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Ascending Appalachian: Fond Memories of My Childhood in the Rural South-East

An exploration of growing up and discovering my identity.

Introduction

The older I get the more I reminisce on parts of my youth with longing nostalgia. Twenty years is not a long life, but the experience of childhood is not easily replicated. As a child, I resented growing up in a rural southern area and had spent most of my time only remembering the worst aspects. I never felt like I fit in or like I was a part of what was such a close community. Most of my friends felt the same and we dreamed of moving to a city, bustling with life and people who don't want to live in the same small town and do the same small things every day. The older I got the less connected I felt with my hometown of Del Rio. Part of this was likely due to the rural nature of the area. If you wanted to go anywhere you would have to drive. The people around me seemed to be interested in different pastimes that I had no interest in such as hunting or fishing. I constantly read, escaping into a fantasy with people who understood me.

Now, after having moved away to Johnson City, I realize it wasn't the town that I truly hated, nor was it the people. What I hated was the lack of being listened to by the adults around me, the disconnect I felt from most of my classmates after being designated a "gifted" student, and the struggling realization of my queer identity. The community just reminded me of the connections I felt I didn't have. I now realize that there were good aspects to growing up in Del

Rio. I may not have felt connected to the community as a whole, but I had a wonderful support system of friends and family. Although growing up in a small town was something I had hated when I was younger, I am grateful for the people I had with me and the memories I made.

Family

My parents weren't a part of the community we lived in despite having grown up in the same area. They worked most of the time and I have very few memories where they did anything other than sleep, watch television or read. They worked about two hours away in Gatlinburg, Tennessee, and took long hours to provide for my three older brothers and me. I mostly just remember them being tired. They were wonderful when we actually got time to do things together, such as playing *Monopoly* or listening to Dad's old-school rock. I remember sitting with my dad and watching *Dungeons and Dragons* until my brothers came home from school. I'd cuddle up to mom while we watched crime dramas. Sometimes they would join me for tea parties where the only snack was shredded cheese.

I have three older brothers. The oldest is Raiden, who is about five years older than me. He had left to live with our aunt when he was about a freshman in high school. She lived in a better area and he hoped living there would help him get into a good college. My other brothers are Michael and Matthew, twins who are about four years older than me. They were both far more athletic than me and were constantly in motion. They were both members of our school's basketball team and fostered a reputation for being hard workers.

When our parents weren't home, my brothers and I stayed with our grandmother, who we called Mamie, until we were all in our mid-teens. She's so sweet and caring, always making sure that we weren't hungry. In that house, we would want for nothing, except maybe for some more freedom to explore outside. She always worried about us getting hurt.

She lived so close to us that you could see her house from our front porch, which made sense as we lived on her land. She has a couple of barns, a chicken coop, and a shed on her

land as it used to be a fully functioning farm years before I was born. Her house is on a hill with a steep incline down one side towards the barn. I spent so much of my childhood in that old brick house my deceased grandfather had built for his wife. I could close my eyes and tell what room we were in based on the grooves in the wall. A couple of my aunts had lived there, as well as some cousins until they graduated and moved to college.

I have a cousin named Emily that was a little less than two years younger than me and lived down the road from my grandmother. She would often come over to our grandmother's and play with my brothers and me. She was also a member of our school's basketball team. We often bickered due to our personalities with hers making her more outgoing and lighthearted and mine being reclusive and nerdy. We were close though, close enough that she was basically a sister to me. Together with my brothers, we would all play and explore the area we lived in.

Keeping Entertained

Most of my memories of playing with my cousin and brothers take place from when I was about seven to twelve years old. Without the internet and after getting tired of watching television, we kids would have to find something else to keep ourselves entertained. When we were younger this consisted of playing make-believe games outside, usually during warmer weather. Mamie would worry about us getting hurt and didn't want us to leave the front yard, so if we did leave we would have to be careful about not getting caught. Sometimes we would have our own designated kingdoms and need to establish treaties or go to war. Raiden had already moved to live with our aunt in Alabama, so there were four kingdoms at this time. My cousin Emily ruled the porch, queen of the stone kingdom. Michael ruled the little parking area we had as king of a port city. Matthew ruled over the front yard as king of the earth. I was the ruler of rivers and my kingdom was down the hill and in the graveled road, at least until Mamie saw me and told me to move before I become roadkill, not that there was anyone driving that way.

When we weren't all different rulers of our kingdoms, we often were soldiers in wars. I was commonly a scout, searching and spying on the invisible enemy for my cousin as she was the queen. I would sneak around, sometimes hiding behind this giant pine tree next to the house, before reporting back my findings. My brothers would often be generals in her army and be present at our meetings. There was this old couch swing on the porch that folded out into a bed. It was usually flat if any of us were around because we would like to take naps in the warm summer weather. Sometimes we would use this to simulate a ship on rough seas. While our kingdom games usually ended in diplomacy and peace, our war games ended in a darker matter. I remember taking my last breath into my wounded body as I watched my queen's navy burn in the port. Our war was won, but at what cost?

When we didn't feel like playing make-believe, we would play a game called Manhunt, where we would hide and try to sneak away from the hunter. Depending on how we felt, sometimes the players that got out would become hunters as well, shifting the odds towards the hunter's favor. I remember running and hiding in the shed just across from my grandmother's house. It was where my grandfather's old truck was stored as well as stacks of tobacco sticks from when the farm was active. I hid behind the stack of sticks, hands over my face and holding my breath, praying I wouldn't get bit by a snake or a spider. I was usually bad at Manhunt due to my brothers' amazing abilities to guess where I hide and my horrible stamina keeping me from running fast. I hid there for around an hour before they gave up and got Mamie to come out to yell for me. I quickly left my spot to assure her I was fine, just got caught up in the game. Walking inside, I felt the guilt I had for causing my grandmother to worry, making way for the pride I got for finally winning.

If we got a heavy snowfall in the winter we would go sledding. Our cousin would join us if the roads weren't too bad. We would bundle up in about three layers of clothes with boots and gloves. We had a couple of sleds, one orange, and one purple. We would start them on top of the hill in the front yard. I would always be scared to get hurt or go too fast at first. I usually

said, "Don't push too hard please," to my brother before they pushed whoever was about to sled. Sometimes one of them would ride with me and hold on tight to make sure I wouldn't get hurt or too scared. We would zoom down the hill and scrape across the graveled road before slamming into the barn. Usually, after the first ride, I wouldn't be scared anymore and want to go again. If we wanted to go faster we would put the sled in a spot that we had already sled down. It would leave a smoother path that would let us pick up speed. We would spend hours going down the hill over and over before finally coming in and eating a warm meal that Mamie had made for us.

Exploring

Sometimes we didn't want to play anything, so we would just wander around the yard. There was this cherry blossom tree that we would climb. It was perfectly structured to be climbed with limbs low enough for us to pull up on and a wide area that was like a nest. Our grandmother would be worried about us falling out and hurting ourselves so we weren't supposed to climb it. This obviously didn't stop us from doing so and keeping an eye out for her. The only real issue with climbing the tree was the stains we would get. There were these little lines that were red and if you touched one it could leave a red mark, so after we would climb the trees we would be covered in this red dust-like stuff. We eventually learned to not let our clothes touch the bark as best as we could while climbing and to find an area with as few red spots as possible to sit. If we had stains, we would brush as much dust off as we could and try to sneak to the bathroom to wash off the rest. Most of the time we were just caught while still in the tree, scrambling to get to the ground while Mamie was on the porch worried.

Down the driveway of Mamie's and just past the driveway of my house was a honeysuckle bush. It was right next to the road at a spot where the gravel started to fall into the creek below. My cousin Emily and I would get on our bikes and ride over there whenever our grandmother was in the house. We would remove the green bottom of the blossom and pull out

the sweet nectar drop to drink. We would just stand there and drink as much as we could. The yellow ones always tasted the best to me as they were older and usually had more nectar. That bush was about the farthest we were allowed to go on our bikes due to Mamie's fear of us getting hurt or kidnapped.

Sometimes during the summer, we would catch fireflies. I would catch them and hold them in my hand, just looking at them through a crack. I think we used to put them in jars for a few minutes when I was little to look at before my parents let them go. I remember asking if I could keep them but my parents said they would die quickly, so I would just catch some to look at when I wanted to.

As I got older I began to enjoy hiking. I used to think just walking in the woods was boring. I lived in the woods all my life, why would I want to spend more time just walking in them? Part of this attitude probably came from the fact my grandmother didn't want us going up in the woods. The older I got the more I enjoyed exploring and seeing what I could find.

There was one particularly memorable hike. My family had decided to go on a hike up a nearby mountain when I was about eleven or twelve. It was about a forty-minute hike to where we were going to camp. We brought hot dogs, stuff to make smores, and our tents. It was somewhere I'd never been to before. The view was phenomenal, peering down and seeing how high we were and being even with other mountains. By the time it got dark we were all around a campfire, relaxing and making food. That quickly ended when we started to hear coyotes near us. We quietly packed up our stuff, putting out the fire. My brothers grabbed their survival knives and started leading us down. I was just quietly holding onto my mom's hand while trying not to fall due to the lack of light. My brother Matthew started talking about this movie he was watching in his high school class. It was called *The Boy In The Striped Pajamas* and he described it to Mom, also describing how it made him feel. I remember being horrified as soon as he mentioned it was about the Holocaust. As soon as he was done describing it, I decided I didn't

want to watch it because I was already tearing up at the idea of it. We made it home soon after Matthew was done horrifying my young mind. Despite the whole ordeal, I enjoyed the hike.

School

Del Rio is a very small area, meaning there aren't a lot of places to go to meet new people. Nearly all of my social life was centered around the friends that I had known since kindergarten. Though we had all joined various teams at one point, most of my friends were not inclined to play sports. When we were in the early years of elementary most of our games consisted of make-believe games, though most of these were based on some media we had read or seen. Those early years were the closest I had been to most of my classmates. Our class would all join together to have our own wolf kingdoms and fight over territory.

As the years went by, some of my friends and I were designated "gifted" students and were given special work occasionally. We were also offered to go to special classes sponsored by colleges. This began an unspoken divide between us and the rest of our class. We would still hang out with some of them and later become close friends with some, but it felt as though something fundamental had changed in the classroom. The divide was also likely helped by some of us isolating ourselves from those who didn't share our interests.

This wasn't all bad as it helped create a bond that rivaled blood ties between a boy named Noah and me. We were both part of the "gifted" program and had a shared interest in many things such as superheroes, horror, and books. Noah was very intelligent and liked to talk about new discoveries he had made. A lot of our time was just telling each other stories, Noah ones he had read and I ones I had made. We became best friends and spent nearly all of our time together. We later made other friends that would join us and grow our duo into a full group. My friend Abbey was a talented artist and a very kind person. My friend Jennifer was so outgoing and charismatic, as well as my first female crush. My friend Adrian was somewhat

more level-headed than the rest of us but was incredibly funny. We were all so excited to leave and explore the world together.

Identity

One of the hardest parts of living in a small community is figuring out your identity, mostly because of the lack of diverse views. I didn't fully realize that I was queer until around seventh grade. When I was very young I thought that it was a sin. I remember sitting on the couch at my grandmother's with some aunts and cousins. We were just watching television when a gay couple was shown on screen. My cousin reacted with disgust as she saw it as "sinful" and some of my family agreed. Their reactions to them simply existing solidified what I had thought to be all of my family's and, as most people in Del Rio are Christians, my community's views.

As I grew older I didn't really care about anyone being gay all that much other than to make jokes about it. I remember repeatedly annoying one of my friends by constantly calling him gay. This was a common joke among my classmates, likely a result of growing up in a small area with people set in their views. I left this mindset once I got regular access to the internet and found more inclusive views. I even added queer fiction to my media consumption for the next few years.

I didn't realize that my closeness with my friend Jennifer was actually a crush until about eighth grade. I just remember always wanting to be near her. We were very different and had opposite opinions on things, but no matter what she did or thought I would basically forgive her on the spot. I also had an on and off requited crush on my friend Noah but the feelings with Jennifer were something new to me.

The moment I realized I was at least partly interested in women was when I was in a grocery store with my mother, sometime when I was around thirteen years old. I saw a

Cosmopolitan magazine with Scarlett Johanson on the cover in a beautiful peach pink low cut dress with her hair in a blonde pixie cut. I remember seeing her and thinking, "Oh my God. She's gorgeous." I asked my mom if I could get the magazine and thankfully the only reaction my mom had was confusion as I was decidedly not interested in many things that society would call feminine. She agreed as she thought I was mature enough to consume media that portrayed sexual topics. I brought that magazine home and typed into a search engine on my tablet, "Am I gay?"

I came out as bisexual to my friends the next time I saw them. They didn't have much of a reaction and were all very kind about it. It wasn't their reactions I was worried about as I had figured they wouldn't mind. Mom and I were about to go out to get groceries when I stopped in front of her and Dad and told them I like girls as well as boys. It was a spontaneous decision to tell them and I remember my hands shaking slightly as I told them. They didn't have much of a reaction but were immediately supportive. I hadn't told my brothers until we were all in a car together sometime during my freshman year. They had genuinely already believed that I was a lesbian. I'm not out to everyone in my family, but I don't hide who I am anymore. It was scary to find out that you are different from people around, especially in a small town, but I had found people who became my foundation and helped me figure out who I am.

Afterthoughts

Every time I go back to my childhood home I feel a sense of ease wash over me. I have general anxiety and depression that I take meds for. I'm still working on getting over my own thoughts and worries, but when I come back to that place in the mountains it reminds me that the world is so much bigger than I know and that these thoughts don't matter. Remembering simpler times helps me stay grounded in reality. I step out of my car onto that old parking area, looking at the front yard and nothing changes. That giant pine tree I used to hide behind as a

scout is gone. There is a new tomato garden in the yard. The porch swing is gone. There are two dogs that greet me with enthusiasm.

I walk through the grass, ignoring the small brick path just like I had all of my youth. I reach the front porch and bend down to greet the cats that are descendants of my first pet. After reaching the front entrance, I pull the squeaky glass screen door open and knock on the main door. I wait and take in a deep breath of fresh air. I see Mamie come and open the door, excited to see her granddaughter. We hug and I take in the moment, remembering everything she's done for my siblings and me. I always think about how I should visit her more. We part and make our way into the living room and stay there for hours, catching up and just relaxing in front of the television. I can close my eyes and rest, being truly relaxed in this house that saw me grow and with the woman who cared for me with her own hands. The mountains aren't always beautiful or perfect. The bugs are annoying and the weather can be fickle, but the connections I made in the mountains keep me strong and made a foundation for who I am.