.

"We will drink another bottle?" Francesco asked.

"Certainly."

"You deal now."

The bottle came.

"Do you smoke Arabian cigarettes, Jack?"

"No."

"You want one?"

"Why not."

"Henri, you win stupid. Pay attention."

"I'm sleepy."

"Shut up you two."

We sat there very late.

"Soon they will make you an officer," Marco said.

"No."

"Yes, they will, and you should be very proud."

I was tired of the army. "No, they won't; I won't be around."

"You'll be shot."

"I'll miss you all," I said.

"You are our dearest friend," Francesco said. I loved that boy.

When you love someone life finds a way to hurt you. We caught up with the war. We ran through the trenches with the stench of our comrades around us and the rhythm of the bombardment. The flares flashed on us and made us look like white ghosts. We were white, many of us, from fear too. Francesco was thrown by a shell. I could barely recognize him, he was writhing and his voice was grainy. He kept asking me to kill him.

"No. Fight for your life dammit!"

"Kill me please. The pain...Please, please kill me, my good friend."

"Hold on dammit. They are bringing the stretcher!"

"Shoot me! Oh please! It hurts so much."

"Never!"

"I'll die anyway...You've got to help me Jack! I'm burning up. Shoot me and end it!"

"I can't. Please Francesco, don't let it take you!"

"Just do it!"

"I can't."

"Bastard!"

I grabbed him by the collar, his shirt was wet and warm. "Don't do this, Francesco! You'll be alright! We'll take care of you! Just hold on to it!" I screamed for someone to bring morphine. Henri came running, backlit by the phosphors. Breathless, He handed me a hypodermic and I pushed it into Francesco's arm. He shivered and then died.

"Poor Jack," Stephen, a friend of mine, said the week after the battle. "You haven't learned a very important lesson."

"Oh?"

"I will tell you."

"I'm not sure I want to know it," I said.

"You are brooding. Do not brood."

"Tell me then."

"In love and war you must not fight the truth."

It was that simple.

"I love you so much," I said to Ellie and I squeezed her but I felt like we were already far apart.

"It has been a lovely night, and thank you, Jack," she said.

"I guess I will be in Spain soon for the fights."

"I don't want to go back to Spain," she said.

"The Fiesta even?"

"No. I want to go far."

"Yes, I know. We all do."

The crickets beat their shrill chorus around us and a night bird called. It was a long ululation and the trees back at the path rustled.

"You will go to India," I said.

"And you will go to Spain."

"Do you have money?"

"Yes," she said.

"How will you do?" I asked her.

"I will find someone for the trip."

"You are a very unusual girl."

"Not so."

"Yes, really--and beautiful too, so you live well."

"I live the best with you, Jack."

"When you get back I might still be here," I said.

"That would be grand."

"I do feel low now," I said.

"So do I." She had never said that to me. It lifted my spirits to know that she felt low because of me. I felt that she cared.

"You are a fine woman."

"Neither of us could really stop, could we?"

"No, I don't think so. Too frustrating. Too dull; no, I don't think so. I couldn't."

"Neither could I," She said.

"Think of me on The Express," I said.

"I will, always."

We kissed and for once it felt true; we both knew love and felt it and didn't worry. It was a long kiss and Ellie's hands slid along my back in patterns but then she stopped and we pressed our bodies together as tightly as we could.

"Oh."

That breeze flowed by us again.

"Yes."

"Well."

"It must be very late now," I said and we walked back along the path to the party which was over.