

Weird Club, a novel

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Cumberland, 2015

Violet and I found each other again. I sent the first note, late at night, and though I was worried she'd ghost me, right away she wrote: *Where have you been, jerk.*

It's true that it had been some time, years maybe, but, still, I'm not sure why I was so nervous. Turns out she goes to Cumberland often, to visit her mother, who had a stroke and who's in a nursing home up on Haystack Mountain. Her stepfather died years before. We made plans. It felt easy.

So, one weekend a month, I drive up from Baltimore, and she comes down from Pittsburgh. We meet at the same place, always on Fridays in what used to be blue Allegany territory, close to downtown. It's a bar now, called Niners, but it used to be an Eagles or maybe a VFW that sold dollar Bud Lights and packs of cigarettes at cost. Now they have Taco Tuesdays and a dozen IPAs on tap.

Violet's seeing someone, but I'm not. I'm trying to get away from life being a little gray, a little soft, a little beyond reach. We hug a lot. It's nice. We have some drinks, talk, get a little hot in the ears from all the smiling, and hug more. Tonight, we held hands across the table, like kids, before she drove to her mom's empty house on Cash Valley Road. I came back to my hotel room. Tomorrow, if I don't get too many hard looks, I'm thinking I'll try to photograph some of the South Cumberland front yards from high school. Then, on Sunday, Violet and I will get lunch downtown at one of the new places before she goes north and I go east.

I've been telling her I'm in town to take photographs for a new project, and though I always bring my gear, I don't always get it out. She asked me, tonight: does this project have anything to do with our last year of high school, what we did, our little trip?

Our little trip, I said. Sort of, I guess. Trip-adjacent.

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Cumberland, 1995

We were deep into another Weird Club night when the knock on the front door finally came.

Violet, sitting cross-legged in her big chair, was so startled that she slammed shut the coffee-table book on her lap. I think she knew right away what the knock was for. A quarter-second later, Adam, who before had been lying on the one couch he liked, throwing a tennis ball over and over in a tight parabola so that it came very close to touching the ceiling but never quite did, jumped up as if he'd been waiting for the knock, too.

"Let's go!" was the kind of thing Adam would have said. Everyone outside of that room called him Red Adam, but Violet and I never did.

"Please calm down," Violet said, though she was not calm.

"Yes, please do calm yourself," I said, though I wasn't calm, either, especially because I by then knew that someone had finally found out about us, and because though there might be a second knock, there almost certainly would not be a third. And as we stood, the most surprising thing to me was not that we'd been discovered, but that it was, without doubt, Violet who I wanted to grab by the hand and lead out through the back door. Only Violet.

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Weird Club was a lot of things but since it's the details that turn summer into sweat, I want to tell you what Weird Club was that particular night, just before the knock. It was Violet in her big upholstered chair in my living room, sitting cross-legged and curled around a Norman Rockwell coffee-table book she'd stolen from the Allegany High School library just hours before. One of us had said, really, Normal Rockwell? But she only said, you have no idea, before turning the page and falling again into quiet. Weird Club was Adam, across from me on his couch, lying on his back, still wearing the stained jeans and T-shirt he wore when he did drywall jobs, throwing that worn-thin tennis ball over and over up to the ceiling.

I watched Adam's face as he came up with an idea. He caught his hundredth in a row, and then finally he slammed the tennis ball against the ceiling and caught it—*crack-flap*—and said, to Violet: Forty-two.

Violet, jarred from her little reverie, asked: Forty-two?

Page forty-two, Adam said. Please.

So Violet turned to page forty-two and said: I mean, look at this one. She flipped the book around so that we could see.

She said, it's this older man at an art museum, in a suit, and he's standing in front of a Jackson Pollack, but it's not really a Jackson Pollack, it's only Rockwell showing that he can do that kind of art, too, if he wants, inside of his own art. I love it.

Adam said: He did the new cool thing inside his old, uncool thing?

Yeah, Violet said.

But Norman Rockwell? I said.

She looked to Adam, to me, Adam, me. This was the very thing that we were always searching for on Weird Club Friday nights, which was the thing long there but in an instant discovered like treasure: a sharp-shinned hawk atop a telephone pole, a Miles Davis record brought to us by one of us. Norman Rockwell, of all things.

Adam crack-flapped another against the ceiling and into his palm, and said: Fifty-seven. Violet turned to page fifty-seven, and said: Oh, shit.

What?

She kept her face in the book, her body curled around it. She said: It's the little Black girl back in the fifties going to school with the four soldiers around her, walking her to school, though he's painted the soldiers only from the waist down. She's so small, and the soldiers are so big, and on the wall behind her is a smashed tomato and some terrible graffiti. Her skin is dark against her white dress and the dirty wall, and I guess she's only seven years old.

My, Adam said, smiling. Heavens, he said. He threw the ball again. Crack-flap. Sixty-seven, he said.

Violet flipped the pages. This guy won't quit, she said. It's a painting he did for the United Nations. It's a bunch of headshots, portraits, of all these kids. They're all colors, from all over the world.

She'd looked up at us, and she wasn't thinking about making sure her bangs covered her forehead, and she wasn't thinking she might have a compacted little nugget of Hot Pocket wedged between two teeth. And Adam wasn't, just then, thinking about how Violet and I were going to leave him for college in the city. And for a moment, at last, I wasn't thinking about how I'd have to find a whole new family somehow so soon after I'd finally found this one.

Violet said to us: Can you see it now?

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After the knock, probably it was me who spoke next.

“It would behoove us, Violet,” was the kind of thing I would have said, “to address the issue of the knocking?”

“Buck!” Adam said.

“Adam!” I yelled back at him.

It seemed to calm him to see me worked up. “So, your stepbrothers, Violet?” he said.

“The ones with bats probably rattling around in their pickups?”

“The fascists,” I said.

“Goddamned fascists,” Adam said, which made Violet and me smile since we had recently taught him that word.

“If you please,” I said.

“They know about us,” Violet said. She whispered it.

The Skelly brothers. Big arms, necks, boots, flannel shirts not from Wal-Mart but from the American Outfitters at the mall, defenders of all things Allegany and blue.

“What,” Adam said, “that we’re a couple?”

“We’re not a couple,” she said.

Adam looked at Violet, and then at me, and then back to Violet, who at that moment was struggling to unplug the string of white Christmas lights that I always turned on for Weird Club Fridays, which was thoughtful of her even though it wouldn’t in that moment do any good. She was as unsettled as I’d ever seen her.

“And they know about this,” Violet said, using her hands to take in the living room, my 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," she said. "My stepfather told me.

Though they call it Gay Club."

"Sure they do," I said.

Violet nodded, and again that old house shuddered.

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Weird Club was a lot of things. Fridays Adam had the Sundance, he'd come all the way out from town, pick me up, and we'd go to Potomac Video. He'd do forty miles some nights, but he never complained or even asked me for gas money. Adam would look and look at the video boxes, trying to find just the right thing, trying, it strikes me now, to impress Violet. Eventually, I'd lose my patience and pick out the weirdest movie I could find, and show it to Adam, who, exasperated by his inability to choose, would nod and say "fine." He could get overwhelmed, and though from the outside it looked like anger, we knew what it really was, which was his roiling, nervous insides trying to figure out some bit of math that he could barely identify, let alone solve, and it was the voice that told him, always, that he wasn't enough, which we all knew had something to do with his dad, who was a mountain in a sleeveless T-shirt. Drawing was not like that for Adam, or building things, but the rest of school was. It was like that even with Weird Club, especially at first. Adam tried harder at Weird Club than I ever did at anything. You had to look closely, but Violet and I saw it in him. And maybe the best thing about us back then was that it allowed us just that: the ability to look at each other and know what was going on underneath, which is another way of saying that we were eighteen and full of stars.

Twenty years later and I think again of Violet. Sometimes months have gone by when I haven't thought of her, but lately I think of her much more often. This might have something to

do with the feeling I get these days of everything being gray. If I try to picture her in the abstract from back then, she winds up looking like a computer's idea of a young woman: brown hair to her shoulders, pleasing face, teeth made straight by braces recently removed. But if I think of her in a specific context, I can get close. I usually picture her in my parents' kitchen, at the stove because she was making something like hot chocolate but also because it was the warmest spot in the house. Curly hair tied back into a low, loose ponytail, big hooped earrings, maybe some make-up but nothing that I could single out, a hand going up now and then to try to cover the pink flare of a pimple on her forehead, and she's standing at the stove waiting for water to boil for the two packets of instant hot chocolate she'll stretch to fill three mugs. I'll remember the clear tube of lip gloss she was always messing with. Or Adam, specifically, eating Slim Jims from the bucket that was supposed to last a month or how he'd use the lead in a mechanical pencil to pick at the grime under his fingernails.

We were proud of Weird Club, especially because or even if no one knew about us. Which is not to say that people were unaware of us as individuals. Adam was the Fort Hill kid who could draw anything you asked but who got into fights and then lost them. 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. Other than that, the only remarkable thing about me was Weird Club, which, of course, I couldn't talk about with anyone. And Violet 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, especially back then, when the Fort Hill-Allegany hatred had gone from a low scrape to the sound of important metal snapping in the sharp cold of night.

None of us had any proper siblings. My parents were dead or gone. Adam's dad seemed to hate him. Violet's mom was fine enough but never around. We were all a little broken, a little sad, all of us missing some belt or gasket that everyone else took for granted. But we'd found each other. We were young and owners of a bright, small, warm thing, and has there ever been anything more beautiful than that, anything more doomed?

Weird Club was about working at trying to like things that were a half-step beyond what we could grasp. It 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 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 college, maybe even drugs—but of course there was only so much we could do, powerless as we were, two red Fort Hill boys and a blue Allegany girl, from my parents' house so far out Route 220 it was almost West Virginia. They say that beauty is wasted on the young, but I think really it's that power's wasted on the old.

So we opened all the books we had, listened to all the music we could scrounge and, tossing aside that which didn't interest us until suddenly it did, we looked and looked until we found that which made Fort Hill red and Allegany blue go away if only for one night a week.

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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 if 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 if somehow Violet has told her stepbrothers about this one window because she's just a person after all.

After that second gigantically loud knock, Adam, for 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 but of following along anyway.

"Don't," Violet said.

Adam, who by then was Red Adam, charged past me, but I stuck out my foot and hooked him, from behind, on the shin. He went toppling, all elbows and knees and 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, for example. But Adam fell all the time.

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, scrambling furiously to get to his feet, and I knew that he meant it. Violet was in the room, after all.

As I ran down the long main hallway, there was an enormous crash. And then there were big footsteps on the floorboards. It sounded like cattle. Feet just pounding, like dumb, angry cows, just pounding the floor, just pounding.

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, and in green, which was her favorite color when we were in high school. So far, Violet’s been close to how I remember her, though of course we’re older now, more comfortable in our skins, or at least our clothes. We’re a different kind of shiny. We have jobs that allow for cars that won’t break down and decent bottles of wine. She’s been all over Europe, for her consulting work, and I’ve been everywhere, on assignment. I can speak enough Spanish and German to get around, and a little French. I mostly shoot cultural stuff, lots of dancing and traditional dress, that kind of thing, but sometimes they let me shoot in the mountains. I can hike all day and have gotten used to eating pre-packaged nutrition bars. On Monday nights up in Pittsburgh, Violet reads classic works of literature for blind people on public radio. She still runs. She’s hoping to do a marathon in every state. If I’m being honest, I look like I’ve spent more time in bars than she has. She’s pretty, grown-up, sometimes sad, in her eyes.

Last time, she told me a little about her stepbrothers. One of them took over their dad’s car dealership on Winchester Road. One became a cop and now he’s sheriff of the next county over. I see his purple campaign signs when I come back. I wanted to ask Violet if the purple meant what I thought—red and blue mixed together—but the conversation rolled on so well, so fast and tangential, that I didn’t want to blow it up so soon. The third stepbrother, the one who was first through the door that night, died years ago, in a car crash. His name was Jason. Violet told me how, during the holidays when she’d visit from college, she’d catch him in the garage, chugging cheap vodka from the bottle when he thought no one was looking.

A lot of people thought Adam would be the kid in our class to die first, but we always knew that at least some part of him was only playing a role. He liked to break shit, but he liked girls, too. He liked Violet, and me. He liked drawing and messing around with tools. And he wanted to keep on hating Allegany, just as the Skelly boys wanted to keep on hating Fort Hill. Violet hasn't brought him up yet, and I've wanted to but haven't.

What people never talked about was how fun it was to hate Allegany, their clothes, their cars, their restaurants, their slightly different ways of doing everything. Hating them was a pastime, like watching baseball or gardening. It felt good to have them there, if only to have somewhere to put our anger.

Of course, if you were to drop in from space back then and squint your eyes, you wouldn't have seen much difference between us and them. But we saw it. Though you didn't have to look hard to see it in Jason Skelly. He was a thumb pressed into the neck, all the way, all the time. He was Allegany's Adam, but without the good parts. Violet never told us much about her stepbrothers because she was ashamed, I think, but we, at the Country Club Mall or after games, had the odd encounter with kids from Beall or Bishop Walsh or even Westmar. These kids from other schools told us how Jason Skelly had pushed a Sunday school teacher into a blackboard so hard that it broke, all because he was wearing a tie with some red in it. 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 and when we're 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 sticks into the belly of the giant hulking hugeness of America, first at West Virginia and then Ohio and then

all that farmland, and then way beyond that to California and the other ocean. The wider part of Maryland, which we all called “downstate,” is low and rich. It’s got money and all the chain restaurants you could think of and so many four-story office buildings you wonder what could all those people possibly be doing in there? But not the skinny part. The skinny part is an outer province, an afterthought, a cartographic mistake. At one point, the skinny part of Maryland is a mile and a half wide. It’s a swollen pinkie finger. It’s a place people downstate forget about unless they hunt or have a second house there, where they go to get away from those glass office buildings. The people I work with in Baltimore call it “out there” or “up there” or just “the mountains.”

The skinny part is all low hills, the ancient Appalachians once as tall as the Himalayas but now as worn as old molars. Those ridges make for horizons that rise and fall like the above-the-water humps of a sea monster. Nothing is flat in the skinny part, not the front yards, not the driveways, not the roads, not the soccer fields on which we ground into our knees grass and dirt.

The muddy Potomac, deep enough but only a left-handed stone’s throw across, lazes along the bottom of the north-south valley where I grew up. Alongside that river, on top of the Native American trails that followed the deer trails, came the first dirt road, and then the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, then the railroads and, finally, that snaking, smooth asphalt that is the blood and the bones and the nerves of the entire world up there. These days, convenience stores dot that road, selling beef jerky, 10-can shrink-wrapped packages of Skoal, camouflage-and-NASCAR 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 that valley, the road and cars and parking-lot lights make for

orange-and-yellow ribbons. The politics, now, when I read the local paper or talk to anyone at the bars these days, make me nervous and sad. It can be a very small place.

That valley and the others like it 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, because their wants are like the wants of people everywhere, in that they cannot be contained. Some are knowable, like a good job at the state prison, or a new car or at least one that runs, or a Super Bowl for the Steelers. But others are unknowable, and they're bigger than the Potomac, bigger than those old hills.

Everyone used to work at the tire mill, or the cloth mill, the glass plant, the paper plant, all gone. Everyone had a father or a grandfather who worked at one of the plants that made stuff, but those people are on disability now, or dead. People have been moving away from the place I grew up in for a long time now. Violet and I, good at school, always knew we'd go to college somewhere that was maybe not California but far enough away. Adam was different. He came to Weird Club nights with drywall putty streaking his jeans. Even back then, he always knew which South Cumberland corner bars were supposed to serve underage kids. Violet and I never knew about any of that kind of thing.

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In the middle of the hallway where my mom used to kiss me on the lips before I walked to the bus stop, big Jason Skelly pushed me in the chest so hard that I landed square on my tailbone and after that I couldn't breathe. Though the other two Skellys kicked me in the ribs, somehow even then I could tell they didn't really mean it, not like how Jason did. As I rolled over, trying to shout to Adam and Violet, the Skelly who's now the cop ripped from the wall a framed photo of my mom when she was a student at Allegany, and the Skelly who took over the

car dealership pissed on a worn upholstered chair my dad had liked for reading the paper on sunny weekend mornings.

Before I could get my breath, here came Jason again, pulling Violet by the arm while at the same time kicking me in the meat of the thigh. And then the other two Skelly boys spit on me, mostly into my hair. Violet turned to look at us, but they wrenched her away. One of them lit a book of paper matches and dropped it to the floor. Jason Skelly threw open the door and dragged Violet behind him. The other two banged out of there like drunk horses, and were gone. They had been inside my house for less than a minute.

The only sound was our breathing. Adam appeared, nose bleeding, neck of his T-shirt pulled down to his belly button.

“Blue!” he screamed. “In here?”

Adam always noticed the blue more than I did: at the mall on days that were supposed to be red Fort Hill days, at the Dairy Mart in Bel Air, in the cans of Maxwell House his parents bought because they liked it better than Folgers. I didn’t care about the blue in my house, but all the same I knew what we had to do. Anyway, I knew it wasn’t really the blue he cared about.

“We’d better wrap up here,” was probably what I said. I’m sure I tried to make it sound as gentle as I could, to calm him, to bring him back from being Red Adam.

“No,” he said.

“Yes,” I said.

And then, because there was no one else to come at, or, it occurs to me some nights, maybe especially because it was me, he charged.

Adam was stronger, but I was better with my body. So long as I didn't get knocked over and stayed away from his grasp, I could manage. Still, Adam was on top of me fast, straddling me, holding my arms down.

"No!" he kept screaming. "No! No!"

Out of instinct, I squirmed, but then I remembered my legs, so I swung them up and to the side and though he nearly held on, already he was flailing and turning red, spitting, hair going in all directions. Then, in an instant, we were both on our feet, and I was holding him, chest to chest, with everything I had. I don't know where the strength came from. I've spoken about it, at the kind of parties I go to now, and the best explanation I've gotten is that I was like the mother who is suddenly able to lift the car off her child.

I squeezed and squeezed. At some point, Adam slowed down, and then he stopped moving altogether. I should have dropped him right then, but I held on. I held on for another long second, and then another, and then another, before I finally let go. He fell to the dusty rug, all elbows, and for another forever second he didn't breathe. But then he did, a short, shallow breath.

I fell to my knees and, because I didn't know what else to do, I slapped him hard enough to sting my hand. He opened his eyes and took a huge breath, and stared straight at me as if he were only resuming our conversation.

"I went crazy," he said. "Sorry."

"Don't apologize to me," I said.

And it's only now that I realize why he didn't want to go that night. It was because he knew, deep down, that no matter what happened with the Skelly stepbrothers, the moment we left that house, it would be the beginning of the end. *(end of excerpt)*