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## The Long Branch

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## The Long Branch

### Author Bio

Eleanor Gross is an Anthropology major and French minor at Gettysburg College who has a love/hate relationship with extremely windy days, depending on the direction of said wind and the condition of her hair.

## The Long Branch

ELEANOR GROSS

The driver's side door of a glossy black Ford F-150 swung open and a brown boot caked in old, dried mud extended from the truck, sitting warily on the step just outside of the door. A large man, standing nearly 6'5, ducked out of the opening. Thin, snow-white hair was blown wildly into a peak at the top of his head and pale blue eyes glanced from building to building, examining his surroundings. Midwestern-themed fronts gave a cartoonish image to the shops lining the long road, but empty sidewalks suggested a forgotten town. The scruff of a white beard had begun to show on his jaw and neck and deep wrinkles lined his forehead and crinkled at his eyes. Tanned skin hung loose at his neck, speckled with sunspots and moles. He wore black Levi jeans and a wrinkled baby blue button-down shirt that strained to stay closed at his distended belly. A white tank top peeked out from the top of his chest and thin black sunglasses clung to it. Two thick, brown leather straps held onto the front of both of his shoulders, wrapping around to meet at the top of his back. In his left hand, he held a long black beanie. Three holes had been cut out of it, two smaller than the third.

When the passenger door creaked open, another man climbed out of the vehicle and stiff, cropped black and grey hairs suggested a military veteran, but a bald crown atop his head proved it was only a ruse. He wore a heavy leather jacket, now a dull black from age and lack of care. It hugged his broad shoulders and thick middle like an old friend and squeaked quietly as the man moved. Though his eyes were hidden by dark sunglasses, large unruly eyebrows streaked in silver and grey glowered in a firm frown. A small black backpack made for hiking clung to his shoulders, clipped together at the front of his chest. This man held a black beanie of his own in his left hand. With his free hand, he steadied the thick black strap carrying a rifle on his right shoulder.

"Where's Annie?" the other man demanded, rounding the bed of the truck to meet the man with the rifle standing on the sidewalk.

The man with the rifle grunted, sliding his passenger seat forward to reveal a six-year-old child dozing in the backseat. She wore red slippers and a pink dress adorned in white polka dots, with a lace

frill delicately lining the bottom. Under her dress she wore a loose pair of grey joggers, rolled at the top to keep them from sliding off when she walked. A large blue baseball cap shaded her eyes, but her head was tilted back to reveal a tiny mouth agape, with drool dribbling down the side of her cheek and neck. In her left hand she held three soggy goldfish crackers, which she had been happily enjoying before she had fallen asleep.

“Do we have to wake her up?” the man with the rifle whined. The man in the blue shirt glared at his partner.

“I’m not having this argument again. She can’t stay in the truck while we’re inside,” the man in the blue shirt growled. He turned his back to the girl and looked down the street to a tall building with huge black letters above the door that read THE LONG BRANCH DINER & BAR.

“How long are we going to have to keep doing this, Bill?” the man with the rifle asked. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from the girl before him.

“Until she’s old enough to pay for herself, George,” Bill answered. He sized up The Long Branch. Two long sets of floor-to-ceiling windows on either side of the front door let in natural light, though soon the people inside would have to turn on the ceiling lights if they wanted to see anything. The sun had begun to whisper its goodbyes in dusty shadows on the buildings lining the street, and darkness was setting upon the town.

George tenderly lifted the baseball cap from the child’s eyes and couldn’t help but hold his breath. Her wispy brown hair had streaked across her pale face and her beautiful little freckles dotted the bridge of a tiny upturned nose.

“She looks just like Becca,” George gasped, “God, she looks just like Becca.” He brought the blue baseball cap to his heart and tears threatened to spill over his eyes. Bill leaned over George’s shoulder to get a better look at the girl.

“Then let’s do what Becca would have wanted and wake her up. She can’t stay in the car, George,” Bill said gently. “I miss her too, but now Annie’s our responsibility, and we’ll just have to do our best,” he said as he patted George’s shoulder.

“Annie, honey, it’s time to wake up,” George whispered, nudging her knee, “it’s gumball time.” Gentle amber eyes cracked open and tiny hands balled into fists as arms and legs whined into a stretch. Annie gazed sleepily at her uncle as realization lit up her face.

“It’s gumball time?” Annie eagerly asked. She kicked her legs back and forth and bounced up and down until her her seat shook.

“And then can we get pancakes?” Before she had begun living with her uncles, Annie had never been allowed to have pancakes. Now, they were a regular and much-anticipated occurrence.

“And then we can have pancakes,” Uncle George nodded.

Uncle Bill dug into his pocket and produced a crumpled beige stocking. Handing it to his brother, he made sure to block Annie from view of anyone who might be watching from a store window. In this town exposed guns rarely raised questions but a six-year-old with panty hose on her head might gather some unwanted attention. Uncle George gingerly slid the stocking over Annie’s face, doing his best to tuck all of her hair into the back of it. No matter how hard he tried, a few strands always managed to escape and blow freely out from under the mask. Annie didn’t really mind the stocking, but it blurred her vision a bit and made it harder to see the gumballs.

“Do you think you could find a *red* gumball this time, Annie?” Uncle Bill asked, turning to her.

Annie pondered her uncle’s question for a moment, her face contorted in the stocking. Her nostrils were turned upwards, and her lips and eyes were squashed under the fabric. She had never gotten a red gumball before.

“Yes!” Annie replied enthusiastically. She was ready to take on this challenge.

Uncle George stepped back to allow Annie to climb out of the truck and held her hand as they walked towards the diner. Opening his leather jacket, he produced a plastic sandwich bag filled with quarters. Annie gripped it tightly and shook the bag so the quarters rattled inside. The heavier the bag was, the longer she could take to find her gumball. This gumball time was going to take a while.

Uncle George and Uncle Bill stopped just short of the door to the tall white-washed brick building, sliding their own masks down over their faces. Removing the sunglasses from his tank top, Uncle Bill slid them over his eyes. Annie always loved it when they wore their hat masks, because she thought their mouths looked funny poking out from those holes. Uncle Bill produced a handgun from the right side of his holster and Uncle George brought his rifle to the front of his body. Bracing her bag of quarters against her chest, Annie made sure to stay silent.

Uncle Bill went in first. The door jingled a welcome as he opened it and he marched straight into the dining area with his gun drawn. Uncle George followed, still holding Annie’s hand, but he stopped to direct her to a giant red gumball machine to his right in the hallway that led to the dining area.

She placed the first quarter in the slot and turned the worn metal knob, click. A scream erupted from the dining room. Turning the knob clockwise until the slot reappeared without her quarter, Annie held her palm out under the tiny silver door just under the knob. A blue gumball. That simply wouldn't do.

She could hear Uncle George yell for people to get on the ground with the same rough voice he always used during gumball time. Annie shoved the blue gumball into the right pocket of her joggers. She stopped to admire the brilliant scarlet red of this gumball machine. The last one was so dull and faded and it had felt cheap and phony under her touch. It was plastic, she thought, and she hadn't liked the scrapes on it that revealed the white beneath its coating. Her previous favorite gumball machine had a transparent trunk with a spiral slide for the gumballs to run down before appearing in her hand and she had used up all of the quarters rather quickly that time just to watch and re-watch the gumballs make their beautiful descent. She had been sloppy during that gumball time and hadn't gotten the color Uncle Bill had wanted.

Running her pointer finger along the cool metal of this gumball machine, she decided this one was her new favorite. Its globe was glass, not plastic and the knob had just the right amount of scoring to give someone a good grip on it. It was a bit sticky, but Uncle Bill always said that just meant it was well-loved.

To her left, Uncle George's voice echoed as he threatened to shoot anyone who moved. Sometimes someone did move, though, and Uncle George would shoot the ceiling to scare them again. Annie always hated the noises people would make when they were scared. Whimpers and screams, cries and prayers would all come out of people's mouths, but it never stopped Uncle George and Uncle Bill. Annie paused to peek around the corner to where her uncles were and stood in awe of the stuffed game lining the upper walls. A giant black bear skin made into a rug gaped at her, and a lynx posed magnificently on a shelf by the teacups. Annie had always loved the pancakes at this diner and adored the taxidermized pheasant behind the counter at the register. An old waitress dressed in her white apron and baby blue dress caught Annie's attention as she whimpered. Her clasped hands shook at the back of her head. Old waitresses were never fit for these sorts of events. Two people with large backpacks and new sneakers crouched under their table, and a line cook held his spatula high in the air from his place on the floor.

Resuming her task, Annie slid a second quarter into the slot on top of the knob and kept her eyes locked on the red gumball in the

machine. Standing on her tippy toes she squashed her face against the glass globe, pleading silently for the gumball to come to her this time. It was always harder to see with the stocking over her head, but she wasn't allowed to take it off until they were all back in the truck.

*Click*, she turned the knob and watched the gumballs in the machine rustle while they lost another member to Annie's hand. A white gumball. No no no, this wouldn't do either. She needed a red gumball. *Red, do you hear me?* she scolded the machine with a tiny accusing finger.

A tall, slender man rounded the corner to her right, wiping his hands on his loose blue jeans. Annie didn't bother to glance up, too focused on demanding a new gumball from the machine. She thought she heard the man stifle a chuckle upon seeing her but ignored him anyway. The man stood silently watching as Annie placed another quarter into the slot and turned the knob, *click*. A gunshot from the other room broke the man's fascination and Annie watched him from the corner of her eye, waiting for him to put his long legs to use and run. But the man stood still, silently analyzing the situation. *Why wasn't he running?* She paused to focus more on the person standing to her right. He wasn't afraid, not in the way the other skinny men were always afraid. Having piqued her interest, Annie turned her head to face the man. He almost took a step back when she met his eyes, but he paused.

Squatting to her level, the man said quietly, "You know, if you can see the gumball you want, that means you're even further from getting to it." Intelligent dark eyes sparkled at her, and she could almost see a hint of amusement in them. She felt her cheeks and ears burn crimson red at the sight of him, but was thankful the stocking obscured it from his view. She had never met someone as pretty as this man was.

Annie huffed in exasperation and looked back at the gumball machine, re-evaluating her tactics . . . maybe he was right. With a grunt she placed her quarters at her feet and curled around the globe of gumballs, trying to see which ones were closest to the bottom now. Satisfied, she turned back to the tall man and gave him a sharp nod in place of a "thanks."

Mirroring Annie's nod, the pretty slender man with loose jeans stood up, looking around. He turned his back to her and silently disappeared around the corner he had come from. Her heart had a dull ache in his absence, but she had to focus on what she was doing. Returning her attention to the gumballs, she placed another quarter into the machine.

Uncle George's voice floated from the other room to Annie's ears, asking someone about the quality of the pheasant behind the counter. The ding of an old register creaking open and the high-pitched sound of a zipper running along its tracks on a backpack told Annie she needed to hurry now if she wanted to get the red gumball. She had wasted valuable time looking at the skinny man and she scolded herself for it.

Quarter after quarter disappeared into the gumball machine, to no avail. A yellow gumball popped out. No, that wouldn't do. A green gumball, then a purple one, next a blue one; even a white gumball, all came spilling out of the scarlet trunk before her. None of these were red and Annie began to grow impatient. Her pockets were filled with a rainbow of colors, but not the *right* color.

Uncle George's heavy footsteps told her it was time to leave, but she wasn't ready to go yet. Blowing on her last quarter, she cursed the machine and the red gumball that hid from her. She placed the coin into the slot and turned the knob slowly, listening for the *click* and waiting in silence as the machine rattled and groaned its last payment to her. She placed her hand below the tiny silver door under the knob and watched as her prize rolled unceremoniously into her palm.

The color clashed with the paleness of the skin on her hands and she let a groan of disappointment escape her throat. This was the color of the sunrise, not the sunset. Orange. It was orange.

Gripping the gumball tightly in her fist, Annie glanced at her sandwich bag on the floor. It had been reduced to an empty sack sitting at her feet and she wished she could just find one more quarter. One more so she could try again.

Uncle George appeared in the doorway and she swept her closed palm behind her back, unwilling to reveal a gumball that wasn't red. Her uncle cocked his head to the side, silently asking what she was hiding. Embarrassed, Annie gingerly raised her hand in front of her and opened her palm to reveal an orange gumball. Her ears burned with shame, because she knew this wasn't the one Uncle Bill had wanted her to find, but it was the closest color to red that she had.

Uncle George knelt down in front of Annie and silently observed the trophy sitting solemnly in her palm. Patting her head, he offered his free hand to her with the shadow of a smile on his lips. Annie kept the orange ball tight in her fist and took Uncle George's open hand without a word. They walked out of the diner and the door jingled its goodbyes to them.

As Annie hoisted herself into the backseat of the truck, Uncle



George removed the offwhite stocking from her head and smoothed down her chestnut hair. Uncle Bill emerged from the building, hurriedly opening his driver-side door and placing the stuffed pheasant he held under his arm in the backseat with Annie. She quietly caressed the iridescent green feathers on its head and neck in awe and was excited to add it to the others in her room. With everyone in the vehicle, Uncle Bill put the truck into reverse and squealed into a donut, heading back in the direction they had come from.

"I didn't find the red gumball," Annie whispered somberly. She slowly reached her hand into the space between the seats where her uncles sat, opening her fist to reveal the apricotcolored candy and waited patiently for disappointed sighs.

"I see you found an orange one, very good job," Uncle Bill said, glancing over his arm to see what she had. Annie gazed earnestly into her uncle's eyes in the rear-view mirror, trying to figure out if he meant what he said. He met her eyes for a brief moment and winked and Annie knew he was telling the truth.

Sinking back down into her seat, she took time to examine the gumball, wondering why it was just as good as a red one. It was almost red, but softer. The shiny exterior was beginning to wear off in the tight grasp of her sweaty palm, subduing the brightness it had once had. She thought back to the tall man she had seen in the hallway. He had been right; she hadn't gotten her red gumball because she could still see it.

"Now can we get pancakes?" Annie asked quietly, still gazing at her palm.

The sun had set, and darkness laid a thick blanket of black and deep navy blue over the old western town. Streetlights in the distance flickered on and did their best to illuminate the sidewalks before them.

"Now pancakes, Hun," Uncle George answered, reaching back to pat Annie's leg.

She popped the orange gumball into her mouth and strained to crack its exterior. She had never bothered to try an orange gumball before and found it to be more bitter-sweet in her mouth than she had expected. By the time it had lost all flavor, they would be eating pancakes in the next town over and Uncle George would find her a new gumball machine.

Looking behind her, she glimpsed the outline of a tall, slender figure backlit by one of the streetlights. Squinting to make out the details of the shadow, she noticed it was the man from the gumball machine. He stood hidden mostly from view of anyone on the street,

resting in the shadow of the large white wall at the side of the building. His hands in his pockets, he solemnly watched as Annie's truck peeled out. Annie offered a gentle half-wave to the man, her stomach roiling at leaving him behind.

Slowly, the man raised his arm until it was illuminated in the streetlight at his side. Extending his hand, Annie caught sight of something glinting in his fingers. The man gripped a tiny ball between his pointer finger and thumb. A ball the color of the sunset. Annie gasped, nearly letting her orange gumball fall from her mouth. Smirking devilishly, the man shoved the gumball into his mouth and chewed it while Annie watched helplessly from her seat in the departing truck.

Her fists balled in rage and shock, Annie remembered the words her uncles had used countless times before when things went wrong, or a machine refused to work.

Glaring holes into the man in the distance, Annie said, "Oh you fucker."