the distance from the heart of things

Ashley Warlick

"A literary arrival of the most stylish sort."

- New York Times Book Review

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ASHLEY WARLICK

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Edisto River starts somewhere up about Batesburg, South Carolina, starts itself up like a forest fire or a thread of cancer, pulling down through the flats and the orchards, through the hogs and the Herefords and the smell of rotten peaches in the sun. It will be cancer that finally puts my grandfather Punk in the ground, cancer like fine barbed wire they'll keep pulling from his cheek and jaw for too many years of tobacco. He used to grow his own in the back parts of the pastures, down where the river snakes over his land. He cured it himself with burning cow dung.

What he'd do was harvest the stalk when the leaves were full and green, leaves enough to dress a child head to toe, and he'd bundle them by the dozen in the rafters of his smokehouse. He'd rub each leaf with ash from the last cure, set fire in the floorboards with cedar kindling laid to tent a cow pie and shut the door up tight. Those leaves would smoke until his fire sweated itself out, three, four days. But all that was when he had his cows, back when he'd send us into the pastures with feed sacks to collect up those cow pies, dry as wasps' nests.

After the cows, he bought his tobacco at the Dixie Home Store, like everybody else. He'd buy it and complain about how sweet it was and how they used maple syrup and tonka beans as additive, and how good tobacco didn't need additive to make it smooth. He'd complain the Redman was stale, aged too long, and the grind not fine enough. He'd complain, but he chewed it anyway.

The bus I ride lists back and forth slow over the asphalt, crossing the river bridge just at sunset. A spread of light cuts through my window and across my face, warms my skin from temple to collarbone, and I watch as this same light blooms on the river, reflects back to me in yellow and gold and strokes of heat. Punk's farm starts here, right where this water and this highway lope across each other. It's no longer Herefords and Black Angus, chicory and pokeberries and pastureland, but miles and miles of vineyards making rhymes across the hills. It's June, and the grapes are still hard and green on the vine.

Punk sold fifty Herefords for Niagara and Scuppernong vine stock when I was still in grade school, up and did it one afternoon without sign or signal. Miss Pauline, Punk's wife and my grandmother, gave him a piece of her mind, cussed him in such a way as no other soul on earth could and still draw breath.

She said, "Punk, you are a flat-crazy son of a bitch," and there was more, but I'll not tell it here.

Miss Pauline, herself, is an entrepreneur. She has her own business, Miss Pauline's Boutique, and she understands things that make sense and things that don't and where exactly they overlap in her husband. The day Punk picked up his stock shipped down from the nursery, hickory posts and cables for trellising all in the back of his truck, he pulled by her store like he was head of a parade. He threw open the front door to the Boutique and set foot inside for the very last time.

He said, "Hey, Miss Pauline, it's your crazy son of a bitch come to roost on your own slat porch."

He's a caution. His was the first vineyard in South Carolina, and even as Punk Black was Punk Black, more than a few people shook their heads and laughed.

Two years later, he brought in sixty thousand dollars selling his grape to Taylor Winery in Fredonia, New York. Nobody laughed then. He expanded, planted Concords and Catawbas to fill out the season, and when I was in high school and still at home, there wasn't a summer's day I couldn't head out to his barn and find a camp of migrant fruit pickers, tussling over something. These are the facts of his business, the figures, the moments I'll have to remember when I keep books for Punk.

Punk says, "Mavis, honey, you're gonna make me a fine bookkeeper one day. Yessir, this fancy education will return to me tenfold."

It was Punk who paid my four years at Appalachian State. He gave the money willingly and never once did he ask me about my grades, ask about my studies. Five thousand dollars a year, every year in my bank account.

He'd say, "Most of that's for the school, a little extra for your pretty self."

Punk's that kind of man.

Appalachian is the school Miss Pauline graduated from and the school my mother might have gone to if she'd not had me. There is a certain weight to this, a legacy of sorts to carry out. It's like knowing you're the only son in a family line and having only daughters of your own. Thoughts like that can be heavy on a body, can make a person see their situation as a part of something bigger, something older and wiser and testing of themselves. I liked that feeling when I was at school, liked knowing I was connected up to larger workings, a lash in a long chain, part of a constellation. I like weight placed on me. It feels good.



This bus comes out of the Appalachian Mountains, the Blue Ridge Travels Line. It's old, silver, chugging, and yesterday broke down in the rain, left me and twenty others on the berm of the highway with our bags over our heads, raspy and worn down. The kindness of Blue Ridge Travels put us up for the night at a roadside stop near Bessemer City. I've been in road-

side motels before with my boyfriend Harris and by myself when I would travel here or there. I've come off a bus tired and anxious with wait or destination, and I've crossed my arms 'neath my head and slept like the dead called home. But last night I was beside myself, alone and fidgeting and walking the floor in my new high-heeled shoes.

It was dark when we checked in, but too early in the evening to go to sleep, that time that's both day and night, when all I wished for was a deck of cards, a good book, or a dog to walk. I was tired with myself, tired with standing up, so tired of stretching my legs out beneath me it almost hurt. I wanted to be still, but I couldn't. I wanted to run the whole rest of the way home, but I couldn't do that either.

My motel room was red, and the carpet was shag, a picture over the big bed of a girl with eyes like blue spades. I walked that room, stretched out my legs, and opened all the drawers, the closets, and the bathroom. There was a Bible in the night-stand, a body hair on one of the towels, a roach in the ice bucket, which made me cringe in spite of myself. I've seen dirt and crawling things before. I've found bugs in my lunch bag or pressed between my books, skittering 'round the toolshed when the light comes on. But those were roaches at home, bugs in familiar places, and this was different. Anybody could have been here before me. I considered standing up the whole night through, but my body got the better of me.

I laid myself out on the big bed fully dressed in my best, folded my hands at my rib cage, and tried to make my limbs go dead still so as not to wrinkle. I'm making this trip in good clothes, careful clothes, new stockings and a short black dress, high heels I walked in for a week to get it right. I'd planned on coming back to Edisto looking polished, like a new penny, smart about myself. I'd planned on coming back sooner; it just didn't happen that way.

I closed my eyes and tried not to be disappointed at my

delay. I tried to fall asleep so that the night could pass quickly and I could wake to the same bus, the same chugging engine taking me closer and closer to home. But it wouldn't happen; I couldn't sleep, and there were still hours and hours of wait ahead. When I took off my dress, I ironed it on a clean towel across the bureau top for a board.

Then I rinsed out my underwear in the sink, my stockings too. I'd brought no change of clothes with me in my canvas bag, so I made a pastime of undressing piece by piece and fixing myself to dress all over again when the time came and the bus was ready to go. I ironed and stacked and shined and rinsed. Finally, I stood naked in that motel room with nothing left to take off, stood naked as if I were comfortable there and this was a just fine way to spend the night I'd been waiting on for so long. If I could have gotten my hands on a chambermaid's cart, I would have cleaned that entire motel room, sheets to shower.

I wasn't going to pout. I was going to stay busy.

I propped my feet on the edge of the bed and smoothed lotion on my bare calves, cupped my knees and ran it down over my ankles, under the arch of my feet. My fingertips tapped at my shins, played that ridge of bone. This was not my lotion, but a bottle from Harris's apartment I'd packed up with my things. Maybe I took it by mistake, or maybe I saw it every day and began to think of it as belonging to me, or maybe I took it because it was Harris's and I wanted it to belong to me. They all come from the same place, these mistakes and thoughts and wants, and it doesn't really matter which turned my mind at the time.

Harris had taken me to the station to catch my bus home, watched me board, and even stood on the platform and waved as we left Boone. But there was no kiss, no tears or flowers or promises to write every day. We had words in his car, minutes before leaving; not a fight really but something that passed over

us and cast things off balance like a great gust of wind. He doesn't understand why I'm coming home, and I don't understand why I must explain myself. I thought of him last night like a tickle in my throat, something that needed soothing, and a phone call might have done just that.

But instead I called home. I told Miss Pauline not to wait up for me, told her to make sure my mama didn't worry, but we didn't talk long or about anything other than me and my broken-down bus. I don't want to talk to her on the phone anymore. I've been two years away from Edisto at school, two years without seeing my mama or Miss Pauline or Punk or anybody in my family. I was unable to hush my fluttering brain, let-down and restless and full of thoughts that would not lie quietly.

I could say I'd kept away from home. I could say I'd been kept away, and in some sense both would be true. There have been things for me to do without that place, those people, in my foremost mind. But what I'd not thought about once I finally steered myself toward home was the sheer amount of time it would take me to get there.

And so last night, with the sound of Miss Pauline's goodbye still in my ears, with my wistful, anxious self about to set to flight or shatter, I realized something. I am about to enter a moment in burgeon, wide open and flat out. I am traveling back home to my family, sprawling and uncommon and longed for as they are, and those hours in that bare red room were to be my last in harbor with myself.

It was enough reason for quiet, almost enough for content.

I slept in the middle of that big red bed with all four pillows, two under my head, one to my side, and one in my arms held close.

It was a calm and dreamless sleep, and in the morning I dressed carefully all over again, made up the bed, and left that motel room neater than I'd found it. Parts arrived from Shelby

and the bus was repaired. We left Bessemer City in the afternoon.

I keep thinking of my two years gone and it doesn't seem that long, just a breath of busy time. Harris tells me as we get older, each year seems shorter, because it's a smaller part of our lives, and once we reach sixty it really is all over in a heartbeat. He says time is relative, and I know he's right. But I want to come home with my time away marked on my face and my body, my expressions and my carriage changed for their distance from Edisto, as if I know a secret or two that I'm not telling. It's in the way that I've dressed myself up, in the care I've taken with my hair and my makeup. It's a simple change I feel the need to show, and I want it to be simply obvious.

My freshman year I came home for my holidays, for a few weeks at Christmas and around Eastertime. But in the summer, I got a job at the Mast General Store on King Street because I liked Boone, its mountains and its coolness, and staying up there made sense. Everybody thought so. I was glad to take my free days and spend them how I liked, especially after I met Harris. There were long lazy weekends in his apartment, whole hours watching TV or reading magazines and knowing we had nothing more important to do. Harris and I found the trails back along the ridge, the quarries that had flooded up to be swimming holes, the banks of meadow grass that held the sun best. I taught myself how to bake in his kitchen, and Harris would eat my sweet things until his stomach ached and then he'd drink a glass of milk and lie on his sofa and pull me down on top of him.

Before we knew it evening would come, and then the night, cool and starry, and Harris would lead me out of doors and we'd wind down the streets of Boone for coffee and a newspaper. It would be like we were the only two people in the world and our waking and our sleeping was enough event to set time by. I know it was not always this way. I know we both had jobs

and work to do, and sometimes I didn't bake for weeks, but when I think back, those summers were sweet like cake and fine naps and there was always night coming on and on and on.

Those summers with Harris were magic, and I loved them. Even so, something could sweep across me like cool shade and I'd want to see my mama, want more than her voice on the phone or her words in a card, and plans would get made, tickets purchased, and I'd be packed for Edisto. It could happen all that fast.

It seemed always something would come up. Last Christmas I got the stomach flu and stayed in bed until New Year's. There were exams and papers that took longer than I thought they would, and in the spring, I was walking out the door to meet the bus, and I just sat down. I found a chair and sat down and was still for a while. It was important to me that I could do that, that I could change my mind and not go and be still. It was important that the plans were mine to change.

Then there were the times too that I'd be walking out the door and Punk would call, ask me instead to run up to New York State and look in on an old friend at Taylor Winery, get an answer to this or that delicate question, pose this or that proposition. These were in-person errands, things he'd want to do himself, but I was closer or packed already, and it was an honor to be trusted this way. Plans are Punk's to change as well and I've been to the winery in Fredonia for him and to Texas where they grow grapes in the dirt, to Minnesota where they develop stock, and up and down, across and over the state of North Carolina. I'd always go alone and I've come to love the travel.

I'd call Punk when I got back to Boone, tell him what I'd learned, and he'd thank me. He'd always ask if I'd gotten myself a souvenir for my trouble.

Of the twenty passengers who spent the night in Bessemer City, there are only a spare few left on the bus. Most got off in Columbia, here and there along the way, with their trails of bags, armfuls of things. I have the feeling the bus is lighter and faster now, feel as though I'm all alone, but I know I'm not.

Across the aisle from me there's a woman huddled into herself as if she's cold, as if she's trying to keep something inside her blouse from escaping. She is Asian and slight of form, her face thin-edged like a piece of porcelain, her clothes crisp as if fresh unwrapped from plastic. She has creases to her, the posture of paper. She looks as though she's been dressed and set in place and told to stay put.

I think how this woman is still, like me, but not like me at all. She rests in two dimensions, still without the want of motion in the near or distant future, like a fallen feather or a stone, and me, I am swelled full and at rest, all things stored up. It's then I see a bead of water skein from her hair to her lap, her skirt blue and bluer yet in places, her face wet with tears.

She makes no sound. No sound at all.

The tears roll down her face, some falling from her nose, her chin, her lips, and some catching in the wisps of hair about her face and glistening there in the warming light, like late ice in treetops.

I reach into the canvas bag on my lap, sift through the contents for a tissue or a handkerchief to give this woman, but I have nothing like that. In fact, I know I have forgotten something, something left in the motel room for the chambermaids to find, like a silver earring, or a cake of powder, a photograph I might miss later. Last night in my pacing, I emptied this bag across the bureau, spilling pots and jars and tubes over the veneer. Something could have slipped away from me then. Something I won't know how much to care about if I can't remember now.

I prop my elbow on the window ledge, train my eyes out

the window. If I can't give this woman anything for soothing, anything to dry her tears, I don't want to stare her down and make her uncomfortable or feel the need to stop. I feel so for her my tongue's gone salty. I've been on this bus so long, it's a taste in my mouth.

I watch the roadside quicken, the bus picking up speed to make the rise to town. Punk's farm fades behind us, giving way to other pastures, other land full of burdock and ragweed breaking to bloom, dry grasses, horse nettle forcing up through the crackish clay. The land at school is so different from here, verdant and wet. In springtime it rains up there for weeks at a time and I like the rain. I used to sit in the library, waiting for Harris to finish researching this or that. I'd just sit and listen to the rain on the skylights, listen to the rain on the thin roof, a spread sheet across my lap.

Edisto is a simple ratio of water to dust, water like the river that moves and tangles, water that glasses in the heat and pales under white dust. My mama got this idea that she's allergic to dust, and when she tells me about it, she holds her hand over the phone's mouthpiece as if to make sure her words sift clean through the jammed-up air.

She'll say, "All this dust comes from someplace. It comes from ash, little bits of things far away. I swear as we sit here, we're probably still breathing in parts of Pearl Harbor and forest fires in the Northwest, that great quake of 1910."

That's Elsbeth. She's my mama. She thinks about the things that make up dust and send it way up into the atmosphere, like fires in distant places, fires in Oregon, Sweden, and Tasmania, volcanic eruptions in Hawaii, fires at the center of the earth, strip mining in Utah, coal mining in West Virginia, land mines left over from World War II, the A-bomb, the H-bomb. All those women all over the world, beating out rugs they've hung on clotheslines.

I turn in my seat to watch the Edisto dust billow out behind us.

And when I turn back around, my eyes sweep over the woman sitting across the aisle. She's not moved, her tears coming and coming, and all this dust and land passing by her window unseen. I wonder where she's going, who sent her on this bus and where she will get off. She has no luggage with her on the seat, no bags above her head. I get the idea that she might just ride this bus forever, for something to do or be or seem to be doing. If this were a vacation or a homecoming, she would have luggage.

I carry two suitcases with me underneath the bus, and the rest of my things I sent on ahead. Over the weeks I'll receive the boxes I shipped. They'll come from New York and Arizona, Jackson, Mississippi, and Jackson Hole, Wyoming. One will come from Thailand and one will come from my next-door neighbor. But I don't know that yet. What all I do know is I graduated a week ago with a degree in business, and I come home now, a few days before my Aunt Hazel's wedding.

Hazel is my aunt, Aunt Hazel. She's thirty-three, too old to be a bride. I'm twenty-two, old enough to know when a woman is clutching at straws. I know this because I know how to audit assets and liabilities, to prove they're properly valued, incurred, recorded. I know there are fifty-two busts on display in the Accounting Hall of Fame in Cincinnati. I know how to draw up books and balance the balance sheet. I know loss is inevitable. I know clutter is a sign of despair and I know the furniture in Harris's apartment is arranged according to the forces of entropy, that red wine should be stored on its side, that the heart travels the body, and that blood is thicker than water. I know that men like to have love in the morning and lunch in the afternoon. I have a liberal arts education, but a degree in business. I think, therefore I am.

I got that degree only a week ago, but I didn't go to the ceremony. Nobody came up from Edisto either and I didn't send down invitations as there was no reason, no circumstance in which I would have needed them. This degree was only what was set before me. What all I took went beyond paper and lawn chairs and champagne, and such learning doesn't hold audience.

But I can tell how it came about. I saw all these things at college I'd never see in Edisto. I saw a very famous Irish poet read his poetry, but now I can't remember his name. I do remember leaving the reading room and hearing two girls talking. One girl said, he is the most handsome man I've ever seen. The other said, yeah, except for my father. Then they twined their arms about each other and kissed on the lips, and I must admit I could not look away. They were pretty, holding each other like that, or at least I like to think of them that way now.

I've developed my own tastes too, things I appreciate and things I don't. I like good coffee and long skirts. I like the smell of old books, old papers, manuscripts in the library that haven't been opened in thirty years. I like things you have to go places to get, apples from a roadside market, fish from a lake, beer from a bottle in a bar, and men too, men with long ropy backs and sweet shoulders, men who are smarter than I am, and you might find such men in the library, or smelling old books, or wherever you least expect it. I like the unexpected. I like thinking those two women were pretty, even as I wouldn't trade my place for theirs.



Owen is to meet me at the station in town. He was to meet me yesterday, and he will be there again today, I'm sure of it. Two weeks ago he told Punk he was headed for Saudi or South Africa or someplace else; he was heading out at the end of the

summer to do it on his own. He'd had enough of the small town, the small time, and he'd been learning Arabic from tapes he'd ordered through the mail. This was it; this was his life that was coming around. He was going to have a big time.

Owen is my uncle. He's six years older than me and we'd play together when we were kids. He had these plastic hand-cuffs and he used to cuff my hands behind my back and see how long it took me to turn a doorknob. Then I'd cuff his ankles together and see how far he could walk.

We talked on the phone days back, but you don't talk much to Owen. You mostly listen and you don't make much effort to understand.

He kept saying, "Let's see how long this one lasts. See how long this one lasts."

Owen used to meet me after school when I was too little and too scared to ride the bus home. We'd walk down Main, by the Rexall Drugstore, crowded with older kids, kids Owen's age, but he'd want to be with me. We'd go by Boyd's Tire and Tool, by the Edisto Bank and Trust. At the Dixie Home Store he'd give me two quarters for a Coca-Cola.

He'd say, "Here, getcha that Co-Cola."

Then he'd move on ahead, knowing I'd catch up, find him at Miss Pauline's Boutique, sticking his face in double-D bra cups. In Edisto, it'd still be hot in the fall in the schooltime, and the ashen dust from the road settled in our throats.

Up at Appalachian in the fall, it was cool, and I was older. The leaves turned a thousand colors, and the ground frosted as early as October. It was October when that Irish poet came. It was like he had a word for every color.

And when those colors were bright, Harris used to take me over to Blowing Rock to see how the mountains turned like fire. We'd toss maple leaves off the edge of the outcropping and catch them as they rose back up, sometimes for hours on end. There's a Cherokee legend about Blowing Rock, some-

thing about a brave and his woman being in love, and him jumping over the edge of this rock to avoid her father's anger, to kill himself for her love. She, this Cherokee woman, wept at the edge of the rock and the winds bore him back up to her. If you love something, set it free and all that. And maybe it's true.

But Harris says the velocity underneath the outcropping is of the magnitude, and the direction is of the angle, to create an undercurrent spiral, allowing something like a leaf to fall to the basin of the wind and be swept back up toward its point of release in the undercurrent. He says it would never work with a whole body, says it all at once like that, and it is the way he's now come to speak in the falltimes when he is serious and working on his papers and his manuscripts.

So, I will admit I am more in love with the way Harris is in the summer, the way we would eat 'til we were full and sleep when we were tired and not ask much else about why or how. It's easier to love a person that way, simply, plainly, and with belief. How you love is how you love, and you can't help that.



Outside Edisto we pass by the carnival grounds. They're all grown over now, green and viny with kudzu that bodies the Ferris wheel like a hide, like fleece, a few cars short of full. Its frame is rust-old, like the carousel that still turns and chimes in the wind, and looming over all is the roller coaster, Thunder Road, a trestle of plank and rail, the sun settling in behind it every night.

I was too young to remember this carnival as ever working. But Owen knew about it, the reason it up and left its pieces here, on a dry lot at the outskirts of Edisto.

You know why they shut this sucker down, don't ya, Mavis? That boy lost his leg on Thunder Road. I saw it happen. Nothin'