

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 twenty 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, you mean Normal Rockboring? 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, Violet.

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 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. 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.

“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.