

Homecoming

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I recognize little as I drive through Huntersville with Ahmed. We are both twenty, and because of the trips I have taken on my breaks from college, I haven't been in my hometown in over a year. Gone are the forest paths we took home as children, our eyes glued to the pink horizon as we raced to beat the streetlights. I look for the crepe myrtles beneath which we sat, inspecting each other's bare backs for ticks and digging dirty nails into rashes from poison oak. Townhomes and apartments and condos and nail salons and mattress stores have taken hold, enough to make you look around and wonder where all the new people are hiding. I find it difficult to believe that I am in the place where I grew up. For this reason, I have to smile when we pass Wallace Farms.

The miniature ponies huddle together in the corner farthest from the gravel turn in. I feel a needle's prick in my fingers as I look at the crooked fence, remembering years of splinters that wood gave me as I baited the beautiful creatures with a carrot from our crisper. An American flag waves at me from beneath the old handwritten sign. "UNDER GOD," it screams in a tired voice, black sharpie fading into old poster board. I feel as if the tiny ranch sits permanently with the smell of honeydew and manure in the Carolina air, unchanged since I left it three years ago. When the car turns on Prosperity Church Road, I crane my neck to get a final glimpse at the place before it disappears from view.

As a teenager, I had cursed the sprawling, bastard child of suburbia and countryside that was Huntersville, North Carolina. I dreamt of growing up in California or New York, afternoon surfing or penthouse views, and felt cheated when I looked out my window and saw nothing but sprawling hills and brick houses.

Ahmed and I are deciding on a place for dinner, and as we crawl between traffic lights I realize that a slew of new options are available to us. If we had wanted Chinese or sushi five years ago, we would have headed to the Asian Grill, whose chef had cornered the market on an entire continent's cuisine. Today I spot a Sogo where the goats used to graze and a Yama in the backyard of Hickory Grove Baptist.

On our left sprawl the baseball fields onto which we used to sneak at night. I remember the way my heart would pound as we twisted paper clips into the locks of the electrical boxes, and the resounding cheers when we made the stadium lights crackle to life. If we heard a sheriff turn into the gravel parking lot, we would grab our gloves and cleats and big-league chew and dive into the kudzu until his headlights faded into the distance. I wonder where we would hide today, now that fast food chains encroach on the property.

We have decided on pizza, for which we agree only one acceptable parlor exists. But Due Amici, ("doo ah mee chee," here) is no longer easy to reach. Previously, we could have simply stayed on Prosperity Church, then taken a right into the plaza. Today, because of the Interstate, Ahmed must drive through two roundabouts, make a U turn, and then turn left into the shopping center. Even after all of these maneuvers, the new movie theater hides Due Amici from view. I wonder how they could possibly gain any new customers. When we finally see the old building, I am confident that the parlor's inaccessibility has taken a toll on their business.

From sidewalk to awning, the pictures of pies and calzones and Italian ice and a cartoon chef—complete with a handlebar moustache—still cover the storefront. But their colors are fading, and a block of black spray paint now censors the chef's nether region. Someone had probably given him a graffiti penis. The stickers' edges have started peeling from the glass.

As I pass through the door with a *ding* I am relieved to see that almost nothing has changed inside. Even the international soccer match on the plasma screens is from a world cup that finished years ago. Then I look behind the counter. Fabrizio, a high school classmate of mine, has been working at Due Amici since we were fourteen. He has one headphone in; the other dangles beneath his massive earring. His mop of black curls bounces as he bobs to the music, spinning a spatula in his right hand and looking in every direction but my own.

In high school, Fabrizio mocked those of us who planned to go off to college, saying that higher education was a scam and that we'd all end up working in cubicles. I hadn't given his opinion much thought at the time, but that anger makes a lot more sense when I see him behind the counter and understand that college was probably never a possibility for him. I know that I am not to blame for Fabrizio's circumstances, but I still feel the awkwardness of one-sided contempt, so I cross my arms to cover the Vanderbilt logo on my shirt as we close in on the register. I don't want him to think that I came to Due Amici to rub my opportunity in his face. When I inevitably have to speak to him, I put on a mask of surprise and delight.

"Hey, man," I say.

"What's up?" Fabrizio returns.

I thank God he doesn't ask me how school is going. I wouldn't know what to ask in return. Ahmed and I pay for our slices, and while we eat our pizza in the corner of the restaurant, I steal glances at Fabrizio. I can't help it. The town I grew up in and the one I visit now feel like completely different worlds; seeing Fabrizio preserved so perfectly in the pizza shop makes me feel disoriented.

On our way back from dinner, Ahmed and I pass through a stratum of townhomes and into my old neighborhood. The slide still towers over the community pool, and the clay on the tennis courts is still green enough to stain someone's socks. The golf course runs through the homes like a river, and each hole summons a different memory. On Number Eight, I remember myself stumbling home from a high school party and using the bunkers like a sailor uses stars. On Number Nine, I picture a younger me in front of a folding table with missing front teeth, selling the balls that trickled into my yard to passing golfers. My mind covers the tenth hole in muddy snow, and I remember sitting cross legged in the saucer that I broke out once a year. As Ahmed and I near the eleventh tee box, my own home comes into view.

At least, my previous home. My parents moved when they became empty nesters, and now I spend my holidays on the border of the Carolinas, an hour south of where we lived in Huntersville. It's been so long since I've been here, so I look carefully as we slowly round the corner. The little things stick out the most. A red potted fern sits beside the porch swing. The owners have sanded and filled the pock marks on the side of the house that face the golf course.

A Cadillac Escalade sits on the basketball court I painted onto the driveway in eighth grade. When Ahmed asks if it feels strange to be a visitor to my own home, I tell him no, it feels strange to know that the place has gone on without me.