BIKER BEATTIE

Steve E. Wright*

I had my head down staring at the yellow line when she flew by so I didn't have time to look up. But I saw the license plate. It read 4STR. That was enough to make me search for a quick turnaround spot. There wasn't one, so I cut across a lawn in the center of Middlesex village on U.S. Route 2. I know the Harley chewed up some grass and I still feel bad about that now, almost six years later. Letting her get away when we had been playing phone tag for weeks was not an option, so across the lawn it was. Less grass to mow.

Now I had to catch her. I knew she liked to drive the five or six mile stretch of Rte. 2 between Montpelier and Middlesex because it had some nice views of the Winooski river and adjacent farmland. You could do this, avoid the Interstate, and use the drive to unwind. Usually, after leaving the capitol, you needed to unwind. But she was moving on pretty good so I guessed she would get on the big road just outside the village and cruise on to Burlington where she was working. So, I took the gamble and the entrance ramp, and gave the bike the throttle, reluctantly, because it was only two weeks off the showroom floor. I had to catch her.

It took about three miles at unreasonable speed before I pulled alongside. I just sat there, hanging in the breeze beside her door. She ignored me for a while, maybe thinking I was just another wise-ass biker. But when I pushed ahead, took both hands off the bars and made eye contact, she did the same, throwing her arms up, laughing, and motioned me to take the Waterbury exit.

We pulled into a Mobil station, and jumped up and down and hugged. Then, she looked over at my bike, still ticking and clicking, with little heat waves coming off the pipes from the short but intense chase. She said, "Oh my God, it's beautiful. I want it."

She was standing on the left side, with her right hand reaching across to the right handle bar, when she stepped back, bent over, and, with both hands, rolled up her long dress. She then threw her right leg over the bike, hit the starter, jammed down the shift lever with the toe of her black flat, snapped the clutch and was gone in a roar, north on Route 100 toward Stowe, past Thatcher Brook Inn and Ben and Jerry's: no helmet, no gloves, no boots—just a long dress and a pair of black flats.

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* Mollie and I worked together for four years in state government. She was Commissioner of Forests, Parks, and Recreation while I was Commissioner of Fish and Wildlife.

I was too stunned to move. Everyone around the station—guys pumping gas, tourists, locals—were all staring after her and then looking at me. No one was saying anything. Finally, from the back one guy yelled out, "Hey buddy, you just lost a nice bike." I turned to look at him, still too numb to respond, and just shrugged my shoulders.

About ten minutes later, just long enough to make me really nervous, I could hear her coming back—over the hill through Colbyville, past the "mansion," down by the hardware store and the Chamber of Commerce information booth, her dress blowing over her head. Her left hand was thrashing at it trying to regain control so she could see the road, but, she made it into the parking area near the gas pumps, hopped off, put her hands on her hips, grinned, and said, "Nice bike."

That one incident, for me, is so typical of Mollie Beattie. Beyond honesty, integrity, commitment, loyalty, brilliance, courage, and lots of other notable qualities, you never knew what Mollie was going to do, and I loved her for it. She was my friend, my colleague, my confidante, my advisor, my fellow-sufferer. And I miss her terribly.