

**The First Two Pages: “The Golden Road (To Unlimited Devotion)”
by David Avallone**

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An Essay by David Avallone

When Josh Pachter approached me to write this story, for his *Friend Of The Devil* anthology, I was a little conflicted. I will admit—heresy!—that I am not a particular fan of The Grateful Dead. I like them just fine, but I rarely go out of my way to listen to them. But I do like Josh very much, and I wanted to do a piece for him. I like to think of myself, like my father, as a pro who can tackle anything, and as challenges go this one didn't seem insurmountable.

Josh suggested the song, and I gave it a listen. The title is intrinsically romantic, and it immediately reminded me of the times in my own life where a golden road was opened up in front of me, and I took it. It reminded me of what I was headed towards, and what I was leaving behind, in those crazy times. Plenty of material in those memories for a good story.

I'd have to add a crime of course—the raw material I was thinking of involved a few misdemeanors, and maybe a sin or three—but no felonies. The memories in question had a lot of strong emotions, though, and I felt that would be enough for a compelling story.

I decided to combine two true stories, two jobs, two women, and two adventures—or misadventures, for want of a better word—into one story.

Writing this, I realize that I didn't have any second thoughts about using so much real autobiography in this story, and I wondered why that was. Ultimately, I think the real stories were good ones, the emotional resonances still strong, and I wasn't afraid to share it. No one reading it will necessarily know how much of it is true. Unless they read this blog...

Whatever you write, you're working with the raw material of your own human experience, and sometimes that material is more raw than others. It was a bit of a surprise that this went in that direction, but the result—one hopes—is an effective story, deeply felt.

The raw material: In 1987, I had an affair with a job supervisor at a Fotomat plant. We worked the night shift. She was coming off a very bad marriage. Her name was Dawn Summers, and that amused me for reasons you'll see in the excerpt below. After that job, I worked in a furniture factory to earn money to move to Los Angeles, in a beat-up 1971 Chevy Impala.

In 1991, I was making a movie in Arizona. I had an affair with a woman named Yvonne... who was coming off a bad marriage. Not to over-share, but if you're a man who is willing to listen, you hear a lot of stories about bad marriages. Some are worse than others, and therein can lie a crime or two.

Finally, my fondness for old muscle cars has resulted in more than one experience of being stranded in various deserts waiting for engines to be serviced... waiting to get back on that open road.

Stylistically, first-person singular was an obvious choice. It's a personal story, and it works best from the perspective of the man telling it. I will admit I lean heavily on first person, as a writer. I love it and it's comfortable for me.

Structurally, I thought it was good to start with Dawn, and create a little mystery around her, as the hook. Then I roll back and set the stage. Two paragraphs of stage-setting, and we're back to talking about Dawn, because this may be a crime story... but it's also a love story. Our narrator's feelings about Dawn drive the entire tale, so we have to fix that clearly, draw her memorably, in the mind of the reader. And reader, she did have the bluest eyes.

A page and a half in, we get into the story proper: the very beginning of the romance.

Here's the first two pages:

Her name was Dawn, as far as I knew. Later I found out it wasn't: she had picked it, with great intention, for reasons both obvious and known only to herself.

In the summer of 1987, I was on my way to California when my beat-up '71 Chevy Impala convertible blew its engine in some desert nowhere and stranded me. I found a furnished dump and got a job in a furniture factory while a sweaty jackass named Reid worked very slowly on my car. Refurbishing the engine would eat up the humble stake I had saved to start my new life, which meant that, even

after Reid the snail finished, I'd have to stick around until I earned it back.

I spent a couple of months assembling the rails that hold cubicles together. It felt like working in one Dickensian workhouse to put together the cells for other poor suckers in some future workhouse. But the pay was fair, as was Dawn, my supervisor.

Even before I knew it was an alias, her name had a fanciful Ian Fleming feel. I clocked in at six every July and August morning and was greeted by a tall and gorgeous woman who called herself Dawn Summers. She had a sunny smile and an explosion of frizzy blond hair like a supernova. She whistled while she worked, and from her it was somehow sweet, rather than annoying. Her eyes were blue and kind, and as blue as they were, they were kinder than they were blue.

She was thirty-something and fun and charming. I was twenty-two and fresh out of school. I wasn't without some kind of rudimentary charm myself, but I'd never asked out an adult woman and was paralyzed by the prospect. Dawn was flirty, sure, but wasn't she at least a little flirty with everyone? There was something in her eyes when she looked at me that I was desperate to take personally, but should I? My confidence was still very much under construction, a fragile structure in need of more concrete and rebar.

By the first week of August, Reid had finally finished the Impala, and by the second week the sack of cash under my bed had almost hit my "time to move on" goal. On the one hand, I couldn't wait to get back on the road. On the other, there was Dawn, and the way she looked at me, which I was desperate to take personally.

One sun-blasted morning, a truck was late with a shipment of rails, and my section of the line shut down. Me and five other guys stood around the loading dock, killing time. Five other guys and Dawn.

I didn't socialize much at work. Our routine didn't allow for more than a few words with each other in the break room. The other guys had all gone to high school together. They called me "Hollywood," because I'd been dumb enough on Day One to explain where I was going. These guys would live and die within fifteen miles of the hospital they were born in, and my kind of dream—the kind you cross a continent for—seemed like a fantasy to them. At first, "Hollywood" was intended to needle me, but we'd grown on each other just enough that it didn't feel like a tease anymore. Just a nickname.

While we waited for the overdue truck, one of the other workers—a handsome dude whose name was probably John—asked Dawn, “What are you doing Saturday night?”

The rest of the boys made predictable noises of surprise and admiration at John’s taking the big swing right there in front of us. That was the kind of boldness I didn’t yet possess, and I was envious. Also, cliché or no cliché, my heart literally sank. It was a long time ago, but I can still remember my disappointment. Maybe she’d say yes, maybe she’d say no ... but how could I ask her out now that John had made his move? It would seem like he’d given me the idea.

But something happened that was completely outside my life experience. Dawn gave him that big sunny smile and said, “I’m busy Saturday night.” She took a dramatic pause, then looked directly at me with a shy conspiratorial grin. “David is taking me out.”

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David Avallone is a writer and filmmaker. In 2024, he is writing on *Batwheels* for Warner Brothers Animation, and has a few comic book series out on the stands, including *Elvira Meets HP Lovecraft* for Dynamite, and his original comic series *Drawing Blood*, co-created with Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles creator Kevin Eastman, from Image. He hosts a couple of podcasts, including the award-winning *The Writers Block*. Over the course of his career, he’s written many iconic characters, like Zorro, Vampirella, Red Sonja, The Shadow, Doc Savage, John Carter/Dejah Thoris and for both the *Star Wars* and *Planet of the Apes* franchises. He’s gone back to prose only recently, with short fiction on classic characters Kolchak and Nick Carter. He is the son of prolific novelist Michael Avallone and women’s rights activist Fran Avallone. He lives in Hollywood, California with his delightful wife, Augusta, and three mischievous cats.