

Appalachian Eulogy

by **Robert Dugan**

I grunted while wrestling the heavy, dusty box wedged in crawl space of my apartment. I had outgrown the cramped place, and my teacher's salary allowed me to purchase my first home. In preparation for the move, I divided my possessions neatly into two piles. One held the things I would take with me; the other I would donate to a local thrift store. The destiny of the current box was unknown as I dragged it from its lightless resting place. I pulled the box into the open air through a flurry of coughs and sneezes.

I opened the box, and a face stared up from a pile of crinkled photographs. The face was that of a young man who sat in a small plastic kiddie pool wearing torn Levi's, an oversized belt buckle, and a camouflage ball cap. There was a scuffed, golden fishing hook bent around the bill. A cigarette dangled from his lip, and he held a beer in his hand. There was a pile of cash on the coffee table in front of him. He couldn't have been older than eighteen or nineteen. I studied him for a moment, ashamed that it took me so long to remember a good friend.

A redneck from Roanoke, Chris drove a red Camaro with peeling and pock-marked clear coat. His southern drawl deepened toward incomprehensibility the more he drank; I loved the musicality in his speech and the way he spoke in southern aphorisms. We were part of an inseparable group of friends joined by our shared fondness for engines and alcohol.

The night I took this picture eleven of us were jammed into Jake's trailer back in the woods. Jake and I had been childhood friends. His father died of alcoholism and left him a house, fifty thousand dollars, and a social security check. He'd pissed it all away by the time he was seventeen.

It was a Friday, pay day. Jake added his wages from his job sweeping factory floors to the pile of cash on the table. I hunkered in the threadbare chair and listened to their planning. I'd begun to tire of their constant pill chasing.

"How much we got all together?" Jake asked.

"About eighteen hundred," Chris replied.

"Make sure and save forty for pizza," I added.

"Call Doddy and get him over here to make a sale," Chris said.

"Already done. He said he'd be here in thirty." Jake shuffled the cash together and removed two twenty-dollar bills. *Varsity Blues* played from a VCR connected to the flat screen. I took a sip of my whiskey and crushed my cigarette in the ashtray before lighting another. I'd never seen so much cash up close.

It would buy a lot of pills and many hours of oblivion.

We'd graduated from drinking and smoking in our parents' basements. We used to raid their liquor cabinets and replace what we'd taken with water. We prayed they wouldn't notice a missing pack from a carton of Camel Lights. Things were a lot different now.

I could hear someone crushing the last of the old pills on the kitchen counter behind me.

"When you gonna get in on this?" Jake asked.

He'd been pressuring me to join everyone else snorting pills.

"Leave him alone," Chris said. "If he don't want to, he don't have to. He's got good grades. Let him drink his Jack and smoke if that's all he wants to do." Chris was a couple years older than us and had more perspective. He worked for a mom and pop tiling outfit. He was skilled enough to work, but not certified, so he struggled to make a living wage. He hadn't advanced since high school, unable to afford an education. I watched him work and spend, resigned to a wretched circular existence. He knew how life would change after high school. He knew enough to realize that whatever grand ambitions we held would devolve into Appalachian hopelessness. I appreciated that he took it on himself to defend my restraint to the others and wanted to believe that he admired my discipline, my ability to say "no," that he respected my good grades and envied my stable home life.

Doddy's headlights shone through the front window glass and obscured my view of the TV. He stumbled in through the front door, eyes glassy. "Hydros are eight, so are percs. Oxy is twelve a pill. How do you want it mixed?"

"Just give us a little of everything." Jake handed over the money.

Doddy counted out the pills, and just like that, a week's wages for a group of young men walked out the door.

Chris cut up the first pill from the newly acquired baggy on a ceramic tile that sat on the coffee table.

The pills, the pizza, and what was left of the money were gone by Sunday morning.

Pills were more expensive than heroin, but the guys rationalized their purchase through denial. Pills had none of the social stigma of heroin, which seemed the stereotypical drug for the hardcore addict. Heroin use represented an indictment, the acknowledgement that they had moved from occasional drug use to dependence. For a time, they paid more to be able to say that they did *not* do heroin. But eventually the price of denial became too high, heroin, too cheap. When they finally gave in, they snorted it for a time. Shooting it seemed a step too far.

When I started my first semester of college, little by little I parted ways with my friends. Once I was exposed to more people and greater ideas, I chose Saturday night study groups over weekend parties at the trailer. In time, I replaced my old drinking buddies with English professors and education majors.

I had been walking to my car after a class when an unfamiliar number rang my phone. It was Jake. All he said was, "Chris is dead. Overdose. Viewing is Friday. I hate to be so short man, but I got a lot of people to call." Jake hung up without waiting for me to ask questions. I was shocked, and sorrow hit me hard.

They'd found Chris dead with a needle in the back of his arm among a pile of dirty laundry. Chris didn't look real lying in the casket with his ball cap on. The fishing hook crimped around the bill reflected the glow of the overhead lights. I wondered if the morticians polished it when they did his makeup and stitched his lips closed.

“Chris loved cars and fishing.” The minister stated flatly as he looked down at his notecards. I resented the old man for giving the eulogy. The speech meant to immortalize him in our memories should’ve been given by the friends he had left behind. His grandmother had taken quick control of the funeral arrangements. She cut many of Chris’s friends out of ceremony in an effort to minimize attention to the way he died. The ceremony would be tightly controlled, the minister the only speaker. “It’s a difficult thing when the Lord takes such a young life. Chris was in the fullness of his vigor, but like all life, he was suffering. He’s gone home to be with Jesus now, to be clothed in the splendor of his glory, to walk without pain or torment for all eternity.” The irony of the minister’s words gave my grief a jagged edge. Chris was an atheist; of that I was certain. The minister’s words were for Chris’s grandparents, not for us.

When the preaching concluded, we stood and filed past the casket. After I said my goodbyes, I turned to leave, facing the family. I struggled to avoid eye contact with everyone gathered to mourn his passing as I made my way down the aisle. I was ashamed. I knew I played no part in his overdose, but I felt complicit in it.

I hadn’t seen the bulk of my old friends in years. I’d stopped coming around once I started college, once heroin entered the picture. At the time of Chris’s funeral, I was in the midst of student teaching and wrestled with a schedule that left little time for socializing or drunkenness, and I was worried that, despite my successful resistance thus far, I would find myself addicted to something far worse than Marlboros.

We left the funeral hall and headed to the FoodLion parking lot to sit on tailgates and bench seats, a familiar and comforting ritual. I was the last to arrive, and I noticed that Chris’s usual spot was empty. I imagined the faded red Camaro sitting on the cracked asphalt between the barely perceptible white lines. I made a lap around the parking lot just like I used to and drove up to a warm greeting. I parked, got out, and lit a cigarette. One by one, I met the eyes of those around me, lingering on each person for just a moment.

We caught up and took stock of everything that had changed between us and within us. Our tight-knit group had splintered into several smaller ones, divided along the lines of what was considered acceptable substance abuse. But for that brief time, all of those divisions melted away. Tragedy brought us a fleeting togetherness we thought

we'd lost. We picked up where we'd left off. We talked about the days before life became so complicated, before we'd experienced loss, and for those few precious hours we were together, unencumbered and honoring memories of Chris.

As we were starting our goodbyes, Jake grabbed a can of white spray paint from a truck bed tool box and sprayed Chris's name in big, sloppy letters in his empty parking space. We all contemplated the awkwardly-drawn letters, and then one after the other we left the scene, the roar of muscle cars and lifted trucks underscoring our vandalism.

Now, years later, I barely recognize that young man in those photos, with his smirk, the cigarette dangling from his lip. I struggle to recall the names of all of those young men I once held so dear, and I wonder if any of the others have died. I have grown so far away from them, and from that place we made for ourselves. I've traveled the country and expanded my worldview. I have my own family. I earned a Master's degree in education. I run my own classroom and am regarded as an expert in my field. I now have kids of my own, one natural, but hundreds more who I work hard to guide as a teacher.

I still make my old lap around the Food Lion parking lot, though only after buying groceries. On Friday nights, teenagers still gather under the florescent lights. They sit in the same spot that we did a decade ago, smoking cigarettes and talking. The spray-painted memorial has been covered by fresh asphalt. As I pass them and they wave, excited to see their teacher outside of school, I survey the faces, and in some of them I see someone from my past, someone nearly forgotten.



Robert Dugan lives in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia with his wife and daughter. "Appalachian Eulogy" is his first publication. He teaches creative writing and secondary English. He hopes to teach his students to find strength in writing about their life experiences. He wants to thank Anne Larson for encouraging him to seek publication and his wife for her unwavering support.