

APPALACHIA

*The excerpt below is taken from a larger work about a dying town, a vivid imagination, and fading hope.
The continuity of the story is intentionally disjointed*

I

A GRAMOPHONE SAT beneath a muted light playing a broken record.

The violins sang along with the cello's moans. The wind and brass fluttered in the background. The drums bellowed. As the sound built upward, a percussive steel sound interrupted. Its entrance was disdainful but it left with a pure resonance. A voice, inaudible before, muttered verses that did not seem to be of any language in a harsh, guttural tone. The steel sound struck again, complemented this time by the earthiness of wooden chimes. The song was a dissonant elegance.

It then ended, allowing the silence to settle in. The gramophone sat upon an old table, abused, but not by time. Notches and deep gashes adorned its aged oaken frame. It faithfully rotated the record, though no sound escaped its rusting mouth. So the silence remained.

Something emerged, hidden mostly by darkness but outlined by light. It stood, unmoving, its silhouette unchanging. The creature then stepped forward, the light bathing it in an amber that flowed down its black suit like rich honey. The suit was draped over its tall, slender frame while knitted gloves clung to his wiry fingers, exposing their boniness. However, its head housed a peculiarity. On it, there rested the skull of a horned beast, cracked, dusty, and of a gritty white. A set of antlers resided on the top, ornamental and labyrinthine in growth, comparable to the roots of decaying tree.

The creature's head slowly turned, its gaze resting upon the darkness again. A woman in a red dress stepped out, her stride wooden but purposeful. Her skin was a deathly pallor which complemented her full, blood-red lips and her short black hair. She looked up lovingly at the creature, her face contorting into radiant smile, her eyes cold and impassive.

The gramophone abruptly let out a static hum, the sound of individual instruments soon rising from the muddy aural pool. The two were surrounded in a cacophony of violins clashing as a piano

emanated a weighty hollowness. There was no cohesion, no union, no harmony, just noise, a rapturous discord. The creature held an outstretched hand, beckoning the woman to take it. She reached out, gently laying her hand in his while also reaching up to rest her arm around his shoulder. The pair stepped forward, caressing each other as they gently swayed amid the music. Each move they made, they made with the other anticipating it, their footfalls landing as one.

The record spun and the two still danced.

T H E B O Y awoke to the sound of broken glass and the clatter of metal.

He heard the grated voice of his father, swearing, slurring each word. Rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, he slowly lifted himself up from the couch, throwing off the blanket covering him. He stretched outward and let out a yawn, looking into the kitchen. Within it, he saw his father standing, staring down indignantly at a pile of pots and pans, silverware, and broken glass cups. The dim bulb above flickered, showing its age, and then fell down onto the floor, cracking into several shards.

He swung his legs off from the couch, leaving the comfort of sleep, and picked up his jacket that laid on the floor. He slipped it on and ambled into the kitchen, walking past the clutter to the refrigerator. Opening it, he was welcomed with a sour odor, the smell of spoiled milk mingling with that of rotting vegetables. He scanned the shelves, sparsely stocked. A ripped open package of deli ham. Half-finished bowl of spaghetti. Stale bread. Broken eggs. He took out a crinkled box of breakfast sausage links and a bag of frozen waffles. Tossing them both onto a plate, he threw it into a microwave and punched in two minutes. Still tired, he closed his eyes while leaning against the refrigerator.

“Aren’t you going to help me clean this up?”

The boy felt a hand smack against his head which woke him from his stupor. He looked over at his father, his reddened eyes staring at him with irritation. He nodded. The two bent down, the boy stacking up the pots and pans while his father picked up the larger pieces of glass, tossing them into a garbage bag he pulled out. The work was dull but was done quickly. The shrill beep of the microwave went off, prompting him to look over at the microwave's clock. He saw that he had another twenty before school.

“So, are we done now?” His father grunted, picking up a cup filled halfway with coffee. He drank, gulping it down messily, drips of it staining his shirt brownish-black. “Yeah.” His father ruffled his hair, before stumbling back down the hallway to his bedroom.

The boy took the plate out from the microwave and then looked for a cup, finding the only unbroken one in the cupboard. He poured himself a glass of orange juice and cradled the plate and cup together as he walked back into the living room. As he sat back down, the couch letting out a slow wheeze, he turned on the television. The screen immediately defaulted to a news channel, showing an anchor bantering with the weatherman, both laughing at a joke he had missed. He wolfed down his breakfast,

savoring the salty bite of the sausage and the lightness of the waffles, and washed it all down with the orange juice. The meal had a hint of staleness but he enjoyed it nonetheless.

Afterwards, he padded towards the bathroom, brushing his teeth as he took a quick shower. The acidity of the orange juice mixed with the mint flavor of the toothpaste, creating a horribly sickening taste. He spat out the bitter mixture, letting the water from the showerhead run through his mouth. After drying himself, he threw on a t-shirt, a woolen sweater, a loose pair of jeans, and his jacket, an outfit he wore continuously. The boy felt refreshed, feeling both clean and full.

He headed back into the living room where his backpack was. He picked up his unfinished homework, textbooks, folders, and pencils, shoving them all into one compartment. His backpack was tearing apart at the seams. He swung it over his shoulder and walked over to his father's room, knocking on the door.

"I'm going to leave now. I have to stay after today so I'll be coming home late." He heard a snort followed by a garbled yes. To make sure his father would remember, he quickly scribbled out a message for him, clearing out part of the kitchen table and placing it on there to make it visible. Feeling satisfied, he left, locking the door behind him.

The boy entered the dim hallway of his apartment complex, the floor inset with a fading green carpet filled with dirt, the walls covered in a chipped red paint. Small lamps appeared on the wall every few feet, some lit, some dull, some dead. A damp, musty smell hung around him, the consequence of a heavy gale that had flooded the building years ago. Dusty windows bathed the hallway with the distant dawn sunlight, providing a much needed warmth.

Eliza, his classmate and neighbor, also stepped out from her own apartment, pulling a black suitcase behind her. It served the same function as a backpack would, carrying all her books and work along with more due to the large space. When he first saw her use it, he had thought it was a novel idea and made sure to let her know of it. However, her only response was to stare at him strangely.

She quickly glanced at him, adjusted the wool scarf draped around her neck, and walked briskly for the stairs. He followed, lagging behind as to avoid being directly behind her. Each step he went down, the wood underneath groaned, each one restlessly protesting their predicament. He made sure his feet fell softly on the steps, not wanting to break them.

Eventually, he made it to the last landing, opening the door into the parking lot and walked out into the cold morning. He was met by an unmoving, frigid air that embraced him, making its ways into the weaves of his clothes. The sun hung above, radiating a soft glow splintered by a copse of bare trees growing near a fading neon sign. It advertised available rooms for rent in bold, black letters, surrounded by a garish green and pink neon light that looped together to form the name Rawler Inns. During the '70s, the apartment complex had been a popular chain of inns. However, it eventually broke apart after the arrival of the new century for reasons he did not know.

The boy walked towards the bus stop. The chatter of the suitcase wheels as it made its way across the asphalt reached his ears. He could also hear distant voices, laughing and talking, as he neared the bus stop. Hunter, a lanky high schooler, flipped through a wrinkled book, a limp but lit cigarette hanging from his lips as he leaned against the lamppost. Two younger middle schoolers took turns tossing snow balls up at the bulb of the lamppost to pass the time. One eventually broke it, having laced his snow ball with gravel. This launched sparks and glass, falling directly on Hunter, both surprising and infuriating him. Tossing aside his singed book, he began swinging his fists and swearing at the two, blatantly yelling out several obscenities and other kind remarks.

Most of the other people waiting at the bus stop were at the other end, next to the neon sign. Nearly all of them were chatting, some were quiet, and some were sleeping. A few were finishing their homework while some ate their breakfast, having gotten it from the convenience store across the street. One girl was using her backpack as a pillow and her jacket as a blanket as she laid on the sidewalk.

Eliza sat at the edge of the sidewalk, her suitcase resting on the road, leaning against the concrete. With her face buried in her scarf, her eyes shut as she hummed quietly to herself. He took a spot a distance away from her, breathing softly, the familiar sigh of the tired engine nearing them.

I T B E G A N snowing started not long after, drifting down after he had boarded the bus. As they got closer to school, the grey morning had been overtaken by flickering bits of white. The forty minute journey had been delayed considerably so the narrow roads could be properly cleared of the snow. The week before, a bus had slid into the side of the road after skidding on ice. No one was hurt, but it was a sober reminder for the school.

Some were excited at the possibility of being let out early when they saw the snow plows. He shared the same sentiment when he looked out the window, hoping he could go back home. Perhaps he could even find time to catch the two o'clock movie on TV.

It was the first day after break, he did not want to go to school, and he especially did not want to go to math. To him, it was considerably acidic to his ability to think. The numbers numbed his brain. The several operation signs multiplied the feeling. He also particularly did not want to do it for another five days, another five grueling hours of addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, formulas, graphs, variables, constants, coefficients, theorems, imaginary numbers, and whatever else they were to memorize and spit out. It was normalized torture for children. The thought of it agitated him, and he began to fidget and chew on the edge of his shirt.

He wanted to return to the break, to the restless hours of doing nothing. Their two weeks for winter had been cut short, lasting only a six days when it should have been fourteen. Even then, in its brevity, it was a wistful time for him. Closing his eyes, he reached out for the warm memories.

The boy remembered taking long walks, brightened by the bitter cold, as he carried a bag filled with books and snacks and a cup filled with a mixture between hot chocolate and coffee. The drink, to him, was what ambrosia would taste like, chocolate with a slight buzz.

Along each walk, he would look around, hoping to see something unusual within the drab landscape. He wished for a secret, one that was embedded in the town and one that only he could unravel. Maybe there were fairies living among them, disguised as waitresses and businessmen. Or a dark creature lurking in the woods. Perhaps dragons roamed the sky, hiding within the clouds, breathing fire in the form of lightning. Or there could be a princess, stranded from her homeland who hoped to find a passage back. In each of his fantasies, he played a central role, either being the hero or the explorer. So far, he found nothing. He had searched through old abandoned stores, snow covered roads, forests, and other places and found exactly what he had expected. Nothing. But he still had hope, a defiant, stupid hope.

He rubbed his nose, a rivulet of white mucus dripping from it. Since he didn't have any tissue, he held his sleeve to his nostrils, stemming the flow temporarily while moistening the fabric of his jacket. It happened often, which once irked him considerably, but now only drew a weary sigh from him.

Snow descended from above like poured sugar from the hands of a baker, dusting the landscape as if it were confection. He leaned his head against the window, the metal frame smooth and slightly cool. The heater beneath him droned, his own seat area disproportionately warmer than the others.

The boy yawned, still drowsy. He tried rubbing his eyes to wake himself, but they felt heavy, as if they were being forced close by some small creature. Slowly, he drifted back into sleep. The snow fell and the bus groaned.

WHEN THE BOY woke up during the night, he realized that his stomach felt empty. However, it was not from hunger nor from any illness. It was the kind of hollow feeling that heralds the coming of something, something unknown. The boy knew the sensation well. He had read of it from his books, the ones strewn across his floor. The moon peered in through the slit in his window's curtain, evenly cutting his room into two. He used this light to guide him as he slipped from his bed.

The boy slowly opened his door, making sure that its creaking would not cause too much of a disturbance. However, his efforts were made fruitless as the snores of his father echoed throughout their apartment. Any beast that may have hid in the darkness was most likely already awake and alert. To protect himself, he picked up a slipper that he had stepped on, raising it up as if it were a sword. It was a weak weapon so he hoped that the beast would be a small one as it would be easy to bludgeon to death. He immediately felt disgusted at the thought, and the boy hoped he wouldn't have to kill. Lightly and slowly, he walked towards the kitchen, clenching his stomach as he did.

He entered the door, the darkness embracing him like a lost child. His hands explored the wall, brushing over the rough textures of fading paint and chipped plaster. Soon, he found what he had been

searching for and he flicked the switch. The light bulb hanging overhead slowly blinked into existence, bathing the kitchen in a pale yellow glow. The boy cautiously surveyed the room for anything out of the ordinary and for the possibility of a hidden beast. He found none, but he heard a pulse, a slow drum that came from outside.

The boy sat down, listening to the beating heart in the forest.

H E W A S the last one off, stepping onto the already trampled snow. The bus had stopped at the high school instead of the middle school which were both next to each other. It wasn't that far but most began complaining about the trek, grumbling about the cold and snow. He felt the same but kept silent about it. Other buses drove past, some packed while others were nearly empty. As he walked, he could hear the chatter behind him swell into a faint roar. A piercingly chill gust blew past.

The doors of the middle school were soon thrown open, letting out tendrils of warm air that drew in students that would usually reluctantly enter. Unfortunately, it was a decrepit building, built in the late '40s, renovated in the early '80s, and still getting older. The two, wooden doors in the front could only let in a portion of the students that waited outside at a time. He stood among them, hoping that the wait would be brief

A teacher stepped outside, wading through the students entering and received many irritated stares and whispered insults because of it. She shouted something inaudible to the students still waiting, gesturing to the back of the school. Most understood her and headed in the direction she pointed to. There they found the set of back doors open, warm drafts flowing out from within. He stayed in the back.

However, he had no intention of going in, suddenly gripped by an urge to rush off, to abandon school. He looked over at the teachers, their attention overwhelmed by the rush of students towards the doors. His pace soon slowed, as he looked behind him, the coarse winds nipping at the flaps of his clothes, beckoning him.

He paused, turned, and ran.