

## Abandoned Houses

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My eyes set on empty houses, after empty houses, every mile becoming more and more apparent. I was far away from home and I was a stranger in a strange land. It seemed that all throughout the deep countryside of Virginia, there were old rickety abandoned houses littered across the states green fields. Empty stagnant homes standing tired and alone, yet standing proud, clinging to countless forgotten memories. My mind raced and I pondered many questions. However I realized after the trip that the answers were in the structures all along. They were in the broken wood and in the beaten down doors. In the molded walls and in the cracked windows. If you just took the time to look... and to think, all of this found in a tiny sliver of southern Virginia.

We were taking a road trip, a kind of family reunion as we had folks in each state we visited. The plan was to drive through Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas visiting various family members on the way; Virginia was our first stop. As Jayson and I drove, I remember thinking "I have never seen so much land in my life." I watched as the terrain went from the busy streets of Richmond with business men rushing to the calm dirt roads of the country with children running on their endless property. Eventually, we arrived to the little country town of Stony Creek. We exited the barren freeway and turned down a narrow compacted dirt path that would sure lead us to their house. There were no people to be found, no cars, no houses, only lush green fields. After a few minutes of nothingness, we set eyes on the sprawling farm.

Their house was made of red brick and its windows had dark blue shutters and a perfectly painted bright red door with white steps leading up to it. There lived Jayson's grandmother's sister's son, Curt, a retired peanut farmer, and his wife a retired school teacher named Mary Anne; every woman in the country has a middle name they use as part of their first. We arrived tired from the trek and pulled in their driveway; Jayson was excited to see his family once again, he hadn't seen them since he was very little and I was happy to meet them. I watched as the couple walked down the paved steps and a chocolate brown lab ran down to greet us. I got out of the car and the cold Virginia air hit my face; I took a deep breath. They smiled and we embraced. There is something very special about frigid weather and a hug that makes a person want to stay forever. They were kind and considerate and their wrinkled smiles put me at great ease. I knew them from the moment I latched eyes with them. Their miles of land told a story I had long since forgotten.

That first night there in Stony Creek was unforgettable. Jayson and I had big plans of driving up to Richmond and seeing the museums and galleries but that was something we were used to doing. Instead, as you do in the country, we decided to do engage in life a little differently. We looked to the family for suggestions. Curt and Mary Anne, as accommodating as

they were, very much wanted to show us their farm. We happily agreed. The pair corralled Jayson and I to the kitchen where Curt took out a diet coke from the refrigerator and Mary Anne a bud light, she slipped the beer into a coozie. Curt motioned to us, "We got ourselves a little happy hour. What do y'all drink?" His accent was so extremely thick I had trouble understanding his words; it was different than the usual southern accent I was accustomed to. I took a moment to process what he had said, and realized he had asked us a question. I looked to Jayson with an open hand.

Jayson responded for the both us, "Whatever you all drink." He said in a non-accent.

"I love straight whiskey." I said. Curt smiled a grin of approval and walked over to the wood cabinets that covered the kitchen walls, he opened one up, and got two insulated plastic cups. He then reached down to a different more secretive cabinet door and took out a bottle of Jim Bean. The label had been worn off and the bottle looked ancient. He poured whiskey into his cup with diet coke and poured me mine neat.

We all proceeded to put on boots and heavy jackets, as it was almost freezing outside. While doing so, Curt and Mary Anne made small talk with Jayson, asking him how his mom was doing and what he was up to. The two of them and Jayson grabbed their drinks and headed outside towards their truck. I took a second to pet their lab named Miley, although when Curt said her name is sounded a lot like Molly; I grabbed my newly poured whiskey and headed outside.

Curt drove for miles down long winding roads with the windows open. I saw tall trees and green fields, they seemed to go on forever. I was overjoyed at the start of our trip. As we drove I would continually ask, "Who owns all of this land?" Mary Anne would turn around and look at me in the back seat and remark, "Ours." Her tone was polite yet confused, almost as if to say "Bless your heart." Although we were both people, one in the same, because of where we lived, somehow we were of two different species.

Curt and Mary Anne pointed out many different spots on our seemingly long drive; the first being Curt's mother's home only a few yards from their house, their hunting lodge lovingly titled "The Sugar Shack", the lake located just east of the house that Miley loved to play in, a tree stand called "Red Roof" made for deer hunting, and a fishing area named "Curt Owen's Fishin' by Permishin'", all of the stops brought to you by; just one more drink.

What I remember most was Curt's buddy's house. The man that lived there was named Brett. The farm was his family's plot, and had been passed down from generation to generation. We arrived, drinks in hand, to Brett's bar; that's what Curt called it. The structure was only a few hundred meters away from Brett's house and had tin roofing on the top of it with a little door on its side. We all walked in and I noticed the floor was just compacted dirt.

Brett's bar was something I had never seen before. It was so new, that I felt a sort of a culture shock even within my own country. When you first came in, on the right, there was a

narrow yet long table made of unfinished wood and had whiskey barrels beneath it to keep the top held up. Around the table, there were metal stools, about five, and there was a plethora of whiskey and coke sprawled on the table's top. Two of the hut's four walls were made of clear roofing, facing west, so you could see the sunset piercing through. In an adjacent room, there right in the middle, was a pool table with one single light hanging from the ceiling to illuminate the game. On the other walls held a variety of things; posters, flags, mounted guns, and metals. There were an assortment of deer antlers, old empty alcohol bottles and signs with sayings about rednecks printed on them. The flags were ones of Virginia and the confederacy. If you looked up, you could see even more flags, flying proudly and unapologetically.

Brett was a funny man, definitely a countryman, a hunter, a farmer; everything I was not. Curt and Mary Anne introduced us to him and the others that filled the bar. Everyone said hello and then went on talking with their friends. They were all dressed in cowboy boots, camouflage jackets, blue jeans, and baseball caps; one man's hat had bright red letters that read "NRA". Brett proceeded to walk Jayson and I around the walls and told us each and every story in which he acquired the items. He recited with great detail the history surrounding his farm and family and his strange decorations. The night was filled with alcohol and laughing. There, in the face of everything I thought I hated, I couldn't. They were different than me, and I wanted to hate them, but I just didn't.

We drove back to Curt and Mary Anne's house after a long night of fun and drinking. We got back to their farm and we all poured ourselves another drink; whiskey makes you do funny things. We hung in their kitchen and talked about family, love, politics, and music. It looks like we had more similarities than differences. As our conversation went on and the volume grew, Curt kept repeating, "I'm so happy y'all are here!" His words pushed me over and broke through my chest, I felt I could no longer hold in my emotions. His gross honesty and love for Jayson and for me, someone he just met, brought me to tears. I knew when Jayson and I returned to Arizona, I would have a hole in my heart that would take a long time to heal. I would miss them terribly.

The next day it was a little warmer. Curt, Mary Anne, Jayson and I went to go visit Jayson's mom's cousin Page and her family. They lived in an even smaller town, if you can imagine, called "Jarrett." After a simple breakfast of coffee and eggs, we got into the car to head to Page's. I still, even though we drove the day before, was baffled at how long it took to get anywhere when your only option was taking a dirt road. Curt drove forever and we finally arrived at Page's. Her house was also brick, and was up on stilts it seemed. Behind her home was a few barns that held farming equipment. Their tractor sat right in front of the biggest structure; to me, a sign of humility.

As I walked around Page's house it reminded me of Curt's mother's home, Charolette. Curt had walked Jayson and I through just the other day. The windowed back porch was simple, and the painted white brick was worn. The kitchen had such detail, the little wooden shutters on the tiny windows, the decorated and rusted light switch, and the gold handle fixtures on the

worn cabinets. I remember going into the front bedroom as if something was drawing me there. Charolette's old bed sat there with a white netted cloth draped over the mattress. I opened the dusty blinds and a screened in front porch was revealed to me. If I closed my eyes, I could almost see her, sitting there in a rocking chair on her front porch, the warm summer air rushing in, wondering where all those people were going on the newly built highway.

I was snapped back into reality as Jayson tapped me on the shoulder.

"Isn't that right Jordie?" We were standing right in front of his whole family, and they were waiting for an answer. I had absolutely no idea was his question was in reference to.

"Yes, that's right." I lied through my teeth. I reflected that I had felt so off the whole trip, even though it had only been a few days. I was in a constant state of blinding emotion, I felt a great heaviness on my chest. My mind continued to wander and I couldn't help but hear Curt's voice telling us stories of family gatherings from just the other day; the closeness of the family was evident by his honest laughter that echoed in my ear.

Before dinner, Page suggested to us that we go see Curt's fathers childhood home. Apparently, it wasn't far from Page's, so we went. We drove again for miles and miles, this time passing little towns with funny names, Population: 30, 24, 32; almost as if the second number was in pencil as to rub off when the number changed, which was often. To me all of these places were Anytown, USA, they all looked exactly the same. Page pointed out different landmarks on the way, for instance the little store about a 10 feet by 10 feet that was the only market in town, or the one gas station with less than 3 pumps. I sure was far from my city.

We eventually pulled up to the home. Curt said matter of fact, "I can't believe this is still standing." I recalled him and Page telling us stories of them visiting this house when it was in its prime. From a distance, it looked as though it was a framed picture hanging on a wall, it was that eerily beautiful. I asked if I could get out to see it up close. They all proceeded behind me. I trudged along, picking up my feet so that I could get through all the extremely high uncut grass. I first set eyes on the porch. The floor wood was so rotted that there were chunks that had fallen through to the ground. The front door was half broken with the top section completely off so that I could see into the house. The winding stair case right behind it, leading to the upper level. I walked around to the side and peeked into one of the bedrooms. The glass was no longer in the window and a tattered white curtain blew out to carress the outer walls. The wind was so loud that the chatter of the others was entirely blotted out. I continued on to the back of the house. There was an old couch, ripped and torn, sitting on the back porch. The trees were high and strong and seemed to be pushing its way through the broken walls. The door to the back still hung there, swinging to and fro in the wind.

I walked out to where the old farm would have been. I put my hand on my forehead to shade my eyes yet I couldn't help but looking directly into the sunset with the proud house standing in my line of sight. The construction was aged yet pristine with no graffiti on its walls, only nature's art of mold and mildew. The close tall trees engulfed the broken wood through

their shattered windows hugging its walls, knocking down the barriers that used to separate them. To the eye, there was no longer a division of the natural and the manmade; they could once again become one. You may ask yourself what is the importance of these forgotten buildings? They are the keepers of time, the rotted wood imprinted with decades past, the ornamented light switches illuminating family dinners, the creaky floors sounding off images of annual Christmases, and the rusted door holding it all in; the dreams and fears of all humanity.

I found myself engulfed in a world, a time, that was not my own and it felt strange. Yet these people and their children and their children's children, I could not get out of my head. They were there, I could feel them; generations of people. I saw their faces, their browlines, their cheek bones, their noses, their lips; I knew them. That's what's funny about someone like me, I don't just see an old abandoned building. I see it for what it *was*, what it *used* to be, a beautiful and imperfect house that held people just trying to get by. But there was something about the broken down wood that made me sad they were gone. I guess it's like whiskey, sweet smelling yet at the same time, warm and bitter going down.