

**Fort Hill at Allegany**  
a novel

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Western Maryland  
1995

We were deep into another Weird Club night when there came the huge thunderous door-shaking knock.

Violet, where before she'd sat cross-legged, easy, pretty in the way that I think of her now, stiffened and froze, eyes wide, for of course she knew, instantly and in her bones, what the knocking was for. Adam, beside me on our favorite couch, jumped up, spring-loaded, as if he'd been waiting for it. Adam, back then, was all fast-twitch muscle. I knew there was more to him than that, and of course so did Violet, but to everyone else he was always just Red Adam.

"I'm ready to go!" was the kind of thing Adam would have said.

"Please calm down," Violet said.

"Yes, please do calm yourself," I said, though I wasn't calm.

"I absolutely will not," Adam said.

And there came another bang on the front door, huge again, and even louder.

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Weird Club was a lot of things but I remember that night, it was a bad German movie, with subtitles, and I remember that night realizing that just because a movie had subtitles didn't necessarily mean it was interesting, or good, or in any way more worthy of your time than, say,

*Iron Eagle II*. On nights *Weird Club* was a movie, Adam would pick me up in whatever rusted, broken-muffler sedan he was driving that month, and we'd go into Potomac Video. He'd look and look, trying to find just the right thing, it strikes me now, to impress Violet. Eventually, I'd pick out the weirdest thing I could find, and show it to Adam, who, again exasperated by his inability to choose, would shrug and nod. He could get overwhelmed, and though from the outside it looked like an occasional disinterested moment to those who didn't know him, we knew what it really was, which was his insides trying to figure out some bit of tricky math that he knew only the bare outlines of. You had to look closely, but maybe the best thing about us back then, about *Weird Club*, was that it allowed us just that: the ability to look closely at each other and to know what was going on underneath, which is another way of saying we loved each other.

I remember that this particular 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, though I can't picture this actress at all, and some nights I can't even picture Violet. 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've thought of Violet only once a month or so, but lately it's been much more often. If I try to picture her in the abstract, it never works, and she winds up looking like a computer's idea of a young woman: brown hair, sort-of pleasing face, generic smile. But if I think of her in a specific context, I can usually get close. Curly hair tied back into a low, loose ponytail, big hooped earrings, maybe some make-up but nothing that I could pinpoint, standing at my parents' stove waiting for water to boil for instant hot chocolate.

*Weird Club* was our thing. 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 us at

all. Which is not to say that people were unaware of us as individuals. While we were not the stars of the Fort Hill and Allegany movie, nor were we extras. Adam was the Fort Hill kid who did everything loudly, who got into fights that he usually lost. People liked all three of us, but they liked Adam because you can't help but like Adam. Violet and I were, before she left for Allegany, the smartest girl and the smartest boy going all the way through, from elementary to high school. Or we were, until somewhere around tenth grade we stopped trying as hard. I was an in-between type who was friends with all the groups at Fort Hill. Violet, of course, was by the time of Weird Club newly small-town famous for jumping over to the other high school, which meant that she went from red to blue, which meant we were supposed to hate her.

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 West Virginia.

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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 all the time, amicably, between poles.

“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.

Everything already was moving very fast, but only outside that house. On the inside, there had been the knock-knock that had supercharged us, but already we were, in fact, charged, pre-charged, maybe, and the advent of the thunderous knock had only amplified, or at most altered our trajectory from one of love to love facing imminent threat of being ripped apart. Two trajectories, it seems to me now, that are very close cousins.

We’d all three of us figured it out, within seconds of the sound of the old front door being hammered upon with those big fists.

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

“If you please, Miss Skelly,” I said. I didn’t want what we had to end, not yet. It was the best thing that had ever happened to me.

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

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

The Skelly brothers. Big arms, big faces, necks, boots, jeans bought cheap from Walmart, flannel shirts, and not the cool kind like the grungers in Seattle wore.

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

“No, everything,” she said.

“Jesus,” Adam said. “That we make out with each other? That we’re a couple?”

“We’re not a couple,” she said.

Adam was, for a moment, speechless. He looked at Violet, and then at me. He was hurt. I'd never seen him like that. I looked at Violet, who at that moment looked from me to the string of white Christmas lights, strung around the kitchen doorway, that I always plugged in on Weird Club nights.

I didn't know which I'd rather it be: my two best friends as a full-on couple, with hand-holding, or as it was, or as they said it was, which was, I assumed, sex.

"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 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, and again that old house that I think about so often, its huge dustiness that was the place of so many of my good memories of those years, shuddered, from the fists.

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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 your dad's ladder is still outside and whether or not the Skelly boys will use it to break in through the one window at the end of the second-floor hallway that has never locked, and you wonder if somehow Violet has told her brothers about this one window because she's just a person after all and who knows what they'd done to her in the time since she'd turned blue.

There was never any discussion about where Weird Club would happen. My parents were always away, virtually never home, working, but they left me plenty of food. Cheap food that fills you up, but, still, Adam and Violet knew that it was a safe place, warm when it was cold out and dry when it was raining, and with plenty of space, seemingly enough for three almost-adults to try out being whatever this shiny, slippery thing that they found themselves before.

The house that just went, room after room. It was all smells. It smelled of mildew and dust and bread crusts and kerosene. It was old plaster, warped floor boards, cobwebs that never decreased nor increased in number nor volume, 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, 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 were red but she also snuck me a blue one that said Allegany, which was where she'd gone to school, back when it wasn't such a big deal for red to mix with blue. 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, and eat. You'd see a Fort Hill family at the Long John Silver's, that kind

of thing, though no one would make eye contact. From that thrift store, she'd bring me grocery-store bags full of paperbacks. All this for two dollars, she'd say.

Adam and Violet used to joke about slaves but talk of slaves at the farmhouse 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—crazier than Adam, and in a scary way—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 actually fight, since you know how bad it can get, for both your nose and your sense of guilt. But I can still taste what it was like to fight. Just before, 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 feeling the build-up, trying to fight it but knowing, like a sneeze, that it would come, and deliciously. The feeling of quick-fire building like a pot of water just before it boils and then you were in it and then it was like dancing like how you always wished you could dance, when it was all pure energy and the 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, and, for me, the guilt if you'd done anything shameful, which was every single time. So Adam and Violet learned to cut it out with the business about slaves even though they may have been right.

There was a lot of rich Potomac River bottomland out back. It was bottomland and then the railroad tracks and then the Potomac and then after that West Virginia. On one side of the house was an old barn with 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 quiet all those dark nights after school without Adam and Violet. I came to love the fact that Adam, who

somehow had got a key, would walk right in through the front door. A bit later, Violet would come in through one of the back-porch doors on which she'd do her secret knock, and the three of us would 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. I'd be Adam and go upstairs to the middle bedroom to 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*, 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. 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. And we'd jump onto the bed alongside 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.

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After the third gigantically loud knock on the front door, we stood. Then Adam, for just a half-second, flexed all of his muscles and I knew what I had to do. He 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.

"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, from behind, on the shin. He went toppling, all elbows and knees and skinny palms thumping on the creaking wood floor. For all of his rage and physicality, all of his never-ending pull-ups and stretches and barefoot sprints down the hallway and back, he was surprisingly graceless when it came to his body in space. While I was only mediocre at sports, at least all the running, kicking, and throwing gave me a certain confidence with my body. I never fell when I wasn't trying to. But Adam fell all the time. 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 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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Western Maryland

Present Day

As people who once fiercely loved one another do, Violet and I found each other again. We figured, I guess, that it had been long enough. I sent the first note, and though I was worried she would ice me out, she wrote back more or less right away. I got all the old feelings back. It didn't take us long to come to a kind of plan. So I drive up from Baltimore and she drives down from Pittsburgh. It's the same distance for both of us.

We always meet at the same place, in what used to be neutral territory, close to downtown. It's a bar now, called Niners, but it used to be a fraternal organization of some kind, the Eagles or Elks, somewhere that sold 80-cent Bud Lights and cigarettes by the carton and at cost if you knew the bartender. Now they have 30 beers on tap and taco deals on Tuesdays. We've met there twice now. This next time, tonight, will be the third. Neither of us has married, though she's with someone and I'm with someone. We hug a lot. We get a little drunk, or a lot drunk. She gets a cab ride to her parents, who still live in town. I stay a night at the new three-story chain hotel down on the canal, where Cumberland's trying to get tourists to visit. Last time, she mentioned that she liked my T-shirt, which read, across the front, "Paris, London, Allegany County," which is silly, but anyway I went online and got her one, in her size, and in green, which I seemed to remember was her favorite color when we were in high school. I've come to look forward to these trips west more than just about anything.

Not long 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, though Violet and I haven't talked about any of that. 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, too, but Adam was only let's say seventy percent crazy. There was some part of him that was always playing a role, and that's the part of Adam that we saw on Weird Club nights. I think he just liked pushing almost as far as he could, whatever it was. He liked to break shit, yes, but he liked breathing, too. He liked girls. He liked drinking beer. He liked reading books, which is something he kept hidden at school. 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 Adam knew, dumb as he was back then, dumb as we all were, that were he 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 was to him and to the rest of us, I can see now, a game. It was fun to hate Allegany. It was fun to make fun of them, of their clothes, their cars, their restaurants, their slightly different ways of doing everything. Of course, if you were to fly in from a thousand miles away back then, and squint your eyes, you wouldn't have seen much difference between us and them. But we saw it, or thought we did. We woke up hating Allegany, looked for any sign of blue throughout the day, and spent our nights hating them. But, for the most part, that's all it was. Nothing carried out. Consummation of that hatred 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, the one who died, 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 Country Club Mall or after games, the odd encounter with kids from Beall or Bishop Walsh or even Westmar. No one from Fort Hill ever had any good evidence but these kids from other schools told us how Vince Skelly had pushed a Sunday school teacher into a blackboard so hard that it broke, all because she was wearing a headband with some red in it. One girl told us she had walked into the bathroom at a party and had seen him staring at himself in the mirror. She'd asked him if he was OK and just at that moment, a little drop of blood formed on his forehead. She saw him quickly wipe away the blood. He'd never acknowledged her presence. That was the water in which we swam, half-truths and fear and fascination.

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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 other places like it, but this was ours.

On a map, the state of Maryland 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 fatter 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 we're 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. Now, I hear from people all the time, in Baltimore or D.C., who 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. Those ridges make for horizons that rise and fall like the above-water humps of a sea monster. It’s plenty green in the summer but, when the leaves fall, those hills 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, big and deep enough but only a half-decent stone’s throw across, lazes along the bottom of the particular valley where I grew up. Alongside that river came the first dirt road, and then the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, and then the railroads, and, finally, that snaking, smooth asphalt. These days, convenience stores dot it 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 early, like how you learn how to read, which road takes you to, say, Flintstone, which had a high school when we were all still there and which in its last year graduated a class of 12. And you learn which road takes you to 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. Or 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 went to Westmar, which is now closed. Before Westmar, it was Bruce High and Valley High. On the other end of the next valley over was Mount Savage, which was a K-12 school and which is now gone. I just remembered about Oldtown, out by Flintstone. I think they graduated a class of four the year Adam, Violet, and I graduated. People have been moving away from the place I grew up in for a long time now.

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 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 Allegany, 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 old issue of Penthouse Letters, and for which I felt so guilty about I actually prayed.

Before I could get my breath, here came Vince again, pulling Violet by the arm, Vince kicking me in the thigh, and Violet stepping around me. And then the other two Skelly boys spit on me, mostly into my hair. They threw open the door, banged out of there like angry horses, and were gone.

Adam appeared, nose bleeding, neck of his T-shirt pulled down to his belly button.

“Blue!” he screamed. “In here? In here?”

*(end of excerpt)*