

## WATCHING THE BLUE RIDGE

A couple of weeks ago I took a Friday off of work to go to the mountains with Katie. We left as soon as I finished up on Thursday, and headed to Hendersonville, NC. Katie was thrilled. All she knew was that we were going to the mountains, that we were going to stay in a hotel (anyplace that isn't home is a hotel to Katie), and that it was just going to be Katie and Daddy, which meant – among other things - that she could have all the Cheetos she wanted, and probably other contraband substances too wonderful to imagine – things like buttered popcorn and Starbursts – maybe even Gummie Worms. She was as excited as if it had been Christmas – almost as excited as I was.

We stayed at this beautiful bed and breakfast called The Echo Mountain Inn. It's well over 100 years old, built mostly of rocks, and sits way back on a ridge overlooking the town of Hendersonville and the surrounding area. I had been there several times before – mostly to rest up and to write. For that purpose, it's the best place I've ever been, but this was not a writing trip – not a time for remembering. This was a time for making memories.

We arrived at the inn well after dark, but fortunately we had already eaten our dinner in the car as we rode. The innkeeper had left our key in an envelope at the desk, so we found our room, unloaded the van, and settled down to check the TV listings. "Apollo 13" turned out to be a great father-daughter movie. Katie was fascinated, and I remembered. I remembered the black & white TV sets on carts in the classrooms at school, and I remembered how we waited and hoped and prayed that those guys would make it back. It was almost as if the world held its breath. "When will we go to the moon again?" Katie asked at one point. "I don't know, Sweetheart," I said; "Right now most people don't see it as being particularly important. Space travel is very expensive, and they'd rather spend the money doing other things, I think." "Oh", she said in a voice laced with disappointment. I understood that very well. Our retreat from space has been a disappointment to me for the last 30 years.

We had a great night's sleep and woke up early. After baths and clean clothes, we headed down to the dining room. We had a homestyle breakfast of bacon, eggs, and hashbrowns at a table situated in a bay window. From our seats we had a panoramic view of the mountain ranges to the northeast of Hendersonville – the ones some people call the Black Mountains - and as we sat there, mildly high on the smell of frying bacon and fresh-brewed coffee, I recalled some lines from a poem that I had read back during my days at Wofford College, written by a fellow named Ed Minus.

"Five windows wide, less than half a pane high,  
The Blue Ridge tapes the piedmont to the sky."

and later,

"Carl Sandburg rested and tended goats;  
F. Scott Fitzgerald came down to dry out.

Thomas Wolfe grew up alone;  
Sidney Lanier died breathing blue stone.”

It would have been easy to sit there all morning with “Good Old Boys Like Me” playing over and over in my head, but that would have to wait for another day. We loaded our things into the van, said our good-byes to the owners of the inn, and headed on up I-26 toward Asheville. The leaves were several days past their peak of color, but still very nice. Katie was singing along with a Smokey Robinson song from the soundtrack of “The Big Chill”, and I was happy, nearly to bursting, to be out and rolling on such a gorgeous morning. Without saying a word, I set my thoughts on Mt. Mitchell and turned onto the Blue Ridge Parkway.

We took our time. The Parkway was almost empty, like it was back in the 60’s, and we stopped at every overlook. We swapped pictures of one another and told stories and gained elevation. As we turned into one overlook we saw a wild turkey running across the road just in front of a car that was leaving the overlook. He barely made it. Katie remarked that he was getting ready for Thanksgiving – by running away. When I had almost stopped laughing I said, “That’s a good one, Sweetie.” “Yeah”, she replied with a big smile on her face, “I get two points for that.” At Craggy Gardens, a normally crowded picnic area, there was only one other vehicle. Kate and I ran and played and rolled on the thick grass like a couple of kids, and for a few precious moments I forgot that I am fifty-two years old.

Above 4000 feet there was no color in the leaves, only the various tones of brown and grey that follow the russets and golds and reds and yellows of autumn. In a shaded curve we stopped, and I snapped a picture of Katie in front of a virtual waterfall of icicles, many of which were longer than she is tall. The photo has the appearance of a storybook illustration or a scene from the Superman movie, but it was just a two minute drive-by on the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Above 5000 feet the leaves themselves were gone, or nearly so, and we no longer looked up at the clouds over the valleys. We were now on their level, and for the first time I think, Katie conceded that we were actually in the mountains. We took a short hike up onto a bare knoll and looked back down the Parkway where we had been. The mountains rolled out in all directions, but the highest ones still lay in front of us.

At the parking lot on top of Mt. Mitchell, at about 6500 feet, it was 41 degrees – just a couple of degrees below the year-round average - under a bright, though a bit hazy sky with almost no wind – nice enough for a picnic on the highest point east of the Rockies, and practically unheard of in November. Katie had all her favorite foods: macaroni & cheese, biscuits from Bojangles – even her beloved Cheetos - with Starbursts for dessert. And just like at breakfast several hours earlier, we had a view from this table too. From there, we looked down on the clouds, on the other mountains, and on nearly everything else. I had a very distinct feeling of being on top of the world, but then again, I’d felt that way all day.

Beyond Mt. Mitchell, the Parkway was already closed for the winter, and by now, the Mitchell park itself is closed. It will sleep undisturbed until bear cubs and Boy Scouts wake it up in the spring. The mid-afternoon shadows stretched out long and thin as I pointed the van to the southwest and headed for lower elevations. Katie didn't make it very far. She was sound asleep well before we reached I-26, and she didn't awaken until we were on I-485 somewhere east of I-77, just a few miles from home. While she slept, I had time to reflect on the day - how exceptionally good it had all been, and to consider the Thanksgiving holiday just coming up on the horizon. "What did I have to be thankful for?" I thought with a smile as a multitude of blessings rolled through my mind: a day off of work to be with Kate; a long ride on the Parkway with no traffic; mild temperatures; breath-taking scenery; good food; a dependable vehicle; the happy, healthy, and frighteningly intelligent and funny kid asleep in the backseat; that beautiful road through the Blue Ridge with the same number of Starbucks and Walmarts that it had when I was growing up; the mountains themselves; the road home; my family; memories – lots of memories. I thought of my Grandma Padgett's last visit to the mountains. Four carloads of us went along, and we had lunch together at Craggy Gardens. That must have been twenty years ago. Grandma always said that it was the most beautiful place on earth, but I don't think she ever traveled outside of the Carolinas. Now I've been around the world, seen black sand beaches and the spring in New England, but still so far, I've seen nothing to prove Grandma wrong.

As I rolled down the interstate through the night, I carefully added one more footnote to my Blue Ridge Mountains memories file:

Craggy Gardens – November 3, 2006. Dean and Katie rolled on the ground and laughed together. They were both five years old.

Dean Greene  
Thanksgiving 2006