

## My Blue Ridge Beatitude

*One night a demon stole my soul. The emptiness felt inside was violent and gnawing. There was a breadth of restlessness and a depth of anxiety beyond comprehension. My mind was distraught. Sheer terror. I was hospitalized briefly, but for a long time my head was like a television set with no reception. Just static...*

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Without doubt, I was broken when I arrived in Pisgah Forest, North Carolina. But, my spirit stirred, just a little, when I learned that, in the Old Testament, *Pisgah* was the name of the mountain ridge from which Moses was able to see the Promised Land. For a body trying to rekindle its soul, there was a flicker of assurance that I might just be in the right place.

We made a home, Michael and I, in a little red cabin in the woods, hidden among the hemlocks and yellow poplar trees. Here I find calm in the sweet repeat of the toad and jack-in-the-pulpit patterned wallpaper I chose to hang in our bedroom. Here I fall asleep in the lair of my black bear, warm in his chest hair - Michael, uncomplicated and constant. Love heals.

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Through the cabin window I learn the forest's most important lesson - *to everything there is a season*. Trees resting dormant in the dead of winter, fiddleheads on ferns uncoiling in spring time, fireflies glowing on hot summer nights, and in the fall, fruits and seeds falling with the autumn leaves. Each of the four seasons is so perfectly represented here in Western North Carolina. The earth's tilt, as she circles the sun, writes this rhythmic quatrain. How beautiful is that? My unbalanced heart seeking balance wherever. I'm grateful. Nature heals

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In town, Mayor Jimmy owns the hardware store. Here the wise and experienced creaks in the wooden floor lead you to exactly what you're looking for. On the other side of the street, brothers, one a bit rough, one a bit smooth, in their matching white coats, cut hair in their barbershop. "Who'd you get this time, Michael?" Ricky? Or Randy?

Further up the road, Stella Trapp, editor and publisher of the local newspaper, stands steady like a ship's captain, under the masthead of, *The Transylvania Times*. Juggling

the headline, the byline, the scope and the angle, she carefully curates the stories that chart the course for the county. While over on the courthouse steps, the self ordained Reverend, dressed in his brown thrift store suit, preaches from his Bible without ever even opening it; everyone hearing, but is anyone listening?

Just two doors down from us, Mossin' Annie, our neighbor, dresses in purple from head to toe everyday, without exception. Like a woodland nymph, she rescues mats of green moss from encroaching development, and then installs her magical moss gardens for lucky people near and far. Across the valley, our British friend, Jan, invites us over for holiday buffets. Her sausage rolls with HP Sauce, reminding me of every childhood party I went to growing up in England. She affectionately calls us "the boys."

All Individuals, yes, but join imaginary dots over their heads, and dot to dot they create the picture of community. I'm a dot too. Community heals.

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Weekdays, the rising sun bids me drive eastward on highway 64 to work. After my usefulness has been used up, the setting sun bids me drive home westward on highway 64. I smile with the curves in the road; bracing myself for the dips and rises I feel the contours of the land in me. After 17 years I know the choreography to match this topography very well.

When spiraling bands of rain fall from a fizzled out hurricane, dumping its last hurrah, I anticipate just how far the swollen French Broad River will flood the furrowed fields. Am I right? Usually. When I stare at a herd of deer on a frosty embankment they stare right back at me, and remind me that I'm as much a part of the landscape as they.

Saturdays find me sitting in the Blue Ridge Bakery on Broad Street, with my favorite raspberry scone. Contentment is found at the intersection of sweets received and gratitude expressed. And through the bakery window, I might catch sight of the Reverend, Bible in hand, barreling towards the courthouse, just as he should be.

On Sundays I kneel with my pew mates at church, spaced out in rows like beads on an abacus. Counting our blessings, or depending on the kind of week, accounting for our sins.

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Many seasons pass, for real transformations take time. But as rhythms and routines establish, as patterns start repeating, and rituals take hold, a quiet miracle occurs. It could have gone unnoticed, but now the static in my head has cleared I'm more finely tuned, so I do notice. I notice that my pulse has aligned with the pulse of Pisgah Forest. There's a word for this kind of harmony - *entrainment*.

It really is a thing! In the 17th century a Dutch scientist, Christiaan Huygens, observed this phenomenon. Place a clock with a swinging pendulum on a shelf and then place a second clock with a swinging pendulum side by side on the same shelf. Even though their pendulums start out swinging at different times, in due course they synchronize and begin swinging in perfect unison opposite one another. An energy transfer from the *shared shelf* performs this magic. Physics writes the best poetry. And time heals.

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I'm sitting at a cherished overlook gazing across the mountains, ridge beyond ridge singing an ever distant, ever fading, different note of blue. The echoes reverberate back a billion years, so geologists say. I can somehow hear harp strings as my eyes pluck each successive ridge.

Swooping into view a peregrine falcon calls out, "Have you heard the good news?" "And what might that be?" My heart inquires, to which the tall grass whispers reassuringly, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," And the mountains lovingly respond, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

If not heaven, it's pretty close I think, as I fully acknowledge my Blue Ridge beatitude. More importantly, I can feel it in my soul.

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*There's no better place to ponder than a mountain top. Up there distance and perspective bring things into view. Perhaps there was no demon all those years ago. But the terror was real - real enough to get my attention, (nothing like being locked in a psych' ward to get your attention!) And the breakdown? It was a turning point, a redirect, a reset. The emptiness? Well, that made room for growth.*