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FOLLOWING A FATHER'S FOOTFALLS

Love and Estrangement in the Alleghenies

I AM ALWAYS SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN PAST AND PRESENT, BIRTHED AND CROSS-FERTILIZED between Cumberland, Maryland, where I grew up, and Massachusetts, where I have lived for more than half my life. For more than three decades, I have made the 536-mile trip home to Cumberland at least every few months. And home it has remained.

Cumberland is a narrow piece of Maryland in the Allegheny region of the Appalachians, sitting alongside the infant stages of the Potomac River, wedged between West Virginia and Pennsylvania. The C&O Canal ended here. Cumberland is a passage in the mountains, where the trains loaded with coal and goods can get through the southern part of the Alleghenies without going up and down. Leo Mazzone, a National League baseball coach from Westernport, Maryland, stated

in an interview that Cumberland is a rough, tough town in Western Maryland, an old, dirty railroad town with some unique characteristics. People in the surrounding areas go into West Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania like most people go from one side of a town to another. Same mountains, same culture. We know each other's parents, each other's siblings. Being in Cumberland is like swimming into ripples of love and memories, into the blue.

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It is all about the mountains. The mountains lie in geologic ripples. All the houses, until recently, have been built in the valleys, in tightly crammed rows, mostly brick, running parallel to the base of the mountains. Like the ripples of houses and the ripples of the Alleghenies, there are ripples of stories in the Cumberland area. People's lives are tightly intertwined, and stories—that never leave the area—evolve. The stories are shaped by the mountains. There is something about the insulating quality of the mountains that makes the stories echo back into the valley. Generations pass, echo and re-echo, intertwining with the past and present. There are voices of generations that never spread out beyond the mountains. There are voices, like my own, that leave but are pulled back.

Linda's lifestyle was difficult for her family to accept. She was a stranger to them—her sexual preference, her choice of work.

I was about fourteen years old when I met Linda. We both had a quirky sense of humor about our mothers. Her mom had fifteen kids, and my mom had seven and was crippled. Although we lived only about four miles from each other, I was from Cumberland, Maryland, and she was from Wiley Ford, West Virginia. Linda's dad worked at the Kelly Springfield Tire Factory in Cumberland. My father had been in construction and was dead. Linda was nimble, a gifted athlete with a good arm, strong and close to the ground. We had different everyday friends at school, but hung around outside of school. Linda was the second child, the oldest daughter, shouldering most of the housework for her seventeen-member family.

Often I would go to Linda's house, and help her bathe, brush, and pajama all her younger siblings. And then Linda and I would go for a ride on narrow mountain backroads, talking.

We drifted apart around 1986. I knew Linda had worked in the West Virginia coal mines for a number of years, then got disgusted with the mine layoffs, and ultimately moved to Florida where she worked for a municipal water department. I didn't hear from her until early September 2007. Linda was dying of breast cancer and wanted to talk as she neared and feared death. She told me, voice cracking, that we had let twenty years go past. I told her that we couldn't fault ourselves for the loss of time, that we had never moved from the depth of our friendship. We talked on the phone frequently, about growing up, about our families, about characteristics particular to our geographic area. With Linda's permission, I took notes as she talked.

I kept myself in college playing poker. I worked for the Labor Department after I got out of Fairmont State, and then I worked in community action. In 1976, I started in the mines at \$16 an hour.

I got laid off from the mines, so I came down here to Florida and started digging ditches for a municipal water department. I made \$4.68 an hour the first year. Then when I got called back to the mines, I went back up to West Virginia and lived in the trailer I kept up there. Eventually I got laid off permanently, which forced me to stay on here in Florida.

One time in West Virginia, the mine owners hired us back on just to dig a tunnel between two mines. There was constantly dripping water; mud up to my thighs, and the equipment kept getting stuck. I did every job down underground. I finished in the mines as a "roof bolter." I would bring in the bolting machine, drill holes in the ceiling, insert

rebar and torque against the roof, then set and remove the jacks, and move on into the face of the mine, four feet at a time. It was the third highest paying job in the mine. Roof support was fake security. It was supposed to protect each person, each layer, but it didn't stop a big collapse. There was a boss and an inspector. They respected me. You know me, "If I do it, I do it right." In the mines, I got along with the guys. As long as you did the work, you were accepted. On the weekends, the guys would teach me how to run equipment. And when other jobs would come up, I would apply. That's how I kept moving up, by getting different jobs.

I worked in a lot of mines. I started as a laborer, shoveling, and learned that every mine has a story. There were old dates from the 1700s recorded on the walls in Barrackville, West Virginia. In one mine, we went 343 feet straight down, and a mile back into the mountain. The whole crew fit on a little "man-bus." It took us forty-five minutes to get to the worksite after we left ground level.

Dangerous working conditions alienated [a father and daughter] precisely because their stories were so similar.

The last part of mining is called "pillar-ing," which is when they take out the coal but leave some columns of coal to help support the roof. It is dangerous. The walls pop. Trees are used as support and they start snapping. One job I had was using wedges and setting the posts.

I liked the dynamite part. My highest paying job was setting the dynamite. We would

drill holes, called a "dummy pack," where we would connect the wires and run around a wall or a corner and yell "Fire in the hole!" It was a rush, just the smell of nitro. It was exciting, just so exciting.

Eight years I worked in the mines. Made it through the strikes and layoffs. But eight years in the mines isn't enough to get any retirement. I wished I'd never left there. It was the best job I ever had. The guys loved me.

Now, I am one of the higher-paid workers in the water department here in this Florida city. I am called a water quality specialist, one of the bosses. I have my own job title—says I'm responsible for industrial grease and surface water. I started on the ditch-digging crew and then took a demotion to get into water quality. I wrote the standard operating procedures for the tests for A&B&C water quality certifications for the state of Florida.

When I got my job promotion, they keyed my car. I was the first female boss to put in hydrants and water suppression lines. I thought about a sexual discrimination lawsuit after one particular incident, but decided not to. Filing a complaint would have cost me my job. When I was still on the ditch-digging crew as a worker, one guy on the City Council told my boss: "I've watched all the workers and she works above and beyond all of your other crew [members]. When you put the lines in our neighborhood, I want her on that crew."

The weekend after Linda died, I went home to Cumberland to grieve, to see my mama, and to be with Linda's mom and dad. I sat on their couch, talking about Linda. Mr. B. said: "I feel like I made Linda gay. She was my best athlete. I practiced constantly with her." I couldn't catch the tears as they flash-flooded down my face. "Mr. B., Linda was who she was, way before you ever threw her a ball."

Linda's lifestyle was difficult for her family to accept. She was a stranger to them—her

sexual preference, her choice of work. It was a strangeness they couldn't and wouldn't reconcile. After Linda died, I decided to interview Mr. B. about his own work.

I worked at Kelly for thirty-four years. I started in 1950. I am eighty-one now. My retirement in 1984 was voluntary. I still dream about the place. Some nights I still work an eight-hour shift. I'm surprised I've lasted this long because of the conditions I worked in. I worked all my thirty-four years without a paid absence (of one week or more) due to illness or injury.

I worked in the tube room where we cured tubes, eight tubes every five minutes. Curing takes the softness out of rubber and makes it stronger and more flexible. We cured with heat and were paid by the piece. I spent one year in curing and then got furloughed. After a nine-month layoff, I accepted a job in the Department 32 mill room which the other workers called the "black mill." It was a dungeon-type place, where they added black to the tires. I got lucky there. I got a good job sampling rubber for the lab. I would cut off a portion of each batch, to see whether the rubber was good or bad. I kept that job for a long time because sampling kept me out of lampblack.

Lampblack is the black added to rubber. It is actually "carbon black," which is pulverized carbon mixed in with rubber. Lampblack comes in fifty-pound bags. One of the worst jobs was just picking up the sacks. The operator dumped fifty pounds of lampblack into the mixer machine, and all the black dust from the bags came up in your face and all over your body. The operator who mixed that rubber got extra dirty, extra black by breathing in all the dust. The only white place on him at the end of the night was where his belt went around him.

Another problem was the "soapstone"—pulverized crystals used to keep rubber from sticking together, after the slabs of rubber have

been made and packed on skids of twenty-four hundred pounds. That was powder, too. There were a lot of grievances. Sometimes you couldn't see the guy fifteen to twenty feet away because the dust was so bad. Later, they switched to liquefied soapstone, which eliminated the dust.

Kelly workers became organized after 1950. When I first started at Kelly, I had the attitude that I didn't need the union, "I could take care of myself." But you cannot do it by yourself.

I worked every job in the mill room and retired from the department. I had run my own survey of the medical issues of workers in the mill room. There were many lung conditions that were confirmed by doctors. Most workers were afraid to write back on my survey because they feared losing their jobs. I did not get many responses. Then I figured out that, if they didn't have to give a name, they would tell me the ailment diagnosed by a doctor. Kelly told me I was not qualified to run a survey.

[Linda and I] shared a naiveté about the role that gender played in workplace dynamics.

I'm not the oldest, but I don't know many still left who worked at Kelly when I did. Many died of throat cancer, lung cancer, kidney cancer, bladder cancer. A lot of other chemicals we handled were hard on the bladder.

I had a thirty-year fight with Kelly to ventilate the middle room. They told me they couldn't ventilate where the lampblack was applied. The mill room ventilation went through a grievance procedure. The arbitrator, who was chosen by the union and the company, would agree with me, and then tell me he didn't have

the authority to make changes. The ventilation was only slightly better when I left than when I started.

I didn't see much top brass down there in the mill room. I caught one OSHA man in there looking around at lunchtime, when all the machinery was shut down. He told me he thought the place wasn't that bad at all. We never could implement changes, even though we tried several times.

When I went on vacation, I still had a black ring on my collar, even two weeks later. The lampblack was still coming out of my pores after I retired. I have more friends in the cemetery than living.

It seemed to me that Linda was Linda mostly because she was so much like her dad. Linda and her father both breathed carbon dust. Both worked in unusually dangerous, unhealthy conditions. Both were hardworking and scrupulously honest. Both were proud of the paperwork they produced. Both sought to change their workplace environments—for Mr. B. it was the working conditions, and for Linda it was to prove that there were women competent enough to operate the equipment, endure the conditions, and surmount the attitudes that women were unable to hold their own in the mines.

This father-daughter story prompted me to think about layers of separation. I was struck by the degree to which fathers and daughters can become strangers to one another. When I asked Mr. B. what he knew about Linda's years in the coal mines, he said he knew very little. When I asked him how he felt about Linda working in the mines, his response was "strange." What distance could have come between a father and daughter who played ball together, a coach and his athlete? Did the depth of this separation stem from the daughter's sexuality? But wasn't there work-related distance as well? It was hard for Mr. B. to understand how someone with a college degree would have chosen to work in

carbon soot, breathing in the black stuff every workday, shift after shift. Choosing coal dust was too untenable a decision in Mr. B.'s eyes. The danger that came with the mine working conditions was not something he admired Linda for enduring. The dangerous working conditions alienated the two precisely because their stories were so similar.

There are many of us in the Alleghenies who share similar stories—offspring who admire their parents' work identities, who feel drawn to similar work, probably seeking some kind of affirmation from the parents we are emulating. I, too, chose to follow a path similar to my father's, to become a licensed master electrician, to work in a male-dominated environment—making what seemed to be a comfortable choice, only to find a strangeness in my work environment that my father did not have to endure. In the electrical trade, in which transmission of information between workers is crucial, I failed to anticipate the debilitating power that gender had in isolating me so profoundly from healthy journeyman/apprentice relationships. Linda and I both underestimated the resistance that would come with following in our fathers' footsteps. She and I were accustomed to and at ease in the company of males, and physically confident about our abilities to perform the work required of us. We shared a naiveté about the role that gender played in workplace dynamics.

Linda and I each sought acceptance from our fathers, thinking that choosing a similar work environment would somehow minimize our distances. Linda's distance stemmed from her sexual identity. My distance was created by a dead father who had associated my birth with my mother being crippled. We both craved a connection. Gender, sexual identity, and time can all cloud filiation, making for a strangeness instead of a connection. Neither Linda nor I, as the children of tradespeople, could go to our fathers for the comfort of sharing similar generational journeyman/apprentice

experiences that fathers and sons have shared over the ages.

Linda is gone now. She loved the mines because she was able to crawl over the gender hump underground. She was too conscientious a worker to be isolated. The dark danger of the mines allowed her to shine. She felt accepted.

A college degree entitles us to leave the mountains, to go beyond our parents. But by choosing not to leave the mountains, or staying close to the mountains through our work, we create ripples in the very fabric we love and

identify with—our fathers. Mr. B. and I have crisscrossed in time, and our friendship has become almost familial.

These stories, mingled with other stories, swirl about, cross-fertilizing. Whatever the path, this much I know: Our voices lift up from the valley, up the sides of the mountains before echoing back into the valley, to blend with the railroad whistles and ripples of other voices. The voices are layers of generations within houses, muffled stories locked in a time that is strange to those who live out beyond the mountains.