

UPON THIS PALE HILL

By Patrick Ashe

EXCERPT

Copyright © 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of Patrick Ashe, except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976.

This is a work of fiction. Any resemblance of characters to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. The author holds exclusive rights to this work. Unauthorized duplication is prohibited.

ISBN: 978-1-7348477-0-3

Cover Design: James Kenyon
Editing and Formatting: C&D Editing

With highest gratitude to Heather, Carina, Jim, and Jess.
Each of you gave me reasons to drive.

October

Two shadows cut across the foundation of the hilltop house, cast away from the setting sun.

Brandon Marcel looked up at the clear blue sky covering the Carolina Piedmont. He heard the hum of the year's remaining crickets, the eight-bit chime of his cell phone's sent text, and the crunching footsteps of his one true friend.

The late afternoon air was clear with a scent of burning leaves. He took a deep breath and looked down upon the construction site. Wood, brick, and plaster sat in piles covered with tattered blue tarps. He thought about places, and he thought about people. Beauty and truth. Family. He thought about home. *Home*.

And then the sky and the ground reversed, as his anxious palpitations and whirling tinnitus picked up again. Home was where the heart hits.

"I . . ." Brandon started to speak. The average height and average weight of his average self stood pensively on the red dirt in a white T-shirt and blue jeans. He had gray eyes and neatly parted light brown hair, all soft and vulnerable in the ultraviolet light.

Most of his neighborhood could be seen from this lot. There were new and old houses along the Carolina hills, hills, each punctuated by deciduous trees of varying autumnal colors. Many of these trees were small, young, and

and artificially planted. But when he looked closely, he could see a large, old maple tree by a dilapidated brick house and the old forest.

“Good leaves this year.”

“Leafer,” Jeremy “Germy” Kuhn responded as he texted away on his gunmetal gray phone. “Leafer madness.” A whim later, he whipped back around toward the construction site. His lanky figure in anemic white skin skimmed around a spiral of copper wire. He leaped over a waist-high pile of lumber, knelt down, and gathered a pile of leaves. His brown eyes shot through tangled, chin-length black hair. Always clad in darker shades of gray, he looked like a modern-day Lewis Carroll stuck in a goth phase . . . with a side of pyromania. “I need your lighter.”

“Do you ever settle down?” Brandon asked.

“I settle down right about the time you quit obsessing.”

“Obsessing? I appreciate the little things. I’m . . . a dreamer.”

“That’s cute, John Lennon, but right now, I need Jim Morrison to light my fire.”

Brandon laughed. “You really want my lighter? I think you used up your arson karma on the incident with the shaving cream. If East Hall didn’t have sinks in the rooms—Come on; that was freshman year. I’ve been good,” Germy interrupted as he dug his thumbnail into the seam of his ratty jeans.

Brandon sighed. “We’ve both been good, Germy—

that's the problem."

"Oh . . . but I've been *really* good."

Brandon chuckled and shook his head. "You know what I mean."

"Indubitably."

Spotting a box of nails, Germy's attention broke.

Brandon walked along the new cinder wall and turned again to see the old brick house. He covered his eyes with his hand again. The outer leaves were as orange as the late afternoon sun and almost as bright.

Taking in the moment, Brandon let himself marvel. His favorite moments were those that were more imagined than real, more within than without, and more possible than probable. But the aesthetic wonders of beautiful sights, sounds, and sentiments weren't enough, and he knew it. They weren't enough for his possible future, and they weren't enough for his impossible past. It was all potential withering away under the kinetic.

As foolish as he knew it was, however, he kept thinking about all that could be. He thought about the means and ends of purpose, meaning, family, and love. And he thought about a woman's face, one that he thought he would get to see one day, if only he was worthy of it. A face of many possible faces, but only having one.

If any.

Aisling.

Germy stuck the magnetic level into the ground and started building a tower of nails around it when his phone's phone's industrial metal ringtone went off. He silenced it and

it and returned to his destruction project.

Brandon sighed again. “Is it always going to be like this?”

“Like what, dreamer?”

“We have less than a year left of college, and this is what we’re doing on a Saturday?”

“Speak for yourself. I’ve got a date tonight, and I’m not graduating until next December.”

Brandon turned back toward the neighborhood. “I don’t know about you, but I’m sick of being a . . . beauty scavenger . . . or whatever you want to call this.”

“Dreamer, scavenger—whatever. You just need to learn to relax,” Germy said as he sent a hammer flying through his nail-adorned effigy. “Quit worrying and focus on appreciating little things, as you said. I’m better at it than you are. I like picking through half-built houses. You like picking through half-worn underwear.”

Germy laughed. “Hey, idle hands, you know. Gotta make sure everyone’s satisfied.”

Brandon shook his head. “Well, we’re both idle. And that’s my point. I think of a world that never was, and you want to give it a reach-around.” He looked toward the sunlight. “And yet we both get big ideas, and then don’t do anything about it. We’re the inverse of the partiers, Type-A personalities, and adrenaline junkies. People who mistake motion for action, but at least, y’know . . . act! Even if we know better, we still don’t do any better.”

“Yeah, but you know the saying: insight’s worth a

thousand words? Action without vision is hell? Whatever. We're still young, so gimme that lighter. We've got time to burn."

"Some people say they've still got time all the way until their deathbed."

"Sure, but all your obsessing makes it worse. Relax." He scratched the side of his head through his mopped hair. "Besides, I don't want to nail the world more than I just did. I just want to nail some of its . . . ophidiophiles? Is that a word?" He felt a vibration, and then pulled out his cell phone again. "Oo . . . speaking of."

"Tell her we're busy."

"Busy doing what?"

"My point exactly."

As Gerny texted, Brandon paced on the edge of the cinder block wall. His thoughts of maples, playing guitar, and a similar afternoon in his childhood abruptly changed into thoughts of cover letters and informational interviews. His ears rang.

He tried to distract himself with the sunset. His ears rang and the palpitations got harder.

Uncertainty, worry, anxiety, pain; within him, they all manifested in ways that garnered little sympathy and fewer solutions.

With eyes darting from one place to another, Brandon's mind kept running until it caught up with his eyes and stopped on a construction apron. It was just someone's apron, left after a day's work.

But then another thought occurred to Brandon, as it did

did from time to time. It was the most essential thought of omnipresent circumstance and his moral self: others. More specifically, the virtually unknown but assuredly factual reality: others who had it worse. Worse in any or all the ways things could be worse. Those whose ears whirled louder. Those who worried more. Those whose neighborhoods had bigger houses and fewer trees. Those whose neighborhoods had real crime. Those who didn't have even one friend. Those who slept in the streets. Those who slept next to monsters. Those who had no bed. Those who had greater dreams with even less probability of being realized. Those who had little food. Those who had little hope. The poor in wealth, and the poor in spirit. Those who thirsted for water, and those who thirsted for meaning, burning in all their pockets of the world and all of their intersections, with sky beneath them and the ground above them. His ears stopped whirling for a moment.

He also knew that such thoughts and their accompanying emotions could only do so much. And he knew where good intentions that were not truly good led. Just as a home without a loving family is a house, faith without works is dead, and flesh without bones is pulp, emotion without reason is chaos. Without continuously refined reason, wanting to change even a small corner of the world would be a ruinous mission with a nightmare of unintended consequences, known and unknown. Emotion could build or destroy.

He knew this. He had seen this. It was absolutely

critical, even if he couldn't remember when or where it was that reason had served him. Even more importantly, Brandon didn't know what he was going to do to convert all convert all his personal anxieties into service for others.

Germey closed his phone. "About ready to be out? I gotta pick up something and head to Club Zigg and hope I don't set off my parents' alarm. They've been paranoid since they put that speedboat in the garage. Takes up the whole damn place, I tell ya."

"Sure. What time are we driving back tomorrow? I have a career counseling appointment first thing Monday morning."

"Counsel . . . what?" Germey laughed. "You go do that, and I'll check my ever-so-detailed schedule and see if I can fit you in. Come on; you know me."

Brandon scoffed. "Germey time as usual."

"So, what are you doing tonight?"

Brandon exhaled. "Read all of my dad's emails about cover letters, worry about what the hell I'm going to do with my life, try not to think about finding a girlfriend before I graduate so we can maybe have a home one day. Oh, and sneaking out to smoke." He looked down and shuffled his feet in the crimson dirt. "The stars should be nice tonight. Outside of town, anyway."

"Star peeping, huh? I hope that clears your mind. Otherwise, it's peeper madness."

The shadows spread under the last rays of the sun.

For Brandon, there was a new kind of satisfaction and even hope in the crisp autumn air. Wandering and

wondering with his friend was a meaningful day. He would be doing much less the next day. Just as the days before, and just as the days after, and on until there was another day like this one. He almost always knew what he would be doing, and knowing made it worse. And yet, he still didn't know what to do about it.

The Morning Star watched.

An empty silence was broken by the *cling* of Waterford crystal against a Hancock dinner plate. Gravy and rolls were passed over the starched tablecloth in a triangular pattern around the mahogany table. The merlot was two glasses away from full, and the chardonnay remained unopened. Little air fluttered around the vaulted ceiling, and a dark blue from the twilight eased into the dining room. Sooner or later, one of the three would realize that no one had spoken, and that person was Brandon's father.

"So, you have a good time with, uh . . . Kuhn, right? Jeremy? You guys paint the town?"

Brandon lifted a fake smile. "Nah. We don't really go out much, Dad. I mean, he goes to bars sometimes, but . . . No, we just drove around for a few hours."

"All right. But hey, that's cool. That's okay. That's college. Best time of your life, you know? Best time of your life. Live it up before you gotta beat the streets."

"Yeah."

"Best time of your life, son. I'm sure you guys have great time up there at school. Enjoy it while it lasts. Met

mom there. Right?”

She looked up with a small smile, finished chewing, and nodded. “Mm . . . Mhmm . . . College years are probably the best. Oh, and the golf tournament. That was a good year.”

“It was. So, did you check out that email, son?”

Brandon put down his fork. “Yeah. I was going to try writing that cover letter tomorrow.”

“You should start tonight. That’s how you stay ahead. Monday’s the big day. You gotta stay ahead. You know that, right? You gotta write that. You can’t keep working those third-shift security jobs at the hospital to pay off your student loans, you know. You gotta start.”

“Dad, I wouldn’t have to have student loans if I did trade—”

“No excuses, son. Write it.”

“I will. Sorry, Dad.”

“Don’t apologize,” his mother interrupted. “It’s a sign of weakness.”

“That’s a good one to keep in mind,” his father said. “You can’t let people walk all over you. Your sister didn’t didn’t score that position with Vazio & Leer by being meek. meek. Now, she had a chemistry degree, so it’s okay that she’s shy, because she’s a techie. Techies can be introverts. introverts. But you’re an economics major; that’s social science. You’re gonna need to be even more of a go-getter getter to use that. Take it from me, business skills only mean something if you’re a go-getter. You’re denying some some company out there a great mind if you keep doing that that introvert thing. It takes people skills. You gotta break

break out of that introverted comfort zone stuff. Right?”

“He has to start talking to the right people,” Brandon’s mother said. “As they say, it’s really all about who you know, not what you know.”

“There’s that, too,” his father agreed. “Networking is the name of the game. You gotta play the game. You gotta get started.”

“And like we keep telling you, appearances are everything,” his mother added. “*Everything*. It wouldn’t kill you to dress nice, dress stylish, every day.” She gestured with her knife. “I mean, just look at that T-shirt. You’ve had that rag since high school. Throw it out.”

“I do dress nice for work,” Brandon responded. “I have a slightly different casual—”

“A slight difference is enough to cost you a job. These days, people will sooner tolerate a big difference. They don’t like this nuance stuff. You never know when you’ll run into a contact, so you always have to be presentable. Don’t ever look weird or sloppy. It’s bad enough that you can’t stick with an extracurricular, so don’t cut off every chance you have.”

“I . . .” Brandon started. “I know these superficial things help society function. They’re small expectations needed to make larger things work. But . . . I don’t think substance is limited to just techie things.” He sighed and looked away. He felt a notch of anger ratchet up, but then he remembered the apron. “Besides, everyone is different to some degree. Not better, just different.”

About the Author

Patrick Ashe is a writer and rock musician with over a decade of experience in nonprofit program evaluation. He is an Eagle Scout, graduate of Appalachian State and Indiana University, and an instructor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. After studying and working in five states, he resides with his family in his hometown of Winston-Salem. He is the author of *Upon This Pale Hill* (2020) and *Typical Tragedies: A Book of Poetry* (2020).

patrick.ashe41@gmail.com

<https://www.facebook.com/PatrickAshe41/>

<https://twitter.com/PatrickAshe41/>

<https://www.instagram.com/PatrickAshe41/>