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Big Mama and the Uncertain Leap

Kelly Dorgan

I live in a place that evokes fear, a place deformed by layers and layers of pulse-racing images, of intoxicating whiskey-dark stories.

Similar to the physical formation of my homeland, the southern part of the Appalachian range, there has been a collision above the surface: the clashing contradictory binaries about nobility and savagery mirror the ancient collision of plates that thrust the mountain chain up and out. Sharp words and dirty tales about this land have deposited themselves like layers of sediment and rock, creating a sooty narrative. For most of my life, I've observed that (re)creation: watching movies and cartoons, reading books and magazines, all showing me what others thought us to be—whisper-thin, gun-toting, gummy-mouthed, and above all, hostile and ignorant.

As I write this, I'm thinking I too would have been terrified of Southern Appalachia if I hadn't spent the bulk of my life here. I evolved from child to adult in this place, and I understand what William Schumann explains in *Appalachia Revisited: New Perspectives on Place, Tradition, and Progress*. He tells us that places get made by human interactions across time in a physical space. This home of mine got made, in part, by others' stories. In response, I offer my own, defying and revising what's been told (and not told).

When I talk about my place, I often start by telling about the marvels here. Time and again, I've watched a cloak of clouds cover blue ridges, making them disappear. I've seen mist, translucent as dragonfly wings, swallow towns whole. I've also been baptized by rainwater pouring from oak leaves and been reborn in pitch-black caves. I wish others could absorb this world as I have, especially those who add to the layers of stories about Southern Appalachia.

That's why I'm compelled to write this tale about Big Mama, acknowledging the fear of leaping into an unknown world, but the necessity of doing just that.

On a Saturday early in September, my husband and I leave our home in Northeast Tennessee and drive toward our destination in Western North Carolina. Fixing to meet friends for a zip lining adventure, we take a familiar route: a blue highway that passes farms, pastures, and a country store that's been shut down and reopened so many times that, for me, it now stands as a metaphor for stubborn perseverance.

Along the way, we roll by a rusty trailer that's precariously perched at the side of the road. There's a rebel flag draped from its roof, flowing down the metal siding, running the length of a twin mattress—about as wide too. No matter how many times I come this way, I wince, privately wanting to make that flag vanish, silently knowing that this one scene exemplifies how many view the entire region.

Next comes the church. Of course, we've already driven by almost a half-dozen churches, and a large evangelical Christian camp, but this one always snags my eye. It's small, picturesque, almost welcoming, and topped with a red roof the color of a holly berry in winter. Really, it's the sign that draws at me. Like the church itself, the sign is pretty, blazing white with a pleasing shape; its black block letters remind me of fun costume jewelry, plastic and chunky. What gets me, though, are the sign's messages. Previously, those cute blocky letters have spelled out: "MARRIAGE MEANS ONE MAN ONE WOMAN." Thankfully, today there's no rankling message, only an announcement about an upcoming celebration. I'm relieved and refocus my eyes on the road.

The highway ahead resembles a backroad, pinched in and riddled with switchbacks, accommodating the swollen land. Overhead, the sky is nearly eradicated by tree-topped granite slopes. About ten minutes more of driving, depending on traffic, the world opens itself wide, revealing distant mountains, rounded and blue-gray like breaching hunchback whales under fat clouds. Quickly, everything closes in again, another granite wall blocking our view. This alternate narrowing and widening continues for the entirety of the route; it's the way of many Southern Appalachian roadways, perhaps the way of many Appalachians themselves, an ongoing opening up and closing off to the larger world.

To drive in Southern Appalachia means encountering the contradictions of this place. In some ways, we appear to have retained some of the cultural features described in 20th century nonfiction. Books like Horace Kephart's *Our Southern Highlanders* and Jack Weller's *Yesterday's People* famously (infamously) depicted us as suspicious of "furriners" and isolated. Many of the roadways I travel do little to counter the early conclusions about my rich and complex homeland. Like this morning, we slip through remote towns, several stores shuttered and houses crumbling—churches, however, are well kept. Soon, though, we enter a resort town, one ringed by ski slopes and peppered with fancy boutiques, quaint brew houses, and luxurious wineries and restaurants.

After over an hour of driving, we make a right onto a common, everyday street. It's state-maintained, nothing remarkable to the eye. But I've been here before, many times, so I know where that road leads. Into a wilder world.

Even before I see or hear it, the creek announces itself by making the air portly, water-logged. And there's a spicy tang at the back of my throat, placed there by the fragrance of perpetually damp rocks. When our car's tires hit the bridge, the inflated rubber produces a rhythmic moaning, a sound that's pitifully small when released into the wild.

Suddenly, the road bends—a dramatic contortion to make way for the rhododendron-lined embankment. Trees loom, casting a heavy shadow, shading the green, cloistered world with gray hues. Right here, I sense I've crossed into a sanctuary; I'm instantly sheltered and renewed. For others, though, this enclosed physical space suffocates.

"Claustrophobic," my mother used to say of the Southern Appalachian woodlands.

The road squeezes inward, shifting from pavement to gravel. We come to another turn, one as sharp as a cat's claw; it forces any approaching driver to swing the car wide to avoid tumbling down the steep slope on the left side while avoiding ramming into the steep (upward) slope on the right. Taking this turn also entails listening to a percussion-like symphony. Rocks *rat tat tat* against the car's frame. The steering wheel thuds when cranked one direction, then the other. The tires crunch, rattle, and roll the gravel.

We cross another creek before reaching a rut-free parking lot and cutting the car's engine. We're at the edge of the wilderness.

In the manicured graveled lot, I pick up the low murmuring of zip line guides, all college-age males, at least the ones we see (later, we'll meet the lone female). Methodically and without haste, the employees lay out clunky harnesses, the straps wide and tan, pulleys and carabiners hulking. These cumbersome contraptions look more suited to securing a mule to a plow than a human to a cable.

After stretching our legs and chatting in the wooden welcome center, we gather around the guides, forming an uneven crescent. Directed by men half our age, we tussle with our harnesses, awkwardly securing them around our aging bodies, all before piling into an ATV. The loud four-wheeler takes off, piercing the surrounding forest, running along what resembles an old logging road. It's constricted and rutted, almost inhospitable to human trespassers.

Perched in the back on the four-wheeler's bench seat, I watch the woodland fold in and witness the return of what I regard as a deeply feminine land. Fecund and lush, this place is curvaceous—curves that could be easily eradicated in the name of “progress.” This is the land that I love, but historically it's been characterized by a kind of jagged masculinity—with narratives, photos, and movies populated by moonshiners, coalminers, racers, hunters, and preachers. I grew up on Richard Chase's *The Jack Tales*, and my schools celebrated males on football fields and basketball courts. And when Sundays arrived, men—fiery and spontaneous or refined and polished—delivered the sermons. By college, I'd gotten so accustomed to the overwhelming masculinity that defined this place that I didn't even notice how the sole statue looming over the university campus was a defiant mountaineer, male.

Here, representations of women were largely invisible, and if visible, were not center stage. I take heart in books like Connie Park Rice and Marie Tedesco's *Women of the Mountain South: Identity, Work, and Activism*, appreciating how there's an effort underway to (re)imbue our stories with a feminine presence. In my Southern Appalachia, though, when women and girls appeared, they were often clustered at the

margins, their gaze downward, featured as backup or audience for a performing male. Instead of tales about females adding to the layers and layers of narration about this place, they seemed buried way underneath.

Over time, however, I came to see in wild, untamed Southern Appalachia what I didn't see in the populated spaces. Throughout my childhood, I crawled under rhododendron and mountain laurel shrubs, my back and hindquarters caressed by firm limbs, and imagined I was taking refuge beneath verdant skirts. In my twenties, I slipped into the narrow openings of caves—moist, dark slits—enveloped by a pungent, raw aroma.

Eventually a greater truth emerged: My place had been defined instead of me defining my place. I've spent most of my adult life trying to rectify that.

Hopping off the ATV, we hike up a razor-sharp slope to the foot of a wooden tower that rises some 20 feet. The harvested timbers erupt from an unruly mix of soil, and leaves are strewn with decaying bark and discarded limbs.

Standing at the foot of the tower silvered by time and elements, I notice the zip lines overhead. The galvanized cables stretch from tree to tree. Other than those lines, and the tower and tree platforms, there is little evidence up here that humankind exists. Absent are the grinding sounds of mechanized humanity. No hum of traffic. No roar of 24-hour news. No whirl of computers. No thumping base from a sound system or wail of an over-processed voice. At this point, my feet sinking into the spongy forest floor, I more clearly see what John Alexander Williams describes in *Appalachia: A History*: “To Euro-Americans without a naturalist’s eye for abundance, the forests of Appalachia were full of foreboding: dark places, savage, untamed,” adding, “even people who look on wilderness as benign see the woods as ‘natural,’ ‘primitive,’ and ‘unchanged by man.’”

Herein lies the present-day cultural contradiction of Southern Appalachia. As the Appalachian Regional Commission points out, the entire region spans over 200,000 square miles, covering thirteen states and over 400 counties. Today alone, just to reach this exact place in the world, we have traveled through two cities (one midsize, one smaller) and through multiple towns—several home to colleges and universities. We

passed all those roadside churches, ubiquitous as chicory, brew houses with their hipster patrons, and wineries with their mountain chic decor.

Living here, I've learned that to face "foreboding" Southern Appalachia means to see, experience, and tell about all the layers that form us, including those that have been covered up.

Here we come to the overdue but all-too-brief introduction of Big Mama.

Under a crystal-blue September sky, there are two time-eroded mountains: neighbors for millions of years. Each peak is generously covered by an extensive deciduous forest and sprinkled with shaggy-trunked conifers. Over eons, the perkiness of these two mountains has been smoothed by rainstorms and wind gusts; they've become rounded, almost genial looking compared with younger, sharper ranges.

Leashing together these neighboring peaks is a single galvanized cable anchored to the tower on which I'm standing. The cable extends 1,600 feet to the other mountain. What I don't know until later is that this cable starts high on my end, dips in the center, and rises back up, connected on the other side to a seasoned tree and the wooden platform secured around its trunk.

U-shaped, the zip line is designed for riders to zoom through a slim window in the densely clustered trees and soar over the landscape, gaining speeds of upwards of 50 miles per hour. Below, some 300 feet down, spreads a lovely valley, a stretch of grassy land that's briefly interrupted by a modest dirt road.

The whole kit and caboodle—the cable-attached mountains—has been christened Big Mama, one of the biggest, longest, and scariest zip lines in the area.

Only a short time before, I finished practicing on the zip lines designated for training, feeling victorious, prematurely. Then, I saw Big Mama. She's breathtakingly beautiful, stunningly voluptuous, and utterly humbling. Standing before her, I'm petrified, literally trembling.

“I don’t want to do this. I don’t want to do this,” I mumble, my voice shaking along with my hands, legs. My face is hot, my scalp crawling as if infested with dark, writhing things.

Instantly, I un-know everything about my place. I recognize nothing but fear, my love for my homeland replaced by terror and an overwhelming need to flee back to somewhere safe and certain.

That’s when I decide.

I take my uncertain leap into an unknown world, and I hope, in spite of all the fear, others will follow.