A Rotten Smell

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Traveling Back

Raising the paddle above my head, I made what would be the final bid on Lot #903746: a small farmhouse on a sizable parcel of land deep in the Appalachian woods. I never thought I would become a hermit, but after the events of the past few years, I needed a change.

A few weeks later, I slammed the hatch on my Subaru closed and got into the driver's seat. I pulled onto the road and watched in my mirrors as the storybook home of my lost life slipped out of view. Pushing memories of the past few years aside, I tried to recall some of the lessons I learned at my grandparent's farm during the summers of my childhood.

Driving south out of the Pittsburgh suburbs, I made my way back to my roots, the rolling hills of West Virginia. I'd never gone far away, but as the months turned into years and the years into decades, my visits waned and my ties to that part of my life slowly fell away. My family was either dead or had moved miles away at this point. I had wondered often over the years if I could have done something to keep the family together. Perhaps if I had tried harder to keep up with the family reunions, it would have kept us closer. Vibrant memories of running up and down the hills surrounding my grandparent's farm with so many cousins filled my thoughts. Now, I'm friends with a handful of them on Facebook and haven't seen any in person since my parent's funeral nearly a decade ago.

As I drove down I-79, the miles brought back memories of the past with each landmark I'd leave behind. Morgantown, the home of West Virginia University, my alma mater, where I met my wife. Further south I passed Flatwoods, the site of the famous Flatwoods Monster, one of the first campfire stories my grandfather had told me. In Charleston I drove past the State Capital in all of it's golden glory before I got off of the interstates and started onto the highways. Highways led to back roads and now, at dusk, I pulled onto the gravel road that would lead to my new homestead. It was a long drive that wound up hills and down into hollows. The sky shifted into the blackness of a cloud covered night. No stars or moonlight could break through the clouds trapped between these West Virginia hills. Despite the gloom, it felt like going home.

The gravel gradually transitioned into dirt roads as homes were replaced by fields and woods. Finally by luck, I caught the sign I was told to expect out of the corner of my eye, speeding past before I could register what I saw. I slammed on the brakes and threw the car into reverse. A

cloud of dust thrown up by the sudden change of direction drifted in waves over the car and surrounded me as I rolled back the hundred or so feet I had overshot to the sign I waited for the dust to clear so that I could see clearly with the light from my high beams.

I fished the photo and rudimentary directions I had been given when I bought the property out of my pocket to make sure I was in the right place. The sign, a mostly rotten piece of plywood, read “Welcome” in white block lettering over a rudimentary painting of a farmhouse in a valley of rolling green hills.

I pulled up to the gate and rummaged in my pockets for the key. Once out of the car, my heart nearly exploded out of my chest when, seemingly out of nowhere, a huge pickup truck flew around the bend, horn blaring, as it nearly clipped the tail end of my car. Instantly, a new wave of dust filled the air, throwing me into a surprised coughing fit. I dropped the key while trying to cover my mouth and eyes.

As I groped on the ground, still covering my eyes from the dust, the stench of rotten eggs and fish creeped into my nostrils, vanishing almost as soon as it had arrived. I wondered if perhaps the truck was running on oil that had been used at a fish place, but that seemed unlikely. I finally grasped the key in my hand, stood up, and dusted the dirt from my knees. After unlocking the gate, I forced it open with some difficulty as rust from disuse fell away. I propped it open, pulled through, and locked up behind me before driving up the winding, overgrown road that led to my new life.

The excitement of seeing my new home for the first time flooded me with memories I had tried to lock away. I barely even registered the scent of rotten eggs and fish returning as the memory of carrying my wife over the threshold of our new home swept over me. I gripped the wheel tighter as her beautiful, smiling face filled my mind, framed in sunlight from our bay window as we ate chinese on the floor. I couldn’t hold back the tears as I wept more than I had since I buried her a little over a month ago. No matter how far I moved, she would still be gone, and her love would continue to haunt me.

I wiped away the last of my tears and stood next to the car for a moment, struggling to push back a fresh surge of memories. From the backseat of the car, I retrieved a camping lantern and slung a duffel bag full of supplies over my shoulder. I had no idea what to expect inside, but with a deep breath and heavy heart, I walked up the overgrown pathway to my house.

I had bought this property sight-unseen as an escape and had done none of the due diligence one is supposed to do with such an investment. I would have driven down here the day my bid had won at auction if I could have. Upon surveying the entrance of the faded and mildewed house, it seemed as though my escape plan had worked. The exterior paint was peeling, the shutters hung crooked or were already fallen from years of neglect, and the front door was slightly ajar. The anxiety I now felt brought on by the thrill of the unknown pushed aside the specter of my wife and caused my lizard brain to scream awake from its modern life hibernation.

The door creaked like a dying animal as I entered and every possible scenario ran through my mind. A family of rabid raccoons could attack as soon as I opened the door or even the shadows themselves could come alive to reach out and grab me. However, my rational mind and reality aligned, and it was just an empty, dusty room with leaves piled in the corners from the wind and inattention.

I checked the lightswitch by the door and found, not surprisingly, that the electric was turned off. The dark walk I took through this alien place that was now my home proved to be the most surreal experience of my life. I soon found the bedroom and laid down my duffel bag full of camping supplies. I walked back through the house once more to check the water, finding that I thankfully had water pressure. I washed my face in the dingy bathroom and took some deep breaths. The adrenaline wore off as I made my way around the house a second time to set my mind completely at ease. I locked all of the windows and barricaded the front door. In the bedroom lay an old box spring, but no mattress. I had no intention of sleeping on the bed as it was and folded out a cot from my camping supplies and wrapped myself in a sleeping bag to finally get some rest.

It was around midnight when I was startled awake by the smell of rotten eggs and fish. This time, it was so close that it seemed like it was right under my cot. I got up and walked around to locate the origin of the smell, but it had dissipated by the time I had composed myself enough to track the stench. I laid back down and decided I would definitely buy a CO_2 detector in the morning when I went into town for supplies.

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Out And About

Dreams of the past spiraled down into a deep, oppressive darkness that was furiously torn apart by the bright light of dawn. I was ripped from sleep so abruptly that my head throbbed and the ghosts of my forsaken dreams danced in the corners of my vision. My wife, captivated by a book in the nook of our bay window. My bent and broken grandfather, selling his father's father's land to the natural gas company. I shook my head and washed my face over and over until the cold water numbed my mind to memories that were best forgotten. A granola bar, a bottle of water, and a palm full of ibuprofen served as my breakfast as I explored my new home in the light of morning.

The sun reached its zenith as I finished emptying the car. With a list of a dozen things that needed immediate attention, I turned the car around and started the trip into town. As I traveled down the country roads, I couldn't help but think about why we all left.

Grandfather could no longer take care of the farm and the gas company was going to tear everything up. He could have kept the old farm house, but in the absence of my grandmother and his family only coming for the holidays, he didn't see the point. Little did he know that the

moment that anchor was sold, all of our lives would drift further and further apart every year. His new house in the city never felt like home. He died soon after relocating.

We all felt the difference at the funeral home. Laughs were more distant and our stories less personal. Somehow, it felt hard to be family. Cousins that had promised each other they'd get along better than their parents all took sides in the disputes that ensued as the estate was split, feelings were hurt, doors were closed, and we became different- we became distant. My throat was tight as I pulled into town. I parked my car in front of what must have been one of the last mom and pop hardware stores in the state.

I walked inside the store and eyed my list. The single-room shop that stretched back into flickering darkness was run down and dusty. An elderly man glared at me from his stool behind the counter.
"Good afternoon." I said as I grabbed an old basket from a stack next to the door.
"Afternoon. Ya lookin' for somethin' 'particular?" He asked.
I walked over and showed him the list. He scanned it slowly and looked up after a few moments.
"Ya jus' move?" he asked over the tops of his bifocal glasses.
"Yeah, I bought a farm down 127." I answered politely. A shadow overtook his otherwise stern features.
"Oh." He stopped to think, "Well, I have mos' everythin' you need here. I'll just scratch down where ya can find 'em."
"Alright, thanks." I watched as he wrote aisle numbers next to the items on my list.
"I'd walk with ya, but my back ain't what it used to be and my grandson is in school. He usually helps afterwards."
"I'm sure I'll manage." I walked away in the direction of the first location on the list. His voice followed me down the aisle.
"Ya didn't happen to read about the place did ya?" He asked hesitantly. I stopped and looked back.
"No, why?"
"Well, it's jus' gossip, and I know God frowns on that kinda talk, but I'm figurin' you deserve to know. The previous owner was found near a sinkhole muttering and smiling to himself, completely mindless. I didn't know him well, but I know he was normal before. Even before that there was a small mining company that owned it that had some foul luck on that land I heard. The place has a history of making people act ungodly." His words kind of fell off and he looked to the side like there was something important anywhere except where I stood.
"No, I didn't know that." I frowned.

Every home in these old towns had ghost stories. My grandfather said his great-grandfather had gotten our family farm after the former owner was found to be a murderer who had buried women and children behind his shed. These lonely Appalachian hills had a way of breaking weaker minds.

I found all of the supplies I needed and picked up a fast-food dinner at McDonald's to eat in the car as I drove home. Before I lost signal, I pulled over and did a quick Google search on my property. The old man hadn't lied. Apparently, a few farmers around the area had complained about sinkholes from old mines. I decided to walk the property before dark to see if the land was sound or not.

The thirty-minute drive home went by without too many painful memories. The ghosts finally felt further away than they had that morning, which was a welcome relief. I had gone back to West Virginia for all of the good memories this place held, not to remember what had made me leave. I pulled up to my gate and started fiddling with the keys to the property. As I retrieved the correct key, the same huge truck from the night before flew by again. A middle finger greeted my annoyed stare as he honked and swerved around my car.

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Down and Out

I parked and unloaded the car quickly. Once finished, I started the tour of my property. A walk behind the house helped me determine where to begin. There was a fallow field taking up most of the backyard that could have been a large garden years ago. It made full use of the limited flat land and could be brought back to life with some work and care. I found myself drawn toward a small barn between the garden and a narrow access road that looked like it went up a steep part of the property to the ridge line.

The barn stood overgrown and half-collapsed with trees pushing in and out of its splitting and rotting boards. The front face of the structure held a sliding door that was rusted and overgrown to the point of immobility. Around the left of the building, I found a side door nearly torn off its hinges that looked like it had seen frequent use not too long ago. The low sun elongated the shadows, and changed the shape of the building into a grotesque, amorphous shape. My curiosity guided me inside the derelict space.

Once inside the building, my nostrils were assaulted yet again by the rotten stench of eggs and fish. It was weak upon entry, but as I ventured further, it battered my sense of smell in cruel waves that seemed to come from the depths of the barn. The wooden fences that were once used to separate the beasts that had occupied this barn now acted as a sort of maze. I walked between them as I attempted to find the source of the smell. I avoided where the roof had collapsed and tried to keep the entrance in sight. My hesitant feet nearly tripped over the saddles, old rusted plows, and horseshoes that had fallen across the walkway. A purposeful path of pushed aside straw and boards revealed itself amongst the debris. Some animals must have used this as a den, I thought. My heart pounded and my hair stood on end as my desire for answers, or perhaps something more sinister, forced me forward toward a looming, unnatural darkness in a far corner that seemed to be the most collapsed point of the barn.

As I drew closer, I saw the floor here was caved in along with the roof and some of the outer wall. It must have been a result of one of the sinkholes I had read about earlier. I leaned too close over the hole, the pungent rot now all that I could smell. I pulled out my phone and turned on the flashlight to peer into the depths.

The darkness pulled back only slightly and I felt the earth shift immediately. Dropping my phone, I tried in vain to grab at the wooden floor beams, breaking my fingernails while trying to find purchase before I fell down the hole. The light of my phone acted as a guide for my vision as the crumpled mass of my body twisted and turned down into a fathomless blackness and I clawed at the sides of the darkness for dear life. With a small crack, my phone hit the bottom right before I did. Blurry-eyed and off balance, I crawled toward the light of my phone. With the illumination from my destroyed screen, I took inventory of myself. A gash on my head was bleeding a disturbing amount, but other than that, there were just some minor scratches and torn clothing. Barely any light attempted to shine down on the collapsed stone wall I had fallen down moments before. I tried in vain to climb back up the spilled debris to the barn above.

I looked around shakily as the horror of my situation suffocated me even more than the overpowering stench. An infinite void stared back at me in every other direction. Delirious and fearful, I turned again to face where I had fallen realizing it was an ancient wall that stretched out of view to my left and right. Depictions of aquatic creatures decorated the wall next to where I had landed. Their appearance was that of large shark-like beasts being ridden by half-man, half-fish creatures, all depicted with stern, sad faces. I vaguely remembered a lecture from my geology professor that most of Appalachia was once underwater long before Pangaea. An ancient ocean floor that, through plate collisions, had risen into a great mountain chain now known as the Appalachian Mountains. I decided to walk to the right alongside the carved fish-men.

At the farthest end of this long and elaborate mosaic, I reached an illustration of a structure that dwarfed the fish-men with an ornately decorated entrance. The carvings came to their cryptic end: the fish-men would pass through the monolithic gate into a huge, columned chamber. I followed the fish-men to the edge of a reservoir where they bowed in supplication and smiled for the first time across what had seemed like a mile of illustrations. I tried to understand the amorphous blackness that seemed to wrap itself around the last few carvings, but I was not yet prepared.

I took the final steps as the ancient story ended and an elaborate, columned entrance that matched the one depicted in the stone carvings loomed above me. I could not see the top nor the far side of this eldritch entryway with the pathetic light from my phone. At this point, I faced the option of going back, walking out onto that endless, impossibly flat cave floor, or continuing through the opening in front of me. With a deep breath, I swallowed my fear and entered the cyclopean chamber.

With the maw of the gargantuan entryway behind me, I followed the columns as big around as redwood trees into the chamber that grew larger with each poorly-illuminated step. Cautiously, I was drawn toward a sloshing, wet sound somewhere inside. I stopped just short of stepping into a black and brackish pool. I could not see an end on either side and instinctively felt that I needed to leave this place, but before my feet could obey my mind, the waters began to turn and sink as a muddled mass of creeping flesh rose from the mire.

I tried to run, but glistening tendrils already barred the way. I turned back to see a mass of undulating, rubbery flesh continuing to rise from where the pool had been. It loomed over me with unseeing eyes and spoke with an unopened mouth. Although the thing's voice was beyond sound, I felt it in the form of aching bones and popping eardrums. I somehow understood it's speech as I fell to my knees.

"What must I do for you to bring back my life?" I answered.

Abruptly, I was knocked onto my hands as what felt like the weight of the ocean fell upon me. My mind was violently churning as if I was caught in a riptide. Somehow, this ancient beings' thoughts became my own. I knew my consent would fulfill my every desire.

"Yes! Take me, oh great Shaddeth'Auel, the Mind of the Abyss, the Epitaph of Joy, Ancient of the Buried Waves, embrace me and make me happy!"

With my affirmation, the ancient god opened it's eye-shaped, chasm of a mouth that stretched many times the size of a man and flooded my vision with a blinding light. I closed my eyes, smiling in stupefied joy as the Mind of the Abyss pulled me into it's loving embrace.

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The mechanical sound of a car window and the unmistakable smell of rotten eggs tore me from oblivion.

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"...'Sorry, babe! That was a ripe one.' is what I heard you say and I woke up."

"Whoa honey! You should write that down! You have the craziest dreams."

I watched my beautiful wife smile as if I hadn't seen it in some time. Her brunette hair framed her face in the bright light of midday, a mischievous sparkle in her eyes as she drove. Turning the wheel, she pulled onto a dirt road marked with a sign that read: 'The Hughes Family Reunion'. "Well, we made it to your grandparent's farm. Don't drink too much at the reunion, you are driving home." she said definitively.

The End