

Where All Light Tends to Go

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A Finalist for the Edgar Award for Best First Novel

"Remarkable . . . This isn't your ordinary coming-of-age novel, but with his bone-cutting insights into these men and the region that bred them, Joy makes it an extraordinarily intimate experience."--Marilyn Stasio, *The New York Times Book Review*

"Lyrical, propulsive, dark and compelling. Joy knows well the grit and gravel of his world, the soul and blemishes of the place."--Daniel Woodrell

In the country-noir tradition of *Winter's Bone* meets 'Breaking Bad,' a savage and beautiful story of a young man seeking redemption.

The area surrounding Cashiers, North Carolina, is home to people of all kinds, but the world that Jacob McNeely lives in is crueler than most. His father runs a methodically organized meth ring, with local authorities on the dime to turn a blind eye to his dealings. Having dropped out of high school and cut himself off from his peers, Jacob has been working for this father for years, all on the promise that his payday will come eventually. The only joy he finds comes from reuniting with Maggie, his first love, and a girl clearly bound for bigger and better things than their hardscrabble town.

Jacob has always been resigned to play the cards that were dealt him, but when a fatal mistake changes everything, he's faced with a choice: stay and appease his father, or leave the mountains with the girl he loves. In a place where blood is thicker than water and hope takes a back seat to fate, Jacob wonders if he can muster the strength to rise above the only life he's ever known.

David Joy's stories and creative nonfiction have appeared in *Drafthorse Literary Journal*, *Smoky Mountain Living*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Pisgah Review*, and *Flycatcher*, and he is the author of the memoir *Growing Gills: A Fly Fisherman's Journey*. He lives in Webster, North Carolina. *Where All Light Tends to Go* is his first novel. One

I hid the pickup behind a tangled row of pampas grass that had needed burning a good year or so before. The law never liked for folks to climb the water tower, but I hadn't ever cared much for the law. I was a McNeely and, in this part of Appalachia, that meant something. Outlawing was just as much a matter of blood as hair color and height. Besides, the water tower was the best place to see graduation caps thrown high when seniors wearing black robes and tearful smiles headed out of Walter Middleton School one last time.

Rungs once painted white were chipped and rusted and slumped in the middle from years of being climbed by wide-eyed kids looking to paint their names on the tower. Those things that seemed as if they'd last forever never did. I didn't even make it out of tenth grade, and maybe that's why I hadn't felt the need to scale that tower with britches weighed down by spray-paint cans. There was no need to cement my name. A name like Jacob McNeely raised eyebrows and questions. In a town this small, all eyes were prying eyes. I couldn't show my face, didn't want the problems and rumors that being down there would bring, but I had to see her leave.

The grate platform circling the water tank had lost all but a few screws and curled up at the edges like a twice-read book. Every step I took shifted metal, but it was a place I'd stood before, a place I'd navigated on every drug I'd ever taken. With only a buzz from my morning smoke lingering, there wasn't need for worries. I sat beneath green letters dripping a nearly illegible "FUCK U" across the front side of the tank, pulled a soft pack of Winstons from the pocket of my jeans, lit the last cigarette I had, and waited.

The school I'd spent the majority of my life in seemed smaller now, though looking back it had never been big enough. I grew up twenty miles south of Sylva, a town that really wasn't much of a town at all but the closest thing to one in Jackson County. If you were passing through, you'd miss Sylva if you blinked, and the place where I was from you could overlook with your eyes peeled. Being a small, mountain community that far away, we only had one school. So that meant that kids who grew up in this county would walk into Walter Middleton at five years old and wouldn't leave until graduation thirteen years down the road. Growing up in it, I never found it strange to share the halls with teens when I was a kid and kids when I was a teen, but looking down on it now, two years after leaving for good, the whole thing was alien.

The white dome roofing the gym looked like a bad egg bobbing in boiling water, the courtyard was lined in uneven passes from a lawnmower, and a painting of the school mascot, centered in the parking lot, looked more like a chupacabra than any bobcat I'd ever seen. To be honest, there wasn't too much worth remembering from my time there, but still it had accounted for ten of my eighteen years. Surprisingly, though, that wasn't disappointing. What was disappointing about that school, my life, and this whole fucking place was that I'd let it beat me. I'd let what I was born into control what I'd become. Mama snorted crystal, Daddy sold it to her, and I'd never had the balls to leave. That was my life in a nutshell. I took a drag from my last cigarette and hocked a thick wad of spit over the railing.

I was watching a wake of buzzards whirl down behind a mountain when the side door cracked against the gymnasium brick. One kid tore out in front of the crowd, and even before he jumped onto the hood of his car, I knew him. Blane Cowen was the type to drink a beer and scream wasted. I'd tested him once back in middle school, brought him up here on the water tower to smoke a joint, and when his legs got wobbly and vertigo set in he decided awfully fast he didn't want to play friends anymore. In a school filled with kids who swiped prescription drugs from their parents' medicine cabinets, Blane was the village idiot. But despite all that, I kind of felt sorry for the bastard, standing there, arms raised in the air as he dented in the hood of a beat-up Civic, no one in his class paying him a lick of attention while he howled.

The parking lot that had seemed so desolate just a minute before was crawling now as friends hugged, told promises they'd never be able to keep, and ran off to parents who had no clue of who their children had become. I knew it because I'd grown up with them, all of them, and all of us knew things about one another that we'd never share. Most of us knew things that we didn't even want to confess to ourselves, so we took those secrets with

us like condoms, stuffed in wallets, that would never be used. I wanted to be down there with them, if not as a classmate, then at least as a friend, but none of them needed my baggage.

Not until she took off her cap did I recognize her in the crowd. Maggie Jennings stood there and pulled her hair out of a bun, shook blond curls down across her shoulders, and kicked high heels from her feet. The front of her graduation gown was unzipped, and a white sundress held tight to her body. I could almost make out her laugh in the clamor as her boyfriend, Avery Hooper, picked her up from behind and spun her around wildly. Maggie's mother hunched with her hands covering her face as if to conceal tears, and Maggie's father put his arm around his wife's waist and drew her close. A person who didn't know any better would have thought them the perfect American family. Live the lie and they'll believe the lie, but I knew different.

I'd known Maggie my whole life. The house she grew up in was two beats of a wing as the crow flies from my front porch, so there hadn't been many days of my childhood spent without her by my side. About the first memory I can recall is being five or six with pants rolled up, the two of us digging in the creek for spring lizards. We were tighter than a burl, as Daddy'd say. In a way, I guess, Maggie and me raised each other.

Back before her father found Jesus, he'd run off on a two- or three-week drunk with no one seeing hide nor hair of him till it was over. Her mother worked two jobs to keep food on the table, but that meant there wasn't a soul watching when Maggie and I'd head into the woods, me talking her into all sorts of shit that most kids wouldn't have dreamed. I guess we were twelve or so when her father got saved and moved the family off The Creek. Folks said he poured enough white liquor in the West Fork of the Tuckasegee to slosh every speckled trout from Nimblewill to Fontana, but I never figured him much for saving. A drunk's a drunk just like an addict's an addict, and there ain't a God you can pray to who can change a damn bit of it.

But Maggie was different. Even early on I remember being amazed by her. She'd always been something slippery that I never could seem to grasp, something buried deep in her that never let anything outside of herself decide what she would become. I'd always loved that about her. I'd always loved her.

We were in middle school when the tomboy I grew up with started filling out. Having been best friends, when I asked Maggie out in eighth grade, it seemed like that shit they write in movies. We were together for three years, a lifetime it had felt like. What meant the most to me was that Maggie knew where I'd come from, knew what I was being groomed into, and still believed I could make it out. I'd thought my life was chosen, that I didn't really have a say in the matter, but Maggie dreamed for me. She told me I could be anything I wanted, go any place that looked worth going, and there were times I almost believed her. Folks like me were tied to this place, but Maggie held no restraints. She was out of here from the moment she set her eyes on the distance. If I ever did have a dream, it was that she might take me with her. But dreams were silly for folks like me. There always comes a time when you have to wake up.

I was proud that she was headed to a place I could never go, and I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket to text her, "Congrats."

When Avery let go, Maggie jumped into her father's arms, bent her legs behind her with bare feet pointed into the sky. Her father buried his head into his daughter's hair, pretended for a split second that he'd had something to do with how she turned out, then placed her on the ground for her mother to kiss. Maggie stood there for a moment, rocked back and forth before she turned away. She glanced behind her to say something as she ran off to Avery's truck, but her parents had said their good-byes. In a way, I think they knew she was already gone. They knew it just as much as I did. A girl like that couldn't stay. Not forever, and certainly not for long.

Other Books

Those We Thought We Knew, From award-winning writer David Joy comes a searing new novel about the cracks that form in a small North Carolina community and the evils that unfurl from its center. Toya Gardner, a young Black artist from Atlanta, has returned to her ancestral home in the North Carolina mountains to trace her family history and complete her graduate thesis. But when she encounters a still-standing Confederate monument in the heart of town, she sets her sights on something bigger. Meanwhile, local deputies find a man sleeping in the back of a station wagon and believe him to be nothing more than some slack-jawed drifter. Yet a search of the man's vehicle reveals that he is a high-ranking member of the Klan, and the uncovering of a notebook filled with local names threatens to turn the mountain on end. After two horrific crimes split the county apart, every soul must wrestle with deep and unspoken secrets that stretch back for generations. *Those We Thought We Knew* is an urgent unraveling of the dark underbelly of a community. Richly drawn and bracingly honest, it asks what happens when the people you've always known turn out to be monsters, what do you do when everything you ever believed crumbles away?

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