

At Home in the Heart of Appalachia

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by John O'Brien

A LATE AUGUST EVENING and we are driving into West Virginia. The small blacktop road snakes ahead through a narrow V-shaped valley that seems little more than an axe bite here in these mountains. The fields and open meadows on either side of the road are occasionally broken by gray split-rail fences. I don't recall ever seeing fences like them except down this way. It's difficult to say how old they are, but they're laid without nails so that they zigzag across the land. Some of the rails are chestnut, a tree long gone from the hills, and the fact that the fences remain is a testament to homespun engineering, as well as to the quality of chestnut itself.

Farther down the valley, we drive past an old, unpainted barn that leans crazily to the left, and then across a metal bridge. Now into Wardensville, a sleepy mountain town just across the state line. The houses here are modest and well kept and the streets quiet and empty. It's Sunday night. People on front-porch swings taking the evening air: old men, ladies in print dresses, adolescent girls in shorts and halter tops. Young girls down here seem to share the same expression, eyes half closed and mouth set slightly hard, a look of enormous boredom. The slowness of things. Maybe waiting for some good-looking fella to come cruising by in his ~~hot~~ Chevy or cleaned-up farm truck. Maybe not. Their legs are long and pale in the half-light.

Down another street and past the Dairy Bar. The lot is filled with angular young men hovering around cars and pickups. Caps that advertise CAT diesel or Southern States or Red Fox chewing tobacco. A lot of clowning around, that give-and-take of young men almost anywhere. Lips puffed out with snuff—what I've heard them call "snoose"—good old Copenhagen or Happy Days.

We cross the railroad tracks and leave Wardensville behind, and in

less than a mile we are driving through pure country once again. Small white farmhouses, clusters of Hereford cattle that seem oddly small, even considering the distance—dusk foreshortens things. On the left now, Seneca Rocks, and on the right, Harper's Country Store where you can drop a quarter into one of the big-headed silver machines and look up at the rocks. Or even buy a T-shirt with a picture of the store itself on it—though as a friend once said, why you'd want to do either is a mystery.

On down through the Mouth of Seneca and Smoke Hole. Place names are magic back through here. We cross rivers with names like Turkey Run, North Fork, and Lost River (which does in fact get lost—just sinks into the ground, goes under a mountain, and reappears on the other side). Or towns like Circleville, Front, Clover Lick, and Stony Bottom. It's American poetry.

Our destination is Green Bank, my wife, Becky's, home place. We are returning with our children—Chris, now thirteen, and Shelly, eight—for the Blackhurst Reunion, a three-day family get-together that will include endless chatter, a gentle reawakening of family ties, and prodigious amounts of country cooking. It's not unusual, I suppose, for families to do this kind of thing anywhere, but back here it goes on all the time.

We entered the state not long after a soaking rain and the tires still hiss along the blacktop. Pieces of the storm still cling to the ridges, gray-white clouds that hang in tatters on the tallest trees. The night air is enough to make you drunk. I am up on the edge of my seat now, trying to balance my excitement. Chris is in the back seat with his chin resting by my shoulder. We watch for newts on the road, those curled bits of intense orange, so much like candied tangerine peel. The rain has set them

into motion. They're everywhere. There is that newt sound, too. There is that sound, too many states of mind all at once pop into your head: some bluegrass, some old-time country preacher, and the whine of interference. The radio is too close and too smug to be here for good reception. It's the only thing I almost always forget. I turn the radio off.

Now we start to climb up and out of the valley and on through Cherry Grove, a few scattered houses, a store, and a gas station. I feel a certain rush. Not far from here, up in high mountain pasture, I used to camp and fish for trout. It was a long ago, back in college.

Almost at the top of the mountain now, leaving the valley behind and here, the first sign of the mountain Green Bank. We're almost there.

THIS IS APPALACHIA. Indeed, West Virginia is called the Heart of Appalachia. I came from here. At least my parents did. I was born in Philadelphia, but my parents talked about West Virginia as home, and I guess I grew up feeling somehow culturally misplaced. Appalachian people are like that. For any number of reasons they're family- or people-oriented and tend to take the web of relations seriously. Not just brothers, sisters, uncles, and the like, but second and third cousins, great-great-grandfathers. You define yourself not so much by what you do as by whom you're related to. By where your relatives live, too. For many reasons, most of them entirely economic, people have been leaving Appalachia for a long time, but most of the people, like my parents and perhaps like me, never made the emotional break. That's why family reunions are so numerous and important here.

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