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In The Valley

Chris Chick

Gettysburg College, chicwi01@gettysburg.edu

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Author Bio

Chris Chick is a senior Religious Studies major and Writing minor. He is a brother of Sigma Alpha Epsilon and a former football player for the Bullets.

In the Valley

CHRIS CHICK

The air at the basin of the Blue Ridge Mountains in July lay down like blankets. The water trapped among it, too, weighed you down when you tried to stand up in it. At night, when the sun had gone away and lessened the burden of evaporating water from the summer night's prior rain, the streets would still steam. The clouds would finally gather, eventually, and pour down into the valleys sometime around three in the morning almost every night. The streets would be damp at first light, and dry by nine. The leaves would drop whatever water they held within them and release it up to the sun by noon. By six, the clouds would start to form again, and by about one o'clock, the stars would be, for the most part, hidden from the West Virginian valley below it.

There's darkness in the base of this valley.

The ever-present shadow under which Jim Klein lived made real by God himself; he took it as his divine authority to act as he pleased under the blanket of West Virginian clouds. And so, as he'd done every night for the past month, he sat in the driver's seat of a beaten, red 1978 Ford Pickup truck, and watched the shadows behind the curtains in the Suffolk home. They moved, sometimes grouping together to speak, and sometimes huddling close while the curtain was peeled back, and the face which peered out from behind the sheer white sheet was met by the back of the family dog chained halfway up the lawn, hair stood up, barking constantly at the silhouette of Jim and a small glow from inside his truck that lit the end of a shotgun barrel pressed nonchalantly against the window.

Across his lap sat his baby, a Benelli M2 he'd bought some ten years back when it first got released. He'd paid a gunsmith in Charleston to strip the polymer and replace it with slabs of cherry he'd stolen from the bed of an idling truck. His hand sat against her stock and he rubbed his thumb across the fading wood as one might against the hand of some woman they'd loved, though this was the only woman Jim had ever really seemed to love. Jim felt naked without his cherry-clad shotgun; the name Doris was engraved above the cartridge release. His mother.

He sat for awhile in the silence, unmoving and blanketed by coats of West Virginian darkness that turned to waves of rain. He cranked the window up and sat, still staring into the home. He did not blink. He did not move. The lights went out and the shadows disappeared behind the curtains;

the Suffolk's had gone to bed, but he stayed. He knew they were still watching him, and so he watched back. An old police cruiser drove by every so often, and though Jim would nod at them, they kept their eyes pinned forcefully on the road ahead. Jim smiled to himself as they did.

He waited until the Suffolks had long gone to bed and the last peeks behind the curtains stopped, and then would wait longer. He popped a cigarette from its pack past the filter and stuck it between his teeth, before reaching a hand that more resembled a paw into the inside pocket of his jacket to retrieve a red Bic lighter that was scratched and fading to reveal its white beneath it. He cupped his hand around his cigarette and sat there, still keeping his eyes on the home all the while. He inhaled and held the smoke sliding down his throat until it burned, stung, and then would exhale through his nose. When he'd finally finished, he cranked down the window low enough to flick out the burning butt into the rain and the browning summer grass of the Suffolk's. He kept it low enough, for a minute at least, that his eyes would be visible in the streetlight. He didn't break eye contact with the home until it was out of his view, and even then he kept his eyes locked on the streetlight at the corner in his rear view mirror until he had to turn again and even that too was out of sight.

Jim stepped onto the porch of his split-level ranch home sometime around two in the morning and took one more drag of his seventeenth cigarette of the day before dumping it in an ashtray. He stepped inside, allowing the screen door to slam behind him. He didn't lock it, nor did he bother to close or latch the oak door which followed it. The crossbreeze and the draft the open door offered kept the house cool in the summer without running the air conditioning. The open windows, too, let the wind sprint through his bedroom and slid the cool air across his bed and within the blankets under which Jim and his wife Marie slept.

He stepped heavy footed to the corner of the room and placed a hand on the top of the armoire. With a snap he jammed the heel of his boot into the 'U' of his boot jack, keeping his back foot on its wood and leather support as he leveraged his foot out of long, snip-toe elephant skin boots. He leaned over and took the boot by the heel and nudged it with his palm until it released, and then he set it on a faded spot on top of the armoire. The second jolt of a heel into the crux of the jack stirred Marie, but she simply rolled over and went back to sleep, allowing greying, thinning hair to fall across her face. After Jim had placed the second boot up in its place, he hung a wet suede jacket on a hook leaving the armoire open, allowing it to dry, both aware and uncaring of the damage he'd caused it and the punishment the suede would undergo from its time in the rain.

He made his way to the bed, undressing as he went, slipping his fin-

gers between his belt and under the buttons of the fly on his jeans to release them, finally dropping them and pulling off an old button down as he sat on his bed. He kicked off the jeans and slid them to the corner by the boot jack and tossed his shirt there as well. He left his socks on as he slid under the sheets with Marie and brushed the hair away from her face, giving her a kiss on her forehead.

With this, he laid his head back and stared up into the darkness of his room and past the ceiling, up into a sky he was sure was his. The crickets were loud, God's white noise. Taps of raindrop and acorns on tin roof drums drove him into sleep. He slept well that night. He slept well most nights.

Jim was always the first to get out of bed. His eyes would seem to snap open every morning before dawn, before school buses came and before most people got up to have their morning coffee and a shower; he wanted to start his day before anyone else did, a few moments alone to order and orient himself.

Regardless of his tendency to fall into a rut, or rather, in compliance with a tendency he was wholly aware and proud of, Jim's eyes opened around 6 or so, just as the sun dripped droplet rays over the peaks of the mountains. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and rubbed his eyes a little, before reaching to the nightstand and putting his glasses on, taking the added measure of wrapping the ends of their lenses around his ears. These glasses have been on his nightstand every night since 1989, when he bought them. As he made his way into the bathroom, he flicked the lights on with an old and yellow switch with a wooden cover that clicked hard into place. Turning a knob in a tub with hard water stains so deep neither he nor Marie even tried to clean them anymore, he got in the shower.

Floorboards creaked as Jim stepped onto the porch, as did the rocking chair when he sat back to enjoy his morning coffee. Black was the only way he drank his coffee, a conscious choice he made when he turned sixteen and went underground for the first time. Everything was black down there; this is his only relic of his mining days. With the coffee gone, the empty mug sat on the armrest of the chair, and it would stay there until Marie finally made her way out on her way to work, at which point she'd saunter back inside and put it in the sink to be washed when she got home.

Elephant boots slid on his feet and cradled the arches of his foot well. The Lucchese logo on the heel of his boots had long been worn off, though the grooves and gripping of the heel still stayed visible. A pair of light blue jeans with fraying hems rolled down the boots and left a small divot in the front. He stood up and slid a crinkled brown belt through the loops of his jeans and fastened it, before unfastening it, as he did every morning, to tuck in a white button down. His stomach hung over his belt buckle. With sleeves rolled up and cuffed, he was ready to make his way out for the day.

He started up the truck after a few turns of the keys and left the radio off, ensuring before he left that he had a fresh pack of cigarettes and Doris in his passenger seat.

The streetlamp on the corner of the Suffolk's street went out just as Jim was driving up. He parked there, in the same spot he had the night prior, and waited. Waiting, of course, was Jim's least favorite part of his morning ritual. The dog started barking as soon Jim rolled down the window. When the door opened and John Suffolk came out, a double-barrel slung around his shoulder simply to retrieve his morning paper, the dog would quiet. John would pat its head and continue by; its hair still stood up on the back of its neck but he stood silent.

Jim grinned at him through the rear view mirror. Not a smile, but a grin, eyes cold and shallow, and met back with the most stoic look John could muster up in the few seconds as he walked down a gravel driveway. Susan Suffolk watched her husband from the door in a white robe. An extra set of eyes should Jim do anything, though he never had. He just sat there. Unmoving. Everpresent.

John was halfway between the end of his driveway and his porch when he stopped. Mist had started to rise off the streets and out of the gravel under which he stood. It was getting hot; the steam slipped up his legs and under a freshly shaved chin.

"What're you doing here, Jim?" John asked. He hadn't turned around yet, but cocked his head back towards the truck so that he could make out just its rusting bumper.

"No idea what you're talking about, John," he replied, "just having a morning cigarette."

"You been here all night?"

Jim chuckled to himself a little, "You know I hadn't been."

John started his way back up his driveway to the porch.

"Man's gotta sleep sometime, y'know," Jim said again. He checked pockets for a lighter to start his second cigarette of the day, which was already perched between his teeth. "Must be pretty tiring stayin up that late, huh?"

"Wouldn't know," John muttered back at him, keeping his head cocked towards the truck and his eyes on Susan.

The creak of the truck door as it opened caused John to whip around with the shotgun shouldered, putting a ground down sight on Jim's lapel pocket. The dog barked again. Jim raised his hands a bit, not reaching them past his shoulders.

"Whoa there, can't a man get out and stretch?" He put down his hands and placed them on his lower back, leaning into them and cracking it. "Ooh, there we go," he muttered to himself, though loud enough for John to hear. He lifted his elbows up a little and rotated from side to side. "Y'know

there John, I can see those bags under your eyes from here. Why don't ya go on inside and get back to bed."

"Gotta get to work, just figured I'd read the paper with breakfast."

"Make sure those kids get off to school too, huh? Or, no... y'all both head out fore they do, don't ya? Not anymore, I guess, cause of the circumstances."

"Circumstances?"

Jim ignored the question, taking another puff of his cigarette. "No, no I mean it. You can just go on back up to bed and I'll make sure those little ones get off to school alright. What, a mile or so down the road? Pretty far walk for them don't you think?" John kept the shotgun shouldered and levelled on Jim's chest. "Tell you what, why don't I drive em? Johnny and Kate, right?"

John marched forward and put the gun a couple inches from Jim's face. Blackness down the barrel of a shotgun would make most men stand down; they shudder and let in envelope them. Jim, though, looked down at the end of his cigarette and put it back between his teeth.

"I wouldn't go doin anything stupid there, John. Whole family's watching. Why don't you just go head and put that down. Y'can tell Mrs. Suffolk up there she can stop pretending she ain't holding a gun on the other side that door, too." Another drag. "Let's just say I were to shoot you. Right here, right now. Ya think she'd be able to hit me from there? Cause I'll tell you what I think." Another drag, spilling smoke from behind yellow teeth. "I think I could bury one in your chest and even if she got a shot off, I'm sure she wouldn't hit me, and I'm damn sure it'd knock her over. Then what, hm? Daddy's bleeding out in the front lawn, with a door wide open and Mrs. Suffolk just lyin' there all... vulnerable." Another drag, and then a flick into the yard. "Be pretty ugly, John, don't you think?"

"I'm not sure you've got time to get that shot off."

"But you're not certain, are ya?" John lowered the shotgun and took a step back. "There ya go. Good boy. Now run back on up there, breakfast's probably gettin' cold."

John stuck a scarred finger up to Jim's face. "You stay the hell away from my family, or we might just have to see." Turning to walk back up to the house, he picked up the paper he'd dropped and slung the shotgun back over his shoulder. Susan finally started to relax, though only as much as she could with Jim Klein thirty feet from her front door.

"Oh, one more thing there John," he called out to him, "If'n you were smart, you're gon' keep your mouth shut bout what you saw at Taylor's last week."

"You're asking me to forget what you did to that poor girl? She was just a kid."

“Weren’t askin’ you to forget. Tellin’ you to keep your mouth shut ‘bout it.” Jim pulled his pack of cigarettes from his lapel pocket as he spoke. John turned to face him, putting his back to his wife as she laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Or what?”

“Or we’re gon see.” Jim chuckled and got back in his truck and lit another cigarette. “Enjoy your day, John.”

The door slammed shut and followed with the audible click of a dead-bolt. With a nod up to the peeking eyes of Johnny and Kate up in their bedrooms, the curtains dropped back into place. He slowly raised his hand as a gun and pointed at their window, closing one eye to better his imaginary aim. He let off a silent shot towards their window before cranking up the radio to try and finish his cigarette in peace. Peace, though the dog kept barking. Jim cracked his neck to his left, and back to his right, before grabbing Doris from the passenger seat.

With one hand on the wooden pump, he stepped out of the truck with a creaking door and easing suspension and walked towards the house. The dog ripped at its chain and snarled at him again, snapping its teeth at the threat now standing inches from its reach. Jim couldn’t see silhouettes now, in morning light, but he knew they were watching.

“And John...” he called out, putting his cigarette in his mouth. He leveled Doris and sent out a neighborhood quaking shot; the dog let out a high screeching whimper and laid bleeding in the grass, crying louder than before, and then not at all.

“...Don’tchu ever threaten me again.” Jim grinned into the living room window before turning his back to the home, the opening curtain, and the shock of both shot and sudden silence still quaking in the Suffolk home. He slid Doris through the open window of his truck before opening the door and dropping in the seat. He cranked the radio high. He resumed his stalking of the home in time to see the curtain finish its drop back into place. Finishing his cigarette and lit another, knowing he’d still be left untouched, he tapped his hands on the wheel to a song playing he didn’t quite know, undisturbed, watching.