

Varus

A short story by River T.

<https://zsls.octorocket.dev/index.html/>

This is not a complete work!

Chapter 1

It was a quiet drive to my grandparents' house. My parents had just earlier that day broken to me the news that they were getting divorced and that I was to live with my father's parents indefinitely. My heart dropped alongside my bag as they told me. I barely had half an hour to pack; however, my father assured me they wouldn't get rid of anything. I packed my suitcase and a backpack full of everything I could ever need or want: clothes, books, some of my favorite CDs, a portable disc player, and even an old analog alarm clock that had always sat on a shelf in my room. I took another pass around my room and spent a while staring at the posters on my wall that I had spent hours arranging and rearranging, posters of bands I liked, concerts I had been to, movie posters, almost anything. Outside my window, my neighbors catch my eye. They're an older retired couple. The husband sits on the back deck smoking a cigar and reading the morning paper while the wife tends to her herbs and fruit bushes. I considered opening my window and catching one of their attention, but before I could do that, I heard my father knock on my door, telling me to hurry up.

The drive was lengthened by the terse glances my mother would shoot at my father and me. The roads were long and boring, the suburban sprawl of my hometown gave way to endless fields, and I realized I had never been given the chance to say goodbye to my friends or my school. As far as they would be concerned, I got off the bus and vanished. Plains turned to rolling hills and forests as knots formed in my stomach as we got off the sprawling interstate onto a road the

map called "Route 28". It was around a quarter after five when we pulled into a Wendy's drive-thru in the dingy town of Chartwell. It was always my favorite as a kid, but now I could hardly bear to eat a bite of food.

"Come on, kiddo," my father started, "You have to eat something."

I wanted to tell him that I couldn't bear to eat when it felt as though my entire life, my entire existence, felt as if it was collapsing in on me, but instead, I mumbled something about not being hungry.

He looked at me with what seemed to be a mix of pity and worry for an uncomfortable amount of seconds as she thought of what to say. My mother looked equally as distressed, but she eventually said, "At least eat some fries".

The fries were about as salty as the tears that were now slowly streaming down my face as we sat at the table in silence. My father attempted to make small talk, but neither my mother nor I wanted to talk. The trees that blanketed the hills in the distance no longer felt comforting but stifling, the air itself turned to syrup in my lungs as I choked up another sob.

"Listen, kiddo," my father began,

"Honey--" my mother attempted to stop him, but he continued.

"We feel your pain."

It took seemingly every ounce of effort not to yell at him. "Do you even know how I feel?"

My father's expression turned to anger. "Of course--"

My voice raised as I interrupted: "I was looking forward to a quiet summer break, but now you tell me my life is--"

"Honey..." tears formed in my mother's eyes. "It's only--"

"It's only what?!" My voice was at a yell now. "Because it feels like the end of my life."

Both my parents were softly crying, and the sight of their tears brought them back to me. "I'm afraid," I choked out between sobs.

"We know, honey," my mom said softly, "We wish it didn't have to be like this."

My dad pulled the two of us in a hug. "It's only temporary," he said.

We hugged for what seemed like forever.

After dinner, we stopped at a gas station to refuel. My dad said we had to be in the town in 45 minutes, but we could get something from the convenience store to make me feel better. The store was small, but the fluorescent bulbs were oppressive, and the pressure of the time crunch made it impossible to pick anything. I prowled the shelves, searching for anything that I actually wanted, until my mother honked the car horn, causing me to turn my head. It was in that turn that I spotted it: a Mars bar. I hadn't seen one in ages, not since I traveled to London last summer. We checked out and returned to the car, where my mother sat pissed.

"I have been waiting here for five minutes!" she exclaimed. "We have a deadline! Six thirty sharp!"

"It's fine!" my dad began, "When have we ever been late?"

"Do you want to see them angry?" my mom replied as she aggressively started the car and exited the parking lot back onto the main road.

My parents continued arguing about the travel time as we made our way down Route 28 towards Nineveh, which the sign said was 42 miles away. I wondered if that's where we were going, which made me realize I didn't know where they lived. I presumed they lived in Nineveh, as that's what the sign said, and by the looks of it, there weren't any other towns in the area. For that matter, I barely remembered who my grandparents were. They never came over for Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving, or any holiday, for that matter. I knew vaguely what they looked like because they came over for my seventh birthday, but that was almost a decade ago by this point. I was still lost in musings on who they were and what they might be like when we turned sharply to the right, eliciting a yelp from both my father and me.

The road we turned on was paved in patchy asphalt. I missed any of the signs that indicated where this road went; however, I caught from the conversation that my parents were having that it went to a state park. We drove down the narrow road until we turned left at the seemingly most obstructed path in history onto an even narrower graveled road until we reached a--

"Well, we're here:" my dad stated, "The Barn."

It was truly a barn, or at least it was. The paint was faded and stained with dirt. The boards that made up the walls looked swollen and rotting from water, and half of the door was gone, destroyed by some incident presumably involving a large animal. It was not a place I expected anyone to want to visit, let alone live in.

"Do they..." I couldn't bring myself to say it.

"Live here?" My dad laughed at the suggestion. "Heck no!"

Relief washed over me. According to my mother, this was just the rendezvous point, or, more precisely, the back was the rendezvous point, and currently, we were running behind schedule. My dad hauled my suitcase, and I took my backpack around the side of the barn, reaching a small clearing just as a dingy Trabant crawled its way through a passage in the trees. When it parked, a man wearing a garish maroon blazer and matching corduroy pants emerged and shook first my father's hand, then my mother's, and then mine. He wore two rings, a modest silver wedding band on his ring finger and a massive gold ring on his middle finger, inset with a ruby that matched the color of his blazer. His palms seemed sweaty, and his skin seemed delicate despite the callouses that itched my hands. He introduced himself as Mattathias Barrow Douglas, the current mayor of Varus, the town where my grandparents live.

My parents helped load my belongings into the trunk of the boxy old car; however, they said they wouldn't be able to join me. We said our goodbyes, and they promised they would soon come back for a visit as soon as they were able. Before she left, my mother handed me a small note, telling me it had the answers to Matthias's questions; however, she left before I could ask what that meant. Mattathias opened the passenger door for me and walked around to the driver's side.

The drive to Varus was slow, long, and turbulent. The minuscule Trabant held no chance against the poorly paved road crisscrossed by roots from the trees that surrounded the path. Mattathias looked at me and asked what my name was.

So that's what she meant by 'questions', I thought.

"I'm Joshua, although my friends usually call me Josh." Thinking of my friends sent a pang of homesickness through my heart.

For just an instant, Mattathias's faint smile fell to the whisper of a frown. "And what's your last name?"

"Hunt-Callaghan," I responded.

A look of annoyance crossed his face. "When you're in this town, I expect you to address me as Sir; it's only proper. I expect the other proper men in this town would like to be addressed that way as well."

"Yes," I said, before quickly adding "Sir."

"Now," continued Mattathias, "I'll ask again: What is your name?"

"My name is Joshua Aloysius Hunt-Callaghan, sir," I replied.

He muttered something about 'the Irish' and then continued, "Good. Now, may I ask you how old you are?"

"You may, sir," I began, eliciting a slightly puzzled look from Mattathias as I continued, "I'm sixteen, sir."

"And who are your parents?"

For this one, I had to look at the sheet for my Mother's maiden name. "Rainier Phillips Callaghan and Irene Barrow Hunt, sir."

"And whom are you staying with?"

"My father's parents, sir." I read their names from the paper, "Elizabeth Carlton Phillips and Isaiah Pauline Callaghan, sir."

Mattathias asked me more questions about my grandparents, which I read off of the handy sheet. It seemed as though I was learning more from this exercise than he was, as he seemed thoroughly disinterested when I answered. We

soon reached a cluster of buildings, then a grid of streets. We passed three or four streets before turning onto unpaved dirt. Luckily, the trees had been cleared, so the ride was smooth. The scattered pedestrians walking along the road stared at us as we drove down the surprisingly wide road. There were two houses between each street, and their driveways pointed towards the street we drove along; however, not a single one had a car. The road we were driving didn't even have a pair of tracks of bare dirt that one would expect from a dirt path well traveled by cars.

We soon made it to the house, which was a grand two-story turn-of-the-century Tudor house that looked like it had been replaced board for board until none of the original remained. Mattathias parked the car and told me to wait in the car while he talked to my grandparents. He walked up to the side of the house and around to the front. I waited around five minutes until he returned with an older gentleman who looked unmistakably like my father. Mattathias opened the door, and I clambered out, almost stumbling into my grandfather. I shook his hand, and he clapped me on the back.

"Ah! You must be the grandson I've heard so much about!" he said,

"Indeed, I am," I began, hesitating slightly before saying "Sir,"

"Oh, you don't have to bother with those formalities," making Mattathias visibly grumble, "I'm your grandpa!"

I let out a chuckle. "I'm so glad to finally see you again!"

"Me too, son," he replied, "And I bet your grandmother will be happy to see you too!"

A voice from the kitchen shouted in agreement: "Stop stalling, the cookies are getting cold!"

My grandmother was sweeter than her sugar cookies. She met me in the foyer with a surprisingly firm hug and a kiss on my cheek. She looked over my shoulder to my grandfather, who was just entering the house, and told him, "He'll be perfect."

Before we could eat, my grandparents opted to give me a brief tour of the house. On the ground floor, there were four main rooms. To the left of the foyer, there was a living room with a green and somewhat ratty sofa and two similar armchairs framing a brick fireplace. On the arm of the sofa sat a pudgy grey cat named Melvin, who they said they found meowing outside their house a year or two prior.

The first floor consisted of a living room directly off of the foyer to the left, a kitchen down a hallway past it with the dining space shortly after to the right, and a study off of that that was filled with stacks and stacks of paperwork covering seemingly every square inch of floor space, radiating away from a pair of filing cabinets next to a modest desk that featured what looked to be an ancient desktop plugged into an even more archaic CRT display. In the hallway to the left of the study, there was a door that led to a pantry that contained a supermarket's amount of all sorts of ingredients, from flour to jerk chicken rub. My grandmother snuck past me and wove in between the bags and boxes along the floor to a smaller jar filled with something I couldn't make out; when she came back, she placed a handful in my hand, and I realized it was chocolate chips. "I know we have cookies in the

kitchen,” she said with a wink, “but who says we can’t have a little something while we wait.”

They were some of the best I’d ever had.

Moving up to the second floor, which was up a hidden set of stairs at the end of the hallway, it was a fairly simple one hallway setup with three bedrooms, two on the left hallway across from the top of the stairs and one bedroom, where my grandparents sleep, on the right, along with a bathroom and a small living area with a conspicuously positioned piano and a couple of armchairs. My grandfather was walking up the staircase with my bags and he showed me to my room, the first on the left. It was rather smaller than my room back at home, but it was cozier, and besides, I didn’t have nearly as many things here as at home. There was a bed on the back right corner with a window above it centered on the room. Across from it was a thin desk that looked as though it used to contain makeup of various kinds, although now it only contained a legal pad, a ballpoint pen, and some sort of dim lamp with an obnoxious burgundy lampshade. On the door side wall, there was an elegant armoire with a tall cabinet and two wide drawers along the bottom. Opening it up, there was an oblong round mirror with no frame. I sat on the bed and processed the room until I noticed my grandfather watching me from the door.

“Come on, son,” he said, “The cookies are getting cold.”