

I have bucolic blood. It's dark red, like the juice that bleeds from a beet. I knew it was in me for a long time, but my folks traded parochial life for the intellectual buzz of the city before it began to boil. They left the pig farmers and wooden carts in the dust when we came over. They even left the family; they never looked back. Romania stopped being home. They had big dreams and only America could reciprocate on their ambitions. The United States was the only place that could provide the scaffolding for their skyscraper. Above all else, they demanded that their country provide them with the opportunity to advance as far as they were willing to work. Romania would never concede such a thing, but their moxie didn't flinch. They saw no limit to the rewards that hard work could bring. Before we left Romania, they both lost their jobs. My dad was a doctor and my mom, a violin teacher. Then, after years of writing letters they finally received permission to leave. Someone got tired of opening the same envelope every day. So they started from scratch on another planet with the steadfast resolve to build something that couldn't stand in Romania. Gradually, their wealth grew until they had things that most Romanians could only dream of. They were happy but insular expatriates. The new life they created came at a price they were unwilling to pay. They felt out of place and clung to customs that only alienated them. As all parents do, they tried to pass these on to their children. I could never fault them for that, but they failed to see that the battle was lost before it even began. They believed that the land of opportunity would allow us to keep our culture. That was their mistake. They came to America as fully-formed adults, but I was a naked canvas just waiting to be painted.

We moved from place to place, rising like hot-air balloons. There was something big on the horizon, but it was always hazy and unattainable. I had no idea what we were headed for. Their ideas of fine art and culture were not shared by their neighbors and we stuck out. From the beginning, I felt lost and vaporous. Their groomed purpose was matched only by my missing it. Obviously, my paucity of direction wasn't an amniotic endowment. It was an atavistic inevitability. We were tribesmen. Nomads in a state of perpetual lust for a chimerical utopia. I wonder if every deed I have perpetrated is only a pit stop along The Great Loop. A roundabout with no exit. I fought the impetuous monster within. I tried to kill him several times. Every few years I waged a new crusade against him in the name of stability. At best, I was only able to mangle him. But he grew tired and shrank away, so I let him live- a desiccated shell of useless memories.

After my dad became a doctor again, I was provided with an incredibly stable financial situation. Despite my advantage, I wanted to taste the bitter fruit. I had been given a window seat on the ride to the top. I was part of the incredible journey only by affiliation. I wanted to spill a few drops of my own blood into the dirt to see if was the same color as everyone else's. When I was finally cut loose, I lapped up toxic jobs and gravitated toward the gutter. I ran with a crowd that never cringed at the thought of sucking down a chili cheese-dog slathered in mayonnaise from a gas station display case. These same people didn't disapprove of skipping class on a Tuesday afternoon, drinking a case of Sierra Ice, setting a shopping cart on fire and pushing it down the hill into a busy intersection. For a while, things made more sense. The future was never more than a few days away. There was no need for purpose. I suffered because I thought I owed it to the world.

I grew up in West Virginia, in a quiet suburban neighborhood called South Hills and although my parents did their best to pass on their aristocratic European ideals on to

me, they didn't stand a chance. How could they hope to compete with a culture that relentlessly hammered its values into every organ? There was a dearth of girls in junior-high, smitten by a weird-looking kid who played the violin and took French lessons after school. In seventh grade, a platinum blond seemed interested in me. If nothing else, I *was* a novelty. She called the house one night, asking for me. My mom was still very wary of all these new people and their strange customs. In one unwitting moment, she could have given me the one thing I rabidly foamed for during those years. Instead, she caustically told the girl that I was practicing my violin. I was busy. The girl was intimidated. I never heard from her again. I laugh about that now. The violin was not the instrument to play as a thirteen-year old foreign boy desperately trying to fit into a world your parents are ardently trying to shelter you from. Eventually, I realized music is the ultimate aphrodisiac. But some adolescents desperately crave validation and acceptance in the eyes of their peers. I gave up the violin in high school. It broke my mom's heart. The fissure between us only grew when I began playing in a rock band. They were confused with their oldest son.

I never thought it made any sense to emigrate to a country and completely refuse to assimilate into its culture. For a long time, I wanted nothing to do with anything Romanian. When my mom talked to me in public, it was always in our native tongue and I answered in English. My parents were the only Romanian icons in my life. They were relics to me; two beautiful statues that cared for me, but had no idea who I was.

I was twelve when we moved to Charleston. We came from Dayton, Ohio and I was sad to leave. I had made friends in the neighborhood. They weren't the kind of kids my parents wanted me to run around with. We rummaged through the neighbors' trash, hoping to find treasure. They cursed and watched R-rated movies. Their mother was divorced and smoked Kool cigarettes. We pilfered a bow and arrow from a dumpster and killed a bird. I told my dad and he was shocked and disappointed. After my brother was born, he finished residency and we left Ohio.

My folks were concerned at how I might turn out after several months of living across from the South Park projects in Kanawha City. This time I had become friends with the boys in the ghetto. I was the only white kid around, but I was accepted. I would go down to the dirty little stream with the kid next door and catch minnows. We played Nintendo and basketball. It was a rough block, though. We heard fights and gunshots at night. My parents seemed nervous and choleric. They were anxious to leave. After six months, we saved some money and moved into a more benign 'hood.

We were weird from the beginning. It wasn't surprising. I could hear the fat neighborhood wives' daily gossip.

"Mary, did you meet that new foreign family that moved into the Lowe's house?"

"Oh, yes. And let me tell you, I went over there the other day with a little housewarming basket. They're just the strangest, cutest little people! The whole house smelled like garlic and onions and they have the funniest little accents. I think they're from Russia."

"Oh, no! I talked to Sandy and she said that Tammy Cabell's boy said they just moved from *Ballgaria*."

"Goodness, well we'll just have to try extra hard to make them feel right at home."

They did try. Most folks in that neighborhood were good people. I wasn't sure if

they acted friendly because they liked us or because it was the socially acceptable way of acting. Whatever their reasons, they still thought we were odd. My mom was a violin teacher and she gave lessons to some of the young kids in the area. Periodically, I was forced to sit through the cacophony of one of her recitals. She was a good teacher and occasionally she lucked into a talented student. Typically though, the recital was a squealing menagerie. My mom stood poised next to the child while my dad accompanied on piano. Tortured violins moaned as horsehair raped their strings. The audience sat politely, straining to discern the melody above the din and enthusiastically clapped when it was over. Some of the parents seemed uncomfortable. Our house appeared mundane on the exterior, but inside, four aliens were posing as suburban stiff. When people met my parents, I could tell that they respected them, but it was also evident that there was a giant cultural abyss gaping just beneath the pleasantries. No matter how much they tried to find some common ground, my parents would never give up their old world values and this crippled their integration. I was the polar opposite. I absorbed every nuance of the new culture and its ideologies. I quickly became "American." When people would ask, "Where are you from?" I answered, "Los Angeles." I tried to escape everything Romanian. I had no idea where "home" was. I went to a small Catholic school in a dying town in West Virginia, but I came home to a strange European cloister. If there was ever a time when I felt "at home" in the last ten years it probably happened while I was wobbling on a bar stool in a scummy Pittsburgh watering hole. Happiness was chasing shots of Beam with Pabst Blue Ribbon, talking to people who assumed I was an amorphous shadow from some hollow in Boone County.

But this is not a self-pitying rant about a ruined childhood. I had fun as a kid. Inevitably, I became a product of my culture. Nature vs. nurture? In this case, nurture came out on top.

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If there was one thing my parents didn't want me to become, it was what they called a "creeker." To them this was the Skoal-dipping, bandana-wearing, tattooed prototype that cruised around the mall parking lot in a thumping F-Series Ford pickup blasting Tuesday's Gone or Rump Shaker. Their eyes narrowed and darkened whenever we came across one of these ominous characters. The slightest hint that I was heading in this direction was met with stiff opposition. This was especially true when it came to my haircut. They didn't like the buzz and strictly forbade the clippers to lick the scalp.

"Why don't you want a nice haircut?" they used to say. They would never understand.

Every month or so, my mom shuttled me down for a much needed cropping. The barbershop was called Jack and Joann's, but it was separated into two autonomous buildings. I never made it into Joann's place, but Jack's was everything a barbershop should be. I enthusiastically called in the appointment.

We left our little cul-de-sac in a late eighties silver Subaru station wagon. We passed Dr Gorck's house on the left and merged onto Bridlewood Road. The houses

stood far apart, obscured from the road by the broad green shoulders of sycamores and hickory. On the right, an overgrown strip of land grew unchecked. After we discovered it, my friends and I stamped through so many times, the grass grew horizontally and it became our football field. A half-mile further, Bridlewood dead-ended at a T. We made a left onto Smith Road and passed the dirt path that led through the woods down to my former elementary school.

Our family lived in a decent neighborhood. It was the kind of place where upper middle-class white people didn't lock their doors at night. The houses seemed big to me at the time, but later I got a taste of what it was like to live in an opulent neighborhood- a place where *rich* white people *definitely* didn't need to lock their doors at night, but did anyway. Everyone had their own private little estate. They sequestered themselves in million-dollar plantations and installed uselessly complicated security systems that they didn't understand. After that, the houses in South Hills seemed much smaller when I went back. Growing up in that safe, middle-class neighborhood, it would have been pretty easy for a young kid to assume that all neighborhoods are basically the same.

Smith Road was a major vein running through suburban Charleston. It connected many of the communities throughout South Hills. It snaked up the side of the hill as an offshoot of Oakwood Road and topped off where Bridlewood ended. There it ran along the crest of the hill for a few miles. We passed a development of brown cookie-cutter condominiums called Hunter's Ridge, and then the houses stopped. It was almost a full mile of nothing but woods; the thick, broadleaf redbud and magnolias speeding by; a deep green blur streaking past. Deeper into the forest, houses appeared again. They were smaller, usually with some trash or a wrecked vehicle on blocks in the front yard. I remember thinking how the quality of life along the road paralleled the steep descent. One abode, actually a trailer, was right on the road. As we came around a turn it always caught me by surprise- a rusty, vinyl box, soaking up the moist summer. It swelled like a jaundiced sponge ripe for a squeeze. The road switched back sharply, flanked on either side by the infamous poverty that plagues the state. I saw kids in their front yard stop and watch the hoary wagon lumber around the bend, hugging the turn vigilantly. They were so close that it was impossible not to make eye contact, although I never held it. It cut through the woods at a steep grade and folded to the south-facing side of the hill at the hairpin turn at Deerwalk Lane. The bend was so sharp that the car nearly had to stop. Another quarter mile and Smith dumped its traffic into Davis Creek, a two-lane cruise beneath a leafy canopy. Small clapboard houses stood back from the road, suspiciously peering into the muddy trickle. Just south of the creek was Berry Hills Country Club, a place I often heard about from some of my friends- boys whose wealthy fathers went there to whack tiny dimpled spheres into pristinely groomed holes while their mothers flaunted their wrinkled stretch marks poolside in spandex aprons. I was invited as a guest a few times, but I felt so out of place among the Ralph Lauren polo shirts and pleated khaki shorts, that each time I ended up in the woods, trampling through poison ivy, looking for golf balls. The jackpot was always finding a Titleist underneath a tree, shanked by some obese trial lawyer too lazy to get out of his cart.

Davis Creek turned into Jefferson Road and it bled into Oakhurst Drive. The barbershop was a mile down. Jack and Joann's was part of the Davis Creek Business District. This consisted of an A-frame gun /locksmith shop caddy corner to a dilapidated diner, perpetually running a pancake breakfast special. On the north side there was a gas

station with ancient pumps and a smattering of houses that lined a dirt road leading nowhere. Jack and Joann's was on the right at 1613 ½- a sturdy red brick building with the traditional red, white and blue barbershop pole slowly revolving around itself outside.

The entire trip took twenty minutes in the car. As the crow flies, it was less than four thousand feet. The hillside was still intact back then. Roads didn't go through the mountain- they went around it. Progress was slow in arriving, but people didn't seem to mind. There was another way to go. If time was of the essence, we jumped on Corridor G from the north for five minutes and exited onto Oakhurst, just before the sprawl at Southridge Plaza.

The tires ground into the loose rocks like molars crushing ice. We pulled into the gravel parking lot and my mom dropped me off with seven dollars- five for the haircut and two for a tip. Sometimes the place was empty and I got a seat right away, but usually I sat down in one of the red pleather seats against the wall and thumbed through a Sports Illustrated or the new Field and Stream.

There were two barbers. Jack's name was on the sign outside. He was married to Joann and they owned the building, although if sheer volume said anything, I imagine that Joann bought the steak and Jack paid for the A-1. Once, I walked in and my barber, Bill, was in the middle of a trim. My mom had come in with me to tell him that it had been too short last time. I saw that Jack was just sitting down and reading. I tried to convey to her that I wanted to wait for Bill, but she stridently asked,

“What's wrong with the other man? He can cut your hair.”

I was so red-faced with embarrassment that I couldn't reply. Fifteen minutes later, I walked out to the car biting my lip with rage. I knew I looked ridiculous and I couldn't do a thing about it. Jack had butchered me. My mom kept saying that it looked “fine...nice,” but I already knew which hat I was wearing when I got home.

I walked in another day and the chemical barrage of beard lathers, hair gels and tonic penetrated my pubescent beezers. It was a pleasant smell- the harbinger of a new, clean look. It was summer and the humidity was a skin-tight trash bag. I had a head full of long uncombed hair that stuck to my forehead. It covered up a fine, ripe, red outbreak of acne.

Charleston is not really part of the geographic “South,” but its collective voice is. The Southern Drawl that people associate with states like Alabama and Mississippi exists in West Virginia, too. The world inside that fake-wood paneled room with the myriad Redken hair products was a microcosm of American culture.

There were two people waiting when I got there. They appeared to be father and son. The boy looked like he had been transformed into a mushroom from the neck up and his father didn't look happy about it. He was sporting a bowl cut which was popular for a minute in the early nineties despite its uncanny resemblance to a cock head. The dad's camo hunting vest and mesh Grainger cap confirmed that he was not the kind of man who tolerated that kind of self-mutilation. He didn't look at the boy, only straight ahead into a Sports Illustrated- a man determined to set things right. Bill and Jack were tending to two other men while we waited.

“Well Bill, prawly gonna put in that cielin' fan this weekend. It gets hotter'n hell in that room come summer.”

“I tell ya' what, Tommy. I put one in the bedroom last summer and now we just keep 'em both on all the time. Get a nice cross breeze upstairs like 'at.”

“Mmm-Hmm.” Tommy agreed.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the partition, a completely different conversation was taking place between Jack and his customer.

“Eers lookin’ awright this year?”

“Hard to say. Could be a rebuilding season.”

“Well, we’ll see. Got season tickets.”

“That right?”

“My boy’s up in Morgantown now.”

“Brandon, right?”

“Naw, Brandon’s the other one. Russell goes to WVU.”

“Awright.”

I always paid attention when I was in there. I came away with visions of casting a fly into a bubbling stream and gutting the interior of a house. I also picked up other cultural essentials like the lyrics to *Achy Breaky Heart* and deduced facts like catalytic converter reduced emissions. I rarely said much except the usual thank-you and goodbye for fear of being noticed, but nothing in that place escaped me.

There was a little variety in the patrons. The clientele was mostly old men and teenage boys. The men talked about their wives, cars and sports. It seemed as if each person was having a conversation with himself. The tone of the voices never changed and the volume rarely got above a murmur. The only time I ever saw anything disturb the natural harmony of the place was when Joann stomped inside. She was a tall woman and walked with a lean menacing gait. She had purplish-red hair and dark bands of eyeliner around her orbitals. She sported a cloth headband that pinned her hair back and pinched her leathery skin so tightly, she looked just like a snapping turtle. She wore a long faux-leather skirt that wrapped around her hips tightly and heels that clicked on the checkered tile. She was puffing as she stormed in and it took her a moment to get the words out. Someone had double-parked her car in and she flashed a feral glance around the room. There was no response and she just stood there with her hands squarely on her hips and her face flushed red. Not even Jack spoke. He only acknowledged her with a shrug. We stared at her until she evinced an irascible wheeze and abruptly turned and left. There was no snickering or commentary and things resumed their natural course, as if nothing had ever happened.

Jack finished his customer first and they exchanged the usual formalities:

“Thanks Jack, that’s good work.”

“You got it, Dale. See you in two weeks.”

“Take care now.”

Jack whipped the chair a few times with a towel and motioned for the mushroom-head kid to come over. The father looked up from his magazine long enough to give Jack the instructions.

“Gaw head and clean that up, Jack. Can’t have the boy running around in public like that,” he snorted and rubbed his nose. “I tell ya’ that boy’s mother’s a pushover. She let him do whatever he want.” He looked at his son gravely. “What kind of haircut you want, Garrett?”

“Flat top, sir” he said, looking nervously at his father who nodded in approval.

“Awright son. Hop on up here then,” Jack said, stacking a couple phone books on the slick green barber chair. It squealed like a shoat as he dragged his scrawny legs across the plastic. Jack made short work of the fungal top with his clippers and within a few minutes the boy looked fit to take orders at Fort Jackson. Occasionally, the father shot a glance over to the boy and seemed pleased with his son’s increasingly exposed skull. On the other chair, Bill worked on an old obese mechanic. The man’s bowling ball face was lathered with shaving cream and he looked relaxed. Bill reclined the chair and

tilted the man's head back while calmly guiding the straightedge across the creamy stubble. He paused occasionally to wipe the froth off the blade, stroking the razor along the length of strop. From the look of the mechanic's face, he came to know, probably sometime around ninth grade, that he was destined to be one of those rare mutants endowed with a five o'clock shadow by noon. I also came to know that feeling well. In junior-high, I spent a year shaving my peach fuzz daily, only to finally get my cursed wish in beard, chest and back installments.

Bill's blade cleaned up all of what was already reassembling for a massive counterattack and the porcine grease monkey eyed the barber's handiwork in the mirror. He gently stroked his chin. There were never any complaints or surprises. With Bill, you knew exactly what you were getting. There was a sign posted directly in front of his chair: "Flats Tops-\$7/Lines-\$1 extra." That pretty much summed it up. There were no perms or other esoteric cuts done here, although I saw more than a few rat-tails and mullets proudly strut out like peacocks. But where we lived, those could hardly be considered "specialty cuts." For me it was always the flat top or an occasional buzz. It was stressful, consistently arguing with my parents, but gradually their resolve weakened and my skull was free to breathe. After the mechanic left, Bill swept up the remains into a pile and motioned for me to come over.

Bill was tall and thin and wore a pair of huge eyeglasses halfway down his nose. His face was long and calm and his features relaxed, like those of a man who realized long ago exactly what the score was. Considering he gave thousands of haircuts a year, he probably hadn't had one in a decade. The evidence reflected off his burnished dome-piece. There was no trace of a follicle above his ear line.

He was a quiet man. His voice was barely audible above the radio, which made it difficult for us to have a conversation. During the short time we spent talking, I strained my ears above the purring clippers to make out his words, but his accent was powerful and I got lost in the drawl. He would pause, killing the clippers and repeat what he had just said. Contextually, I was able to piece together what we were talking about. He asked me about school and I tried to talk about sports. We both knew something about baseball, so that was some common ground to stand on. It seemed like Bill lived in a simple world and I felt a connection to it.

It was obvious that I wasn't from around those parts and I knew he wasn't quite sure what to make of the kid whose foreign mom periodically brought him in insisting that "It was too short last time. I can see the skin!" I was always relieved when she would drop me off and run her errands.

"Sebastian, how you doin' son?" Bill said, wrapping a tissue around my neck.

"Oh, pretty good."

"What's it gonna be today?" He pumped up the seat a few notches.

"Well, I think probably a flat top is good. But can you take the sides down lower this time? Last time they was a little long."

"Yeah?" I looked in the mirror and saw him raise an eyebrow. He put down the spray bottle and paused for a moment. "Your mom might not like that. She said they was too short. She don't like that skin showin'. You know that."

"Yeah, I know but it's Ok," I said. "She said I can do what I want this time."

He laughed a little, but not in a snide way. It was more like he was got a little kick out of watching me struggle for a small victory on the battlefield.

It wasn't a complicated procedure: Mist it with water, comb it down, perhaps a little scissor work, and then burn it down to a half-inch. Occasionally, somebody wanted a shave or trim. Simplicity was the secret. Chop chop, sweep sweep, go home. Get the routine down. The fate of the world didn't rest in a barber's hands, no matter how bad he butchered it. A few times in high school, I shadowed doctors, realizing I was supposed to be awed and inspired at the marvels of modern medicine. Meanwhile, I clenched my jaw and flared my nostrils to stifle the yawns. Not that the prospect of being a barber did much for me, either. I considered the life, briefly. It might be interesting to be the character that cut everybody's hair. It was a defined *role*. The Barber. It seemed an ancillary part in a movie. The townies knew him by name and they trusted him. It was a simple life devoid of recondite expectations and bottomless ambition. I was sure that it was an existence free from the torture of uncertainty. Success was *attainable*. If he stayed in the same place long enough he saw people's kids grow up and go to college. He saw his own family grow. If he did a good job he might even be *venerated*.

I liked Bill's accent. It was slow and thick, like maple syrup. Oddly, it seemed exotic. It represented a taboo world that I knew nothing about. I began to talk like that around my friends. It was subtle at first, until I felt comfortable hearing the new voice in my head. Over time, it became so ingrained in me that I stopped realizing I was doing it. I heard my voice on recordings and it shocked me. It didn't stop with the voice, though. The voice led to an identity shift. I began to idolize everything blue-collar. Everything changed. I worshiped the working man and everything he stood for. Suddenly, Lynyrd Skynrd and The Outlaws were cool. I wanted to talk to the plumber and hang out with the landscapers. My parents were flummoxed, as were the landscapers. I was constantly at odds with myself, repudiating my good fortune; I desired a romantic life of toil. It seemed so poetic and just. I saw the world as an ideological struggle between the rich and poor. The working man was the heroic pauper. The rich were always wrong. Even after I left- after years of formal education- I was never able to completely shed all of these notions.

Few people stayed in West Virginia after high school. Most of us took our "college prep" education and got out. My family moved to California after I graduated. There wasn't much opportunity around for the taking. I had visions of grandeur playing music. It allowed me to live out ambivalent dreams of quixotic existence with the fringe benefits of an honest living. I roundly rejected selling out. I was unfathomable. I renounced a world where things came easy. I wanted to suffer and become a legend for it.

I wondered if Bill ever wanted to put his scissors away and tell Jack he wouldn't be there in the morning. Did it ever occur to him to drop everything? I was sure it didn't. His life was reality, not fantastic speculation by a fortunate son. I never knew much about Bill's personal life. What were his aspirations thirty years ago? Was he a high school phenom drafted to pitch for the Dodgers only to break his arm and abruptly end his career in his first start? Could he have been he a brilliant pilot in the Air Force who had to be grounded because of advanced glaucoma? I never found out. Maybe he was just a forgettable face who married a woman, had a son and became a barber. Our conversations were limited by the fact that the common ground we shared existed, as far as we both knew, only in a lime green vinyl seat. But some strange people want to talk to everyone- even tell them the most personal things. They read their own story through

someone else's eyes.

It's been more than fifteen years since I set foot in Jack and Joann's. I wonder if it's still there. Is the barber pole still twisting outside? I could grow the mop out for another year and casually stroll in without an appointment. I'd wait for Bill in the plastic chair and read about Orvis' new reel.

"What's it gonna be today, bud?"

"Oh, I think it's time to clean 'er up. Just chop it all off- marine style."

"You sure about that? That's a lot of hair."

"Definitely. I'm going for a new look."

"No problem. Haven't seen you in here before. You new around here?"

"Nah, just visitin'. Gotta head back to Mo'Town on Tuesday."

"Mountaineers had a good season, last year."

"Yeah they did. If Slaton and White stay healthy, be even better this year."

"Well, I believe them boys could win it all."

"Yes sir. Sure would like to be up in Morgantown for that party."

I looked up into the mirror and saw a goofy grin spread across his face. He stepped back as if he was pondering something he hadn't thought about in years. Then I heard him laugh. He came back and pressed the blade against my head.

"Sure would be something to see."