

Writing About Oneself, ENGL 455
Professor Anne Fadiman

Title: Blue Ridge Bounty

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When she was seven years old, my mom found a dead body in the woods.

I learned the story in pieces, over a period of nearly fifteen years. It began as we were driving along a winding mountain highway near the town where she grew up. Our old white Kia shuttled along the gravel roads, and we passed a decrepit steel water tower in the woods to our right.

Look, Mama, what's that?

She looked out the window where I pointed and shuddered.

Oh God, Abby, don't do that. I don't like water towers.

Are you afraid of them?

I guess I am.

She found the body on her aunt's property, in one of the ambiguous townships in the Appalachian foothills. She was playing with her brother in the woods, running alongside a creek near the side yard. My mother saw a man, laying face down among the mud and broken brambles. She recognized him, a friend of her father's, and called his name. She stepped closer, and the rest I have to imagine. It was winter. I am left to wonder if it was too cold for the gnats, or if they landed upon his decaying, still damp face and drank from the water at his eyelashes.

Was it too cold for mildew, for the smell of decay? Or did she attribute it to the blanket of pine needles that muffles every sound and smell in those forests?

Why are you afraid of water towers?

I don't want to tell you. You'll think I'm silly.

Did you try to climb them?

I'm afraid of what could be inside.

The man was a friend of my grandpa's and a fellow dealer. Almost entirely marijuana, although when weed gets too expensive, most dealers try crystal at some point. It's easier to grow. That was all they sold until September 11, 1985, when Andrew Thornton, a convicted drug smuggler, was flying over the Blue Ridge mountains with a fresh shipment of cocaine from Colombia. He was tipped off by associates that his plane was going to be confiscated upon arrival. He panicked. He began dumping pounds of cocaine over the mountains, bricks of white powder that sometimes exploded in the air and fell like snow. He parachuted out in Kentucky, with 88 pounds more of cocaine strapped to his chest and back. He died on impact.

A few days later, a black bear began terrorizing the backyards of those living on the outskirts of Blairesville. People marveled and shot at the bear they saw stumbling into their clotheslines, leaving scratches in their porches, and behaving altogether like a damn fool.

My grandpa must have recognized the symptoms of a bear on a bender. He gathered my mom and her brother into their car and drove low and slow along the backroads. My mom asked him where they were going and he replied "hiking". She remembers him being so focused on the trees, that at one point, one of the car's wheels went off the road and was stuck for a moment, paddling through the air like a duckling without a pond. Eventually, he got out and walked into the woods alone. "Alright kids," he said when he got back in. "We're leaving."

He and two of his closest friends were able to track the bear's path of destruction to find 40lb of cocaine, littering the forest floor in busted bundles like so many presents on Christmas morning. What the bear hadn't so rudely consumed, they gathered. Coke is a rich man's drug--it almost never makes it down to the Blue Ridge mountains outside of resorts. And it was worth a lot.

They started dealing between the three of them, tapping into their network of regulars. Until one of the friends came to my grandpa and asked to borrow a gun. "I don't feel safe at night, man, I have a feeling this guy is onto me." My grandpa gave him one of his old rifles.

A few days later, the third friend showed up dead in a ditch on my great-aunt's property. Shot with the bullets from my grandpa's gun.

The police took my grandpa in for questioning. My mom remembers answering questions, too, although she doesn't remember who was asking them. Apparently, one of the most compelling pieces of evidence for my grandpa's innocence was the fact that his seven year old daughter was the one who found the body. What kind of decent man would let his kid go play in the woods where he hid a body, after all.

The friend confessed. My grandpa was free to go. My mom says she remembers the man taking a plea deal for a less severe charge (a hunting accident, I'm sure it was, you know how old guns without a proper safety can be). My mom once saw him driving back and forth, on the street outside their house. Out early on good behavior.

Where did the money go? I asked her once. Oh, two of her siblings got encephalitis in the same year after a round of chicken pox. The money went almost entirely to their hospital bills. My aunt still has no peripheral vision out of her left eye. We used to sneak up on her all the time, as kids. We could never sneak up on my mom.

Inside? What could be inside? Water?

It sounds stupid, but when I was a kid, I used to be afraid there were people inside.

People? Like living in there?

Just...people.

My mom doesn't watch horror movies. She skipped the death scene in the Lion King every time. I never went on a walk alone until I came to college. She told me about sexting and how to watch out for pedophiles online before I got my period or my first phone. She wanted to know all of my friends' parents before I was allowed to sleep over. I never went on a date in high school. Everywhere I went, she saw water towers.

Last time I was home, we told the story again, and she laughed while pulling at loose threads on her couch with her left hand.

It was kind of horrible, wasn't it? But why are you laughing?

Oh, honey, you can either laugh or you can cry. But you can't do both at the same time.

We did.