

Edgemont

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Though my grandfather always said that my father's long hair made the back of his head look like a camel's ass I never saw the resemblance in the photo. Leaning tall and thin on a headstone his black hair falls to his chin in loose waves. A thick beard, rich in color instead of the salt-and-pepper grey it is today, frames his hooked nose, which balances his wide-set blue eyes rendered grey by the camera. The grave marker on he leans on bears our last name, though the person resting there is of no relation. And as my father's stare bores into the lens I cannot help but feel pressure as I wonder which would crack first: the glass of the camera, or the glass of his irises, on guard and cautious. He's surrounded by headstones much older than the one he stands against, worn away by Edgemont's heavy-handed moisture; riddled in moss that conceals the identities of the dead. But the allure—what would drive me to trek hours through the same cemetery—rests in my father's expression as he stood upon a grave bearing his family's name: Sharpe. Allure gives way to something like grief, though it's not sad. There is a resignation, an acceptance to it. His lips are turned downward in recognition of what happened in Edgemont, but his eyes remain solid: a last goodbye to the place that devoured his family, now rotting in the earth.

I yearn for the same resignation my father expresses around his family, but I have a lasting connection to them. Because I have my aunt's eyes I have the same eating disorder that she developed, though hers was in lieu of a

messy divorce. And though I do not hear the voices like she does, I fear one day I might. And because I have my uncle's lips with the same thirsty quiver in them from an addictive personality I am prone to self-medication with uppers and downers and everything in between. I am so much of the family my father left behind in Edgemont and I thought if I found the grave, maybe, and immortalized my image, standing firm and accepting in front of the corpse of my family, I too, would be free of the Edgemont legacy. And so began my journey through the Ardsley Cemetery in Westchester County.

I've never lived in Edgemont, New York, but I'm bound to it. I don't even like it. The sprawling maple and beech trees that surround the house my father grew up in reek of prestige; not the good kind you earn, but the kind you can buy. Up the soft, moist path behind the gates to the Westchester County neighborhood nestles my father's childhood house—a towering white estate that contrasts the soil, covered by the shade of oaks and sumac. Shingles curl upward to make room for tufts of moss to grow; deep brown timbers of the trim split with moisture and everything else the house has bottled up inside. Unlike the rest of Edgemont, grandiose in its regard, the manor has shrunken in witness to its tenants. It gives itself over to the native ivy and wild grapevines. Delicate, green plant spindles carefully wind their way up the imposing supporting beams, holding up the plant-laden eave over the stained-glass doors. Though breathtaking, I imagine it won't be long until the delicate tendrils grow into great boas, constricting the beams until they splinter and give-way. The whole town has that effect: the looming hint or threat of suffocation that I'm sure my father and my aunt must have felt as children.

But again, I feel bound by it. I feel I cannot lay on the sprawling yards or the lush grass of the golf courses for fear that Edgemont will detect something in my cells—in the marrow of my bones and all that I am made of—and mistake me for its own, pulling the thread of my skin into the earth like steady-creeping roots until I unravel; too tangled amid the rot and the worms and my family to be

removed. It can detect the legacy of my blood—my father’s; my aunts—that courses through me.

Edgemont never lets go of the past, and in it’s past, Edgemont bore witness to the unraveling of my father’s family. It picked and pulled at the flesh of their bonds until they were left as raw carcasses. In the wake of my father’s high school graduation Edgemont saw to it that money would destroy his parents’ marriage; the sound of the breaking china as fights broke out in the dead of night resonate in the soft hum of cicadas that hide among the trees. The dull, muffled shouts are still trapped under the blankets where my father and aunt used to hide, covering their ears. The stinging in the hollow of my aunt’s stomach as the fighting made her grow thinner and hear voices that were not there still looms in the ceiling over my own head when I walk into the house. The wet dirt that encrusts everything in Edgemont serves as a reminder of the white dust my uncle began snorting years ago, when he decided coke would be a good escape from the fighting and the hitting and the it’s-two-in-the-morning-and-where-have-you-beens. And in the water droplets that are constantly in the air every piece of the shattered past is held and swirling for all to inhale and to soak in through their pores. No one forgets Edgemont and no one escapes.

My father was an exception to the rule, but my aunt would never shake loose and she lives as a ward of the state, too sick and scared and paralyzed to care for herself anymore. As for my uncle, he would be forgotten; parents too consumed in greed and hate to notice the subtle ticks and twitches he developed as he fell deeper into the coke scene. My aunt and uncle were possessed by Edgemont’s wealth and brokenness long before they had the chance to live. But my father found a way out. It’s never been clear to me how he did it, given the small fragments of his childhood that I know. After seeing my father’s Class of 1971 senior Yearbook photo, however, I developed a theory that would inspire my own attempt at escape from Edgemont’s legacy.

I stared at the entrance to the cemetery. It starts with the new, modern-styled headstones carved—blocky and tasteless—out of the popular grey marble. From the headstone in my father’s photo though, I knew I must follow the brick path inlaid in the dew-ridden grass to find what I was looking for: it’s made out of weathered stone, maybe cement. Moss creeps up the corroded sides and there’s a large piece of the corner missing. The further into the cemetery I went the gaudy, new headstones gave way to the hand-crafted, gallant ones of the past. Marble turned to brick turned to illegible engravings. And the further I got the more I realized that my task was not an easy one. The graveyard goes on for acres. Towering trees shroud dozens of resting places and I was forced to leave the path in order to search through the misplaced forests. My shoe choice was terrible for the weather and they soon became soaked in Edgemont’s proverbial, icy ground water. Thunder set in, followed by flashes of lightning that illuminated the grey skies, but I kept walking. I felt forlorn, almost desperate, and felt more and more so with every step as the rain came down.

But I never did find the grave. My father followed me, impatiently, for the several hours I took until we finally reached the edge of the Edgemont cemetery. I had taken off my shoes, now drenched, and was walking barefoot through the mud and grass with the people that once were. I made my way to a set of stone steps and stood staring back at the vast hills speckled with headstones. I didn’t feel the closure I so longed for and I probably never will.

I turned back to see my father pointing the camera at me. He looks so much like my grandfather, and I, like him. “Smile,” he says.

But I don’t.