

Fort Hill at Allegany
a novel

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We were deep into a Weird Club night when Violet told us about how her brothers knew about us. Probably Adam jumped up from the couch. Adam, back then, was all fast-twitch muscle. Of course, I knew there was more to him than that, and so did Violet, but to everyone else he was just Red Adam, though he hated when we called him that.

“What the tits does that mean, Violet?” was the kind of thing Adam would have said.

“Please calm down,” Violet said.

“Yes, please do calm yourself,” I said.

“I will not,” Adam said. “Your brothers are a problem that we need to attend to, motherfuckers.”

Weird Club was a lot of things but I remember that night, it was a pretty bad German movie, with subtitles, and I remember thinking that just because a movie had subtitles didn't mean it was interesting, or good, or worth your two hours, which was a revelation. When Weird Club was a movie, Adam would pick me up and we'd go into Potomac Video in Cresaptown. He'd look and look and after an hour, annoyed, I'd pick out what looked like the weirdest thing I could find. I remember that this German movie was black and white, that there was a lot of smoking of cigarettes, and that the lead actress was pretty in an entirely different way than Violet. I can't remember exactly how. All that remains is the feeling, that night, of seeing Violet through new eyes, and of the realization that there were a thousand kinds of pretty. Sometimes I think of Violet only once a month or so, but lately it's been much more often.

We were proud of our weirdness, especially because no one else was, even if it was at the same time true that almost no one cared, or knew even, about the existence of Weird Club. We were young, owners of a bright, small, warm thing. We held it tight to our bellies as we might a sick kitten. Weird Club was jazz records that we half-liked, poetry read aloud when I forced it on them, cookbook nights, some moderate drinking of whatever we could get our hands on or whatever my parents wouldn't miss, and, once, Dungeons and Dragons, though that didn't stick. We were always talking about new things to try—playing music on actual instruments, lectures and talks and concerts at the university, drugs—but of course there was only so much we could do, the three of us, two red Fort Hill boys and a blue Allegany girl, from my parents' house so far out Route 220 it was almost in West Virginia.

Probably it was me who spoke next. That's how we worked. Violet would say something, and then Adam would get mad or excited, and I'd try to say something that would work its way in between whatever they had said. I had the feeling back then that I was floating, amicably, between poles, all the time.

"It would behoove us," was the kind of thing I would have said, "don't you think, to speak more on this topic, Violet, please?"

"Buck," Adam said. "What did we discuss about your Mrs. O'Rourke voice? Everyone knows you like her ample bosom."

Buck was my nickname and Mrs. O'Rourke was our English teacher. She was short but of considerable mass, and would teeter on these impossibly tall high heels that would spike into the floor with so much force that she'd leave marks in the varnish.

"So, like, how ample?" Violet asked, though she already knew. We'd been over this again and again, though Adam and I loved it when Violet faked the not-knowing.

Adam did the thing with his hands that everyone, at some point, has done to approximate the size of large breasts. We thought we had all the time in the world, as if her brothers weren't right

then bearing down on us like rolling boulders. Everything already was moving very fast, but only outside that house. Inside that house, we were all, I can see now, in luxurious love that we thought would go on forever, until the sun burned out or at least until graduation, which was as far ahead as we could think.

“Mrs. O’Rourke? No shit?” Violet said. She looked at me. “Go get her, boy.” She held my eyes, as she’d been doing for a little while in that time. She held my eyes for a half-second longer than was necessary, was what it looked like. And then she, too, cupped her hands out in front of her own chest.

“Bigger,” Adam said.

“No, that’s about right,” I said.

“No, bigger,” he said. But then Adam shook his head, fighting the silliness, for there was, again, the fact of her brothers.

We’d tried charades, but only once, because though Adam called it dumb, we all knew really it was because he was so bad at it. But we did often play a game Violet called Tradesies where we’d lay our official school IDs on my parents’ little coffee table and, eyes closed, choose an ID and then act like that person the rest of the night. There were only three of us and so of course it was more silliness. And we never talked about it, but for me, at least, one of the thrills was getting Violet’s Allegany-issued ID, with that Allegany blue around the edges, and there would be Violet herself, in that stern official-ID face that we had to do in our own photos, too, for our all-red IDs. We talked about a lot of things at Weird Club, but never that particular thrill. Probably now we’d talk about it.

“So, your brothers, Violet?” Adam said. “The guys with bats in their pickup trucks? Go.”

“If you please, Miss Skelly,” I said.

“That’s what I just said,” Adam said. “You just used different words.”

“Maybe she likes my Mrs. O’Rourke voice,” I said.

“Yeah, they know about us,” Violet said. She whispered it. “My brothers.”

“What does that mean?” Adam asked.

“Pray tell,” I said.

“Asshole!” Adam shouted at me.

“You know,” Violet said.

“What,” Adam said, “that we’re friendly?”

“No, everything,” she said.

“Jesus,” Adam said. “That we used to make out with each other? That we were a couple?”

“We were never a couple,” she said.

I didn’t know which I’d rather it be: that they’d been a couple or rather if they’d instead only gotten naked with each other.

“And they know about this,” Violet said, using her hands to take in the living room, my parents’ uneven couches that smelled like ground-in dust, the old records, the kerosene heaters stashed in the corners, the imitation suit of armor my dad had gotten from Pittsburgh when we’d visited his brother and their kids. “They know about Weird Club, though they think it’s called Strange Club. Actually, no, they call it Gay Club.”

“Of course they do,” I said.

“But they know where we hang out, don’t they,” Adam said. “They know about this house. This place.”

Violet nodded.

There are moments that, when you look back on them, you’ll forever wish were different, that so easily could have gone your way had you only had a click more guts. Maybe I should have kissed her right there, in front of Adam. I’d never been great about saying fuck it. Maybe I’m even worse at it now.

Probably the Skelly boys had known about Weird Club for a long time. Allegany kids weren’t stupid. We’d never thought so. They were just brutal, like how we were brutal sometimes,

when we had to be. And when not-stupid and brutal come together, you wonder about whether or not all your ground-floor windows are locked and you wonder if there's anything outside someone could use as a ladder to get up to the windows on the second floor.

I don't remember any discussion about where Weird Club would happen. My parents were always away, working, but they left me plenty of food. Cheap food that fills you up, but, still, I knew and Adam and Violet knew that it was a safe place, run-down but always there. Part of me wonders if my parents knew all along what we'd been up to. They were essentially kind people. We could have used more of them. I miss them.

It was an old farm house that just went, room after room. It smelled of mildew and dust and bread crusts and kerosene. It was old plaster, warped floor boards, spider webs, tattered rugs, books, and for some reason globes from earlier times in recent human history, the ones with all the old names for the African colonies. It was not easy for my parents to collect what they collected, and so what they had, they loved, and they kept. My dad gave me comic books without my mom knowing. My mom did the same but with old T-shirts, and mostly they said Fort Hill on the front but she also snuck me a blue one that said Allegany. I remember how much she loved the thrift store on National Highway in LaVale, which was technically on the blue side of town but which was also informally middle ground, since it was where everyone went to shop. She'd bring me grocery-store bags full of paperbacks. All this for two dollars, she'd say. She always told me how much everything cost.

Adam and Violet used to joke about slaves in that house but talk of slaves was one of the few things that ever got me to fight, and they hated how I fought. It's true that back then I'd go crazy and probably it's never changed, though of course when you get older, though you get just as angry as you ever did, you hardly ever want to punch anything. I'd hear only a *whoosh*, would see only this fast-forwarded series of white-hot still scenes. Nothing could touch me when I was like that. I remember hating the build-up but then, when it came, falling into it like you'd fall into, I don't know, sex, maybe. The feeling of building and building and building and then you were in it and then you

never wanted to leave, when it was all pure energy and absolute focus of knowing exactly what you wanted to do and then acting on it, the result of which was pure. Absolute certainty and then immediate action. You'd never feel the pain in the moment, but only an hour later, and then for four, five days after that. But that feeling of never wanting to leave never lasted very long and then, when it was over, I'd feel terrible and would apologize to everyone, even the people who didn't deserve to be apologized to. So Adam and Violet learned to cut it out with the business about slaves even though, the more I think about it, it's very possible or even likely that whoever built that house had some slaves. I've done a little research. There weren't a lot of slaves here, at the very top reach of where people did that sort of thing, here just a few miles from the Pennsylvania line, but they certainly existed.

Our big, old house sat well off the highway, with nothing out back but a cow pasture and then the railroad tracks and then the Potomac and then after that West Virginia. On one side was an old barn and a pig pen and on the other a little diner that was only open, for some reason, on Sundays. It was a playground of a house, so big it would have been terribly and hugely quiet all those dark nights after school without Adam and Violet. I came to love the fact that Adam, who somehow had a key, would walk right in through the front door. I loved that about him. A bit later, Violet came in through one of the back-porch doors that I kept open for her, and we'd share a shitty frozen pizza or a pan of fries dipped in ketchup or mayonnaise or whatever jar of something we had in the fridge. Maybe we'd do our homework but usually we didn't and then we'd do Weird Club, which, often, was Tradesies.

There were so many rooms, and somehow Tradesies seemed to fill them all. Adam would be Violet and he'd put on some girl singer and I'd be Adam and go upstairs to the middle bedroom and do pushups and Violet, who was being me, would come up and ask if I'd read a book with a title she'd make up on the spot like *The Winds of October* or *The Rains Before the Dawn* or something and then finally Adam, who was being Violet, would run in and scream that he'd just seen the first

robin of the spring and come check it out. And then Violet and I would follow him through one of the big middle bedrooms and into what they always called the servant's bedroom, which was in real life my actual bedroom, and there would be Adam, standing on my unmade bed, staring out the window at the cow pasture out back. And we'd jump onto the bed next to him, looking for the robin, but, invariably, it would be two cows, fucking. That was Weird Club and it was the thing I looked forward to the most, more than when my parents would come back from work, more than soccer games, more even than the sweet, dark nights when I'd imagine, always, the same thing, which was a days-long snowstorm that kept Violet—but not Adam—from leaving.

There was a gigantically loud knock on the front door, the one no one used except for Adam, so I looked at Adam, who'd been sitting on the arm of the couch, and he immediately jumped up and had that look on his face that made me feel equal portions of wanting to run away but also of wanting to follow him wherever he was going. That's my overriding sense of Adam, now, a feeling of knowing bad choices were about to be made, and that there might be blood, but of following along anyway. Blood's exciting. I can admit that.

"Shit," Violet said. "Shit bitch fuck shit." Sometimes she cursed because she knew we liked it, but not that night.

Adam charged past me, but I stuck out my foot and caught him, barely, on the shin. He went toppling, all elbows and knees and meaty palms thumping on the old, creaking, wood floor. For all of his rage and physicality, all of his never-ending pull-ups and stretches and barefoot sprints down the downstairs hallway and back, he was surprisingly graceless when it came to his body in space. While I played sports, Adam was always running into things and falling down. He was always bruised, scraped up, as if the world were a sharp corner to be crashed into.

I jumped over him. He tried to grab my ankle, but he was lying in an awkward position and he missed.

“I’ll kill them,” Adam said, lying on his back but scrambling furiously to get to his feet. “And then I’ll kill both of you.”

As I ran down the long main hallway, the big old door straight ahead, there was another enormous knock. It sounded like four, five big hands, pounding. Just pounding, like dumb, angry goats, just ramming, ramming.

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Not too many years ago, one of the Skelly boys took over Violet’s dad’s car dealership out on Winchester Road. One became a cop and now he’s sheriff of the next county over. I see his campaign signs when I come back to visit Adam. The signs are purple, of course, just like everything else that used to be either red or blue.

The third Skelly boy, the one who was first through the door that night, died years ago. His name was Vince. Some boys who are crazy when young, you know are going to clean up and get a job and be all right, but some you know are going to die. A lot of people thought Adam would die young, too, but Adam was only let’s say eighty-five percent crazy. Maybe eighty-eight. There was some part of him that was always playing a role. I think he just liked pushing almost as far as he could, whatever it was: Tradesies or the little scenes of violent dialogue he was always trying out. He liked to break shit, yes, but he liked breathing, too. He liked girls. He liked drinking beer. He liked reading books. He liked Violet, of course. He liked me, and all of that was plenty enough to keep him from going all the way. And, just as importantly, he wanted to keep on hating Allegany, just as the Skelly boys wanted to keep on hating Fort Hill. It was almost as if he knew, dumb as he was back then, dumb as we all were, that were he to actually go full throttle in his hating of Allegany, if he were to really act upon his most honest desires, that it would ruin him, and that would mean that there could be no more of the hating, which he loved to do. Consummation would have meant,

somehow, destruction. I've come to love that part about Adam, wise and prescient as it was, even as I've come to loathe it in myself.

But Vince Skelly was a thumb pressed into the neck, all the way, all the time. Violet never told us much about her brothers because she was ashamed, I think, but we had, at the mall or after games, the odd encounter with kids from other schools, kids from Beall or Westmar. We heard Vince Skelly pushed a substitute teacher into a blackboard so hard that it broke, all because she had a tattoo with some red in it. Really stupid shit like that, but that's for sure how it was. It was the water in which we swam.

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I'd like to tell you a little about where it is exactly in America that I'm from. There are places like it, but this one's mine, and it's got a certain smell to it that I've never been able to wash out, though I've never completely wanted to, either.

On a map, the state of Maryland, on the East Coast of the most powerful country in the world, looks like a pistol pointing west. The barrel points at the giant hulking hugeness of America, first toward West Virginia and then Ohio and then all that farmland, and beyond that California, the Pacific, China. The fat part of Maryland is low and rich. It's got money and restaurants and office buildings. But not the skinny part. That skinny part is where I'm from.

The skinny part is an outer province, an afterthought, a cartographic mistake. At one point, the skinny part of Maryland is less than two miles wide. It's an add-on, a hangnail, a swollen pinkie finger. It's a place people see on maps but forget about unless they go deer hunting or have a second house there, where they go to get away. People from Baltimore or D.C. call it "out there" or "up there" or "the mountains."

The skinny part is all hills, ancient mountains once as tall as the Himalayas but now worn down like old molars. On topographical maps, it looks like a tablecloth pushed together from the ends, a swatch of corduroy. The proper name is Ridge-and-Valley. Those ridges make for horizons

that rise and fall like the above-water humps of a sea monster. Those hills are green in the summer but, when the leaves fall, they exhale a long breath and fade into their thousand browns and thousand grays. Nothing is flat in the skinny part, not front yards, not driveways, not roads, not soccer fields. Very little is straight, either on a map or up close. You cannot see very far, except up.

The muddy Potomac lazes along the bottom of the particular valley where I grew up, and alongside that famous river came the first dirt road, and then the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, and then the railroads, and, finally, that ocean of smooth asphalt. These days, convenience stores dot your path every so often, selling beef jerky, 10-can shrink-wrapped packages of Skoal, camouflage baseball caps, scratch-off lottery tickets, handmade signs out front that say, “Absolutely Lowest Cigarette Prices Allowed By Law.” The bars are there, too, as are the churches, the tattoo places, the liquor stores stuffed with warm 30-packs, the trailer courts. At night, if you were to look down into those valleys, the roads and cars and parking-lot lights make for orange-and-yellow ribbons, or arteries.

Those valleys hold everything the people up there do or make. And those valleys hold a lot of what those people want. But not all of it. Definitely not all of it, because their wants are like the wants of people everywhere, in that they cannot be contained. The wants that live up there, it’s no surprise, go on forever. Some are knowable, like a job or a new car or at least a car that runs or a Super Bowl for the Steelers. But others are unknowable, and they’re bigger than the Potomac, bigger than all of Maryland or Pennsylvania or West Virginia, bigger even than those old hills.

You learn which road takes you to, say, Flintstone, and you learn which road takes you to Frostburg. A few people live out in Flintstone but more, relatively, live up in Frostburg, the college town on the cold ridge that has a Main Street, an old movie theater, a coffee shop for the professors and poets. Those Frostburg kids go to Beall High School. You go south on 36, down into the George’s Creek valley, and you’ll find a series of hard little towns where the Scottish and German coal miners settled 150 years ago: Midland, Lonaconing, Barton, all the way down to Westernport,

where their last names are Sloan, Kitzmiller, Snyder, DeHaven. All those kids go to Westmar, formed after the county had to close Bruce and Valley high schools back in the 80s. People have been moving away from the place I grew up in for a long time now.

And then again many more people, relatively, live on the other side of Dan's Mountain, down in one of those corduroy crevices which is the big Potomac valley, in LaVale and Pinto and Bel Air, where we lived for a time, in Cresaptown, where we lived for a little longer, and in Rawlings, where my parents found an old house cheap enough even for us. A few live out east of Cumberland, on the edges of the great rolling forest there, in Flintstone and Little Orleans and Paw Paw. Even fewer live in Oldtown, which used to have its own high school, the one that graduated a class of four the year I left for the big city. Some people live on the sides of those old mountains themselves, on Will's Mountain, Irons Mountain, Polish Mountain, hillsides where the wind just goes and goes, where winter hangs on through Easter, through the start of baseball season, until you're ready to scream, and where, when summer does come, it comes in easy and cool like a kiss on the cheek from your grandmother. It's lean up there in the skinny part, scrawny, scrappy, tough like a chunk of meat that's been left in the oven too long. People say that the deer up there are skinny because the land itself is skinny.

But if we're talking about the people up there we're talking about Cumberland and the people who live right around it. Cumberland has always been either a very small city or a big town. The Shawnee lived there first, before white people came in 1728. During the French and Indian War, the English built a wooden fort where Wills Creek meets the Potomac. George Washington, as a young officer, lost a battle there. After the Revolution, the skinny part of Maryland stayed quiet. But then they dug the C&O Canal through, even blasted a thousand-yard-long tunnel underneath a hill. Then the railroads came and put the canal out of business. Cumberland grew, but only a little. Baltimore had a port, Washington had the government, and Pittsburgh had steel. Cumberland became a place you passed through.

For a while, as in other hard, brown places like it from New England to the Great Lakes, Cumberland had factories. There was Kelly-Springfield for tires, the sprawling Celanese plant for textiles, the PPG plant for windshields. Husbands took their wives to the Elks, the Moose, the Ali Ghan Shrine Club. There were the Masons, the Knights of Columbus, the Rotary, the Kiwanis, even a B'nai B'rith. They sponsored our summer baseball teams, we knew that, but beyond that, we had no idea at all what they were for, or what they did. There were volunteer fire departments up every little valley. The men got drunk at the American Legion. Their sons played football and they sat in the woods and got cold, a 30-aught-six laying across their thighs. Their daughters were cheerleaders and then secretaries and wives and then mothers.

It's a familiar story by now but that doesn't change the fact that the factories closed up. In the summer, weeds shot up through the asphalt in the parking lots surrounding the Celanese plant. The only place that still makes anything is the paper mill in Westernport, but it seems as if it's only a matter of time. Those good jobs, where you lifted something heavy and got paid well for it, were vanishing even back then. They're almost all gone now. More and more, it feels like a blip, that time, not at all the ordinary. A bad back and enough money for a house, two cars, enough left over to be able to say to a son, a daughter: here, go to college, don't look back. Now, it seems, it's all looking back.

They said, when I was growing up, that, per capita, Cumberland had more churches and bars than any place in the country. I've since heard that said about at least a dozen other little cities, but when you drive Interstate 68, heading west, you can't miss all those steeples off to the right, in North Cumberland. From the highway, if you squint, the city looks comfortable, quiet, almost European. For Christmas, the churches string white lights along the edges of the steeples. The hills frame it all. It's pretty, maybe, or cute, people say when I tell them where I'm from. I've heard adorable. And then I ask them where they ate, or drank, or slept, and they say, oh, no, we just kept driving through.

There were always bars and they're like old-school bars anywhere: low and flat and dark, and somehow still smoky, even though it's been years before the state made everybody take their cigarettes outside. Later, on college breaks, I'd drink beer in Christie's, Goetz's, Appel's, Carmichael's, Bullwinkle's, When Pigs Fly, the E-Z Way Inn, and by then, I'd feel already that I was a visitor, only dropping in to pretend I was not what I already was: a city kid getting undergoing rapid, traumatic sophistication. Most of those bars had dartboards. One or two had a shuffleboard table. Cheap advertisements for the same American beers hung on the walls: Budweiser, Miller Lite, Natural Light, Busch, Michelob, Rolling Rock. Maybe one of them sold Guinness. There were bars I was too scared to go into, mostly in South Cumberland, and corner bars with glass-brick fronts through which you could make out a soft light that made me wonder why men and women would ever spend time there. I remember once ordering a Samuel Adams at Duncan's in Frostburg, and the way the bartender looked at me told me I'd made the wrong choice.

Not everyone was the same. There were differences, if you looked closely. Some grown-ups must have made good money. That's what people said, "good money." Some fathers drove new cars and resurfaced their driveways every summer. Some fathers dug holes, poured concrete, and put up basketball hoops in the driveways, and from the hoops hung new, white nets. I knew of a few houses with satellite dishes out back that you could rotate with a remote control. Some of the channels, secret ones, showed people having sex. At our house, we got some channels, but not all of them. We had no basketball hoop, but we didn't want one. We threw a scuffed baseball back and forth, to each other, until our forearms throbbed.

The people who made really good money came from the cities, what we called "down state." They came gliding through on I-68, in Hondas and Toyotas and Volvos. Sometimes we'd see a BMW or Mercedes Benz or, every once in a while, something unimaginable, like a Saab or a Jaguar. Sometimes it felt as if our small world was running at quarter-speed, that the world motored at top speed only elsewhere.

But, mostly we were not anything like the down state people. We were two worlds, them in their new cars and us in our used trucks. Maybe we were orphans. Maybe we wanted it that way. We had only each other, up in that specific set of hard valleys, to love, to hate. All of it, the whole range of it, from birth to death, from denim to camo, pickup to rusted-out Buick Skylark. We had only ourselves, only red, only blue. It was what we breathed, what we painted on our faces, on our trombones via colored electrical tape, winding it around and around the slide, the perfection of each inch-wide stripe attesting to how much we loved our red, to how much we suspected we loved their blue, if we were ever to do such a thing.

For sure, though, we knew which road led to Allegany blue. It was U.S. Route 220, flat on the valley next to the Potomac, the working Chessie line and the abandoned Western Maryland in between. It went like this: Rawlings, out at the far edge before you got West Virginia, and then Pinto, and then Bel Air: all red. But then it was Thousand Oaks, Cresaptown, LaVale, The Dingle, all blue. Westside and North Cumberland: blue. South Cumberland and the East End: red again. That's how the school districts went because that was how the jobs went, how the classes went, how the money went. They were blue and we were red and we knew where we could go and so did they.

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That last Weird Club night, as soon as I threw open the big deadbolt, Vince was on top of me, through me, and the other two Skellys, not as to-the-marrow blue but still not far off, kicked me in the ribs but somehow even then I could tell they didn't really mean it, not like Vince did. Still, it hurt, took the wind out of me. I can remember that pain, even now. As I rolled over, trying to shout to Adam and Violet—though I couldn't through all the coughing—the Skelly who's now the cop ripped from the wall a framed photo of my mom when she was at Fort Hill, and the Skelly who owns the dealership pissed on a worn upholstered chair my dad liked for reading. My mom and I had bought that chair for him when I was 13. I remember because I contributed 13 bucks, which was all the money I had in the world except for the four bucks I kept back but didn't tell my mom about and

which I spent on Skittles and Mountain Dew and one night with John Dawson's dad's issue of
Penthouse Letters, and for which I felt so guilty about I actually prayed.