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MATTHEW OGLESBY

The buildings of the Colony were like their history: sickly and diseased. Years of abandonment had led to disrepair. Broken windows and boarded doors. Half-sunken porches. Latticework peeled away to reveal the gray gaps of crawlspaces like missing teeth. Virginia creeper climbed the walls and eaves. We walked along the narrow avenue between the vacated old buildings. The air was still and moist and glowed with eerie stormlight. Aside from our voices, the Colony was completely silent, cocooned in stillness and hush. It was a ghost town—an increasingly familiar scene in these pandemic months. Dead as it was now, I could see the Colony as it had once been. The women dressed and out of bed, tending the cows and pigs and chickens, plucking vegetables from vinewrapped garden stakes. Their tiny bent figures, pulling up weeds and trimming hedges, hauling buckets of water and heaps of unpinned laundry. The women assigned to kitchen duty shuffle along the narrow avenue towards the cafeteria, looking almost identical in their standard-issue cotton dresses, gray as the morning, gray as bucket water, wraiths of mist curling about them.

Founded in 1910 and spanning more than a thousand acres in the rolling foothills overlooking Lynchburg, the Virginia Colony for Epileptics and Feeble-minded was, for many years, a central landmark of the American eugenics movement, which stretched from the early 1900s until the late 1930s—and in some cases, beyond—with long lasting (and now mostly forgotten) consequences. With its brick and columned dormitories and dining halls, the Colony had the peaceful, protected atmosphere of a college campus and the operations of a large-scale farm. Residents spent their days in the fields and gardens, harvesting the land and tending the livestock. Those not skilled in farm work received assignments in other areas, with occupations like cooking, cleaning, sewing, and carpentry. This was in keeping with many late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century asylums, which were built in remote, idyllic settings, offering fresh air and a therapeutic sense of purpose and direction.

Like a convent or boarding school—like a prison—the Colony was an enclosed world, a self-contained and self-sustaining “total institution,” where patients could be both “mad and safe,” in the words of Oliver Sacks. There were phonographs in the residence halls, heat and electricity, weekly dances, church services in the Colony chapel. Twenty thousand pounds of pork came off the hog herds annually. Enough canned goods to last the Colony for years. Seen from the outside, the Colony was like an ordinary village. The grounds were laid out in streets and avenues. Each building had its own little lawn and garden. But beyond this façade lurked a horrible truth.

For years I imagined my way around the Colony, trying to capture the essence and atmosphere of the place. I had originally gotten interested in connection with my own epilepsy, a disability I’ve had since my early twenties. The research became an obsession for me. I haunted the Library of Virginia in Richmond, where I lived at the time and where much of the Colony’s history is archived. The more I read, the more resonance I found. Eugenics was originally conceived in 1883 by British anthropologist (and half-cousin of Charles Darwin) Sir Francis Galton, who coined the term from the Greek: *eu* meaning good, *genes* meaning born. The good born. The good people.

With eugenics, Galton sought to establish a “new religion” founded on the gospel of heredity and improvement of the human race. But with all its talk about inborn moral deviancy and ill-made parents bearing children as defective as themselves, the supposedly new religion of eugenics often wound up sounding a lot like predestination and the Protestant Christianity it sought to replace. The feeble-minded were inherently bad, in the same way certain souls were condemned to hell, with eugenics offering one explanation and the ancestral sin of Adam and Eve another.

I was reminded of the small evangelical town where I grew up and went to Christian school—both of which were, in their own ways, enclosed worlds. In daily Bible classes we learned

about the good and the bad, the saved and the hellbound. And all of this had been decided before we were born, much like our genetics. As I read and wrote about the Colony, I came to see it as a metaphorical setting, a physical and moral landscape that could be made to encapsulate everything I thought I might want to say about my own life history—a mask and mirror for my secret cargo of personal meanings.

But strangely, despite all this—and despite living in Richmond, just a short drive away—I didn't visit the Colony until recently, when I learned it would be closing soon. Upon arrival, I met with Joan and Revely, the two employees who agreed to guide me around the Colony (renamed the Central Virginia Training Center in 1983 and home to about fifty residents when I visited). We walked along the quiet avenue of crumbling old buildings. From time to time Revely stopped to point out the abandoned attractions: the cottage-like dormitories and residence halls; the chapel, which did not at all resemble the white and steepled clapboard I had so often imagined. Like all the historic buildings, it was redbrick and Colonial Revival. Columns flanked a concrete porch with an empty pedestal planter blighted green. A padlocked fence with a weathered yellow caution sign caged the front doors. Lettered in black on the peeling, pedimented porticos were the names of the once-prominent dead, the well-connected and well-bred, the doctors and lawyers and good people whose legacies, like those on so many monuments and memorials, have not aged well.

Joan walked beside me with an umbrella she used like a cane, lifting it up and then stabbing it back down. We passed the old barn that used to serve as the carpenter's shop. Parked out front were cargo trucks with their loading doors thrown open. "Surprise, surprise," Joan said. "Seems like not a day goes by they don't come out here and pick up something." I asked her who was taking over the property and she said, "A community service board. They cover mental health and developmental services. They're starting to take possession of the buildings." Her tone of bitter sadness surprised me. "Looks mighty abandoned compared to what it used to be." She shook her head. "It gets lesser and lesser by the day."

The centerpiece of the Colony was the Bradford Building, large and columned like the courthouses that committed people here. I recognized it immediately, despite the ruin it had fallen into. This was the building where I had imagined the superintendent of the Colony. I could almost see him there now, standing in a window like a ghost in repose, taking a break from the work piled up

on his desk, the blissful demands and drudgery of an administrator who—at a state hospital in the early twentieth century—was a combination of chief executive and resident doctor.

He is a thin and well-fit man, as I imagine him, with short blond hair and a gossamer complexion so fine you can see the capillaries beneath his skin, little cobwebs of blood. He watches as a car pulls around the circular drive and a young woman steps out of the backseat, hunched over in a thin, tattered dress, holding her elbows in the cold of her new home. To the untrained eye, she would not appear the least bit defective or abnormal, but to the superintendent she is clearly a moron.

Greek for dull or foolish, the term moron—introduced in 1910 by researcher and psychologist Henry H. Goddard and used interchangeably with feeble-minded—described those whose illness was supposedly so subtle and hard to diagnose it often went unnoticed. Which is exactly what made them so dangerous. Unlike idiots and imbeciles—terms which Goddard also popularized to describe those with more severe disabilities—feeble-minded morons might resemble normal people, but their natures gave them weak wills and loose morals, making them easily susceptible to deviant criminal behavior.

This was in the early days of genetics—which was, for a time, all but synonymous with eugenics—and many in the field believed that immorality and delinquency were heritable conditions. Expanding on the theory of natural selection and the research of Gregor Mendel, whose experiments with pea plants formed the basis of inheritance, eugenics was founded on the belief that disability, crime, and even poverty might be eliminated through better breeding. Leading this crusade were prominent researchers and scientists like Charles Davenport, who founded the Eugenics Record Office in connection with Carnegie, and its fair-skinned and fair-haired superintendent Harry Laughlin, who withheld the secret of his own epilepsy while zealously advocating for the sterilization of people like himself.

When the rain started falling, we made a run for it, taking cover under the portico of one of the buildings I had so often imagined myself in. In this sheltered space, we tried to carry on conversation as usual, but that soon became impossible. The wind whipped the rain across us like spray over the bow of a ship. Joan, clothes soaked and hair pasted to her forehead, opened her umbrella and the wind flipped it inside out. We were forced to retreat inside. The wind snatched the door shut behind us. It was

dark and quiet in the hall. A gray light filtered down from the ceiling, which resounded with rain. Discarded medical equipment littered the floors and shadowy corners. Wind whistled in the cracked walls and broken windows where tattered curtains hung like ghosts. Still dripping and breathing heavily, Joan said, "That's where they did it. That building there."

In an effort to achieve their dream of a future untroubled by hereditary disease, eugenic leaders

passed laws prohibiting morons and other defectives from marrying. "The laws of the country will not permit children ten years old to marry," wrote Henry H. Goddard. "Why should they permit it when the mentality is only ten?"

But marriage laws could only do so much. Morons would, by their very nature, find a way to reproduce. So eugenicists moved on to confinement at institutions

like the Colony, as if feeble-mindedness were some sort of virulent contagion in need of containment.

Eventually, even this approach proved unsustainable. Institutions were overcrowding, costing taxpayers a fortune. A simple, inexpensive solution was needed to prevent the problem, not simply treat it, so that moron women (it was mostly women), having undergone valuable moral and vocational training, could be returned to society without fear of reproducing.

Although there were men at the Colony, the eugenics movement focused primarily on "fecund feeble-minded females" of childbearing age who were considered unusually promiscuous, prone to venereal disease, and all but certain to bear defective children out of wedlock. This fixation on controlling female sexuality and reproduction is yet another similarity shared with Christianity (and, for that matter, any number of patriarchal organized religions in which men punish women for their desires). Throughout the Bible and in modern Christian culture, women are frequently portrayed as temptresses, serpents leading men astray. Eugenics took this same basic story and moved it from the church to the laboratory, spreading the good news of better breeding and condemning the sins of degenerate women from their own secular pulpits.

Joan was standing by the door in the pale glow of the sidelight. "That building there," she said. "That's where they did the sterilizations." I peered through the warped glass at the infirmary across the street—the building where

approximately 8,300 inmates were sterilized between 1924 and 1979, longer than any other state. A two-tiered veranda leaned across the front like an upset layer cake. The paint was badly peeling away, giving it a splotched, malignant appearance. "You can't see it from here," Joan said, "but there's a skylight there on top of the building. That way, they could operate even when the electricity cut out."

Eugenic sterilization was against the law until the 1927 *Buck v. Bell* Supreme Court decision made it legal for the "health and protection" of society. The defendant, Carrie Buck, was an inmate of the Colony, handpicked to make the perfect case for eugenic sterilization. Her mother, Emma, had been confined at the Colony for years, suggesting a clear line of hereditary defectiveness. Carrie had also given birth to a daughter out of wedlock. The pregnancy was the result of rape, but no one believed this. The fact that Carrie was poor and only eighteen also counted against her. Confining a young woman for the remainder of her reproductive years would be needlessly expensive. It was far cheaper to simply sterilize her. Carrie's attorney, Irving Whitehead, was close friends with Aubrey Strode, the handsome, well-connected lawyer who, despite a lack of eugenic belief, acted on the Colony's behalf. In years prior, Whitehead had also served on the Colony's board. You can imagine the sort of spirited defense Carrie received. And with all the weight of "science" against her, with expert testimony from Harry Laughlin, who wrote the Model Sterilization Law—well, you could even say she was doomed from the start. Predestined.

Carrie Buck was sterilized on October 19, 1927. But this was hardly the first sterilization performed at the Colony. Under the guise of appendectomies and other operations for the relief of "pelvic disease," sexual sterilization became common practice well before the Supreme Court made it officially legal. Often, the women (again it was mostly women) who underwent these procedures did not know why they were unable to have children until years later. Their sterilizations were "quiet procedures."

It seems clear to me now that in my past attempts to imagine the Colony, I was most interested in the landscape and atmosphere of the place: the vast orderly array of stately brick buildings, the rolling wooded hills and farmland, the hedgerows and avenues of trees. *The Colony*: just the name seems to conjure up the place, calling to mind a secluded little village, colonial in spirit and architecture, with echoes of sin and Salem, sex and taboo, cupped in a shadowy valley and bounded by fragrant mountains.

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The enclosed beauty and horror of this pastoral setting fascinated my imagination to the point of distraction. The larger story here—and the one I was missing for so many years—is the story of power and how those who have it use their privilege to subjugate the weak. The people committed to the Colony and other eugenic institutions were not sexual deviants or biological mistakes of nature. They were often survivors of rape and abuse. For that shame and the violence done to their bodies, they paid an even higher price.

Nearly a century later, the story of the American eugenics movement remains painfully modern. Controlling female sexuality and reproduction are still charged topics. (The founder of Planned Parenthood, Margaret Sanger, was an outspoken eugenicist who led the birth control movement alongside eugenic sterilization campaigns.) We still criminalize mental illness. We still criminalize poverty. Minorities and immigrants are still considered undesirable populations. How else can we explain allegations that an alarming number of hysterectomies were performed at an ICE facility in Georgia? The Immigration Act of 1924, which tightened our borders against “genetically inferior” eastern European Jews—the first such policy of its kind, and one lauded by Adolf Hitler—was spearheaded by none other than Harry Laughlin.

The American eugenics movement trails a long-lasting legacy with a number of other recognizable traditions, including genetic science, couples counseling, intelligence tests, and gifted education. The rising specter of biotechnology, with advances in DNA editing and talk of designer babies, raises myriad social and ethical questions related to eugenics. For all our progress, it would be a mistake to consign the story of eugenics to the dustbin of history.

The rain slowed to a steady drizzle, then stopped. The gutters and downspouts gushed. The sky glowed a calico mix of orange and black. We loaded into Joan’s car and rode out to the cemetery, which stood at the end of an unpaved path with a grassy strip between the tracks. A tilted metal archway engraved in faded lettering marked the entrance. We drove under it and parked. The grass was wet and stuck to my legs and shoes as we picked our way across the overgrown cemetery searching for the grave of Emma Buck—a task that proved difficult because there were no gravestones or crosses. In all things, the Colony was thrifty. Cheap little flatmarkers memorialized the final resting places of those who’d lived and died here.

It took some poking around, but we finally found Emma’s grave down near the boxwoods at the end of the cemetery. The plaque was small and recessed and seemed almost to be sinking into the ground. Soon, I imagined, it would vanish altogether, disappearing beneath the tall grass and wildflowers that trembled in the slight movement of the air. ●

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