

## Invisible Town

Erik unfolded a crumpled map of West Virginia on my kitchen table, sweeping the dust from its surface with a single breath—the particles swirling, dancing around in the pale light cast by my window. I hunched over the squiggly lines and solid masses, watching his thick fingers point to a town called Core. The red, wrinkled letters dimmed against the yellow curves and outlines of blue. So this was the place.

I searched the soggy wet outside my window. In order to teach tae kwon do, I knew that Erik needed an empty space—community center, school gymnasium, recreation hall—in a town like Core, hidden, practically invisible. I knew that martial arts schools are territorial; Erik couldn't hold classes near another studio without causing friction. But, after a few months of dating, I also knew Erik. I knew he wanted to enter this ghost town like a quiet hero, teaching students to wheel kick and left jab. With his strong body and clear green eyes, he pictured himself in front of thirty scrawny kids who had never thought they could defend themselves, who had never imagined their bodies as weapons. He saw himself molding their muscles into machines, their minds into those of everyday warriors. He wanted to teach instinct, release. Erik strode out to his Land Rover, folding the edges of the map and slipping it into his pocket. He tilted his head to the gray sky and envisioned a martial arts utopia.

We passed sodden marshes and coal black trees—a stark, lonely landscape I still wasn't used to; it was my sixth month in West Virginia. Although just a five hour drive from my home town in New Jersey, I still found myself surprised by little things—the accents of my students, the way rain streams down with a vengeance, the summer insects, the white, wispy wasps that get stuck to your windshield. And big things. I don't come

from a family of campers or hikers. We never made trips to national parks or thought to visit any particular natural landscape—we were city people living in suburbia—no wildness in sight. The focus on nature here, then, the wild beauty of West Virginia, was also a surprise, a delightful, sometimes bracing, surprise. The biggest surprise of all, though, was Erik, a man I'd met several months ago. He seemed to like my city sensibilities, stories set in Boston or London. He didn't mind my tentativeness, bearings scattered in my new surroundings. I liked his confident stride, rough skin, heart shaped mouth; I liked that he promised to show me around his state.

We were circling Core. I felt as though we needed a password, or permission from a resident, to enter. We pulled over, held the map against the windshield, and drove around some more, but the town remained hidden.