

## **Soloist Remembers West Virginia**

He took the Peter Pan bus away from the festering gangrene hills. Coal dust wasted away Appalachia. He wanted to believe he could turn back, that he would eventually settle into himself but he was already headed to the Super 8 two counties over.

Those hills. They wind, they linger. They are hardened veins with crystals leaking out at the wrists, exposing rocky track marks in the lunacy of night. The time was 4:30 p.m. Around this same time, his father would tell him to refill the ice box. But now, daddy was checking his watch, wondering why his son hadn't shown up yet; thinking, Kid said he was getting change from the bank and I gotta take the Cherokee downtown for a pickup.

The son had left the Cherokee at the bus station. He lowered his head as the bus went down the main drag. He had Vivaldi playing in his headphones and it felt like a real goodbye. He fingered the violin case and convinced himself he was born to play.

He couldn't lie anymore. The air that inked the lungs, steamy bars at the bottom of those lingering hills. Fellas went outside the Torchlight Club to bum cigarettes off that one friend while the pool hall crackled. Trying to quit, but one more. Cumbersome as elephants in fine china shops, overalls bump around in the black dirty. Like leftover patchwork from an unfinished evening. They drink to forget what could be tomorrow's last elevator ride down the big hole. His mother would say, Wave bye-bye to daddy.

The bus brakes shrieked and he saw Alan smiling, resisting to move the hair from his forehead so as not to garner attention in the Super 8 parking lot. That same smile he saw outside the community center after the talent showcase last February. That same smile that turned a snowy face into windswept, rosy cheeks. Hot and tender. They wrestled in the back of the Cherokee a week later, always telling themselves they were doing this just because. When they were finished, they listened for cracking ice in the dark, slushy river.

Next week was the conservatory audition, tomorrow would be a bus headed north, two tickets. It was always a hobby to Mom and Dad, until he got a technician gig at the gas company. Dad would come back home from work in a wake of volcanic dust, creaking and cracking. Saying, You mind if you hold off practicing til' tomorrow? It was always tomorrow, even after his knee got busted in a cave-in and the pills gave him insomnia. The time was 6:30 p.m. and the soloist looked at his phone.

They didn't call, not from their side road pump station on local route 25 where Dad would meet the postman around back to collect his disability check. 30 customers a day: Jim with the Camels, Todd with the Skoal, Trent with the spicy fries, Don with the 40 oz. before he too would wait for the postman around back. No, they knew he was gone by now. They'd found his letter, Goodbye.

A cold sweat, an unfamiliarity of waking up not in his bed. He crawled out of the itchy sheets of the Super 8, room 32, and watched Alan's sleeping chest rise and fall.