

# WHISKEYPAPER

## CUMBERLAND BRIEFLY by SETH SAWYERS

*December 18, 2015*

My big brother Jake and I, fresh from a wedding at the Holiday Inn, are sitting on a dirty couch in a dirty apartment on Centre Street, drinking cheap beer so cold it hurts my back teeth. This is a part of town where strange single people live and, indeed, a strange single person, the cousin of a high school friend, lives here. We've come, after the wedding, to keep the party going, which is what always happens. The cousin is skinny, too skinny, in his early twenties, eyes bulging behind the curtain of his oily bangs. Even his fingers look sucked-in, skeletal, the nails too large. He chain-smokes Sheetz-brand menthol cigarettes. Somebody's passing around a joint and we're playing Nintendo games that were only just OK even when they were brand new. It is January in the ancient rolling Appalachians, the dark cutting wind scouring the frozen creeks and the empty parking lots.

I'm back home for the long winter break, my first, the sprawling hard city and its huge screaming beltway mercifully far off. I don't tell anybody, but I've had a terrible time. My roommate from New York has turned on me, has shut me out for some reason I can never precisely figure out but which involves, I'm sure, my taste in music, and for sure, my clothes, which run in no way toward his designer labels and in every way toward JC Penney. And so, every night, in the enormous dining hall that looks like a Pizza Hut, I eat by myself, which at first is freshly terrifying but quickly becomes numbingly dark and sterile and, eventually, the normal regular quiet state of things. I did not think I was the kind of boy who ate alone. But there I sit, eating my pizza or noodles or salad as quick as I can. Everyone around me is cooler, more confident. It doesn't help that I get high much too often. Even the thing that was supposed to come easy, the actual classes, are not going well. It comes as a shock to me that, in college, I have to try, to work. I got bum-rushed, by the pace, the clever girls, by the choices, the human density.

But this, this apartment on the edge of this little city where I grew up, the video games, the beer, the framed Steelers posters on the walls, it's all familiar, like stepping into old shoes that have grooves exactly where your toes go. I've not been here before, but I've been here before.

There is a loud knock on the door. Instantly, we, nineteen years old, twenty, go quiet. My head screams: cops cops cops. Cigarettes burn in ashtrays. The gaunt kid goes to the door, and when he returns, a moment later, a tall black woman follows him, her blackness, in this town, alone a reason to look, to let our stoned eyes linger. She is very dark. The woman sets her huge purse on the coffee table, in among the beer cans and the ashtrays, and stares, in turn, at each of us. She is good at staring. She has stared before.

Abruptly, she opens her mouth wide and laughs. "Shit. Look at all these white boys," she says, but her voice is too deep, too loud. She digs down into her purse—it's too big, I think, big enough to carry, I don't know, a whole other purse—and comes out with a pint bottle of Lord Calvert whiskey. It would be impossible for me to look away now. She removes a shot glass from the purse, fills it to the top, and quickly drinks it down. Watching her, I can feel the burn in my own throat, but she does not grimace. She pours another shot, drinks it. Her hands are too large, too strong. Strangeness has come to us, has found us, in this hard frozen little town up in the hills. This, this person, this woman who might not be a woman, is like a TV show made real, or an article from a weird magazine that I might read but would never subscribe to.

The woman pours a shot. A friend, bound for the Marines in a month, reaches for it. "That's mine," he says. He throws the whiskey into his mouth, swallows. He's trying to be tough but his face contorts. I can smell the whiskey. It burns my nose.

The woman finds two more glasses. She pours three shots, each impossibly full. She does this carefully, with a steady hand, so that the whiskey forms a dome at the ridge of each glass. She looks at Jake and then at me. “Look here at these two boys. You brothers?”

“We are,” Jake says.

“Motherfucking thought so,” she says and, bored with us already, now staring at the boy headed for the Marines, tips the first shot into her mouth, and swallows. With great care, as if she were performing an exercise in a laboratory, she does the second shot and then the third. It is graceful. Her hands, the whole time, are steady. “Whoo!” she shouts, after the third. She grabs the gaunt kid by the arm. He stops hammering on his Nintendo controller. “You wanna get fucked tonight?” she says. Her voice has gone deep again. The gaunt kid smiles, shyly, and lights a cigarette. We laugh. The woman who might not be a woman disappears into the kitchen. After a beat, two, the gaunt kid rises from his chair, and is gone.

Under the coffee table, Jake kicks me, which means we need to leave, and he’s right, and in a few weeks I’ll be back square in that fast loud paved-over place, where nothing is safe. But nothing, now, is safe here either, up in these hills, and I see, just then, still sitting on that couch, that nothing ever has been safe, here or anywhere else, and never will be, that there’s no city and no hills, no beltways or dirt roads, no hard concrete or forgiving grass, that there’s only the electric inescapable this, and that’s just how it’s going to be in this world we got, every little dirty beautiful terrifying corner of it.

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**About the Author:** Seth Sawyers' writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Rumpus*, *The Millions*, *Salon*, *Sports Illustrated*, *The Morning News*, *River Teeth*, *Fourth Genre*, *Quarterly West*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Ninth Letter*, and elsewhere. He is an editor at *Baltimore*

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**Story Song:** "Over the Hills and Far Away," by Led Zeppelin