



Nothing Ordinary: Reflections From Nameless Creek

Chapter One, Part One Finding Our Place

My mother never lived anywhere but town and always said wistfully that she was born with 'country' in her blood. I was born with the mountains in mine.

The year was 1974. I know I must have looked foolish that balmy October night, sitting in front of our Birmingham apartment in an Eddie Bauer down jacket. Soon, I'd be going where the weather suited my clothes and I had already left my native Alabama in my mind.

That parka on a too-warm southern evening was a vestment of possibility and it wrapped me in our

future. That night began the metamorphosis of new belonging—from past to future; from south to north. In the pink glow of my home town at night, I traveled hopefully ahead to December when we would pack and go, into the high places of southwest Virginia. There would be wonderful darkness there and we would know the constellations. We would hear the winds of real northern winters blowing and see clear creeks flowing. Beyond the smell of exhaust fumes in the heart of town, I could smell the sweet air of those mountain realms where we'd be moving soon. Ann and I and our infant daughter were bound for Virginia and for our future. It had called to us, and we had answered. I was leaving home to find it.

I had been offered and accepted a teaching job in Wytheville in southwest Virginia. It was snowing when we arrived in the U-Haul and I was wearing my Eddie Bauer parka. We stayed there twelve years, and they were good years for us, mostly. We had a constant group of friends and lifelong jobs if we wanted them. I taught in the biology department at the community college and Ann was a pharmacist at the local hospital. Our kids were happy. We had acquired a familiarity with the lay of the land and had a clear sense of our place in it. Soon we moved to our first little farm on Greasy Creek outside town and things were good. Maybe they were too good, too easy.

Sometimes it seems we have to rock our own boat just to test our balance and remember how to swim. When we seem headed away from the course we think we're meant to follow, we allow the push of avoidance and the pull of attraction to other places, other possible lives, to capsize our unstable craft and toss us overboard. We swim in the dark, with faith that our feet will find new and better land under them before we give out, find solid ground closer to our true destination, eventually. We abandoned Virginia in 1987 and found a kind of temporary shore once again in Alabama, where we stayed long

enough for me to replace my old career in teaching with my new one in physical therapy.

Two years later, we left Birmingham the second time. With a physical therapist license, I could find work and we could make our home most anywhere in the country that we wanted. We chose Asheville as the center of our search, and spent two years in Sylva, North Carolina at the gateway to the Smokies and then seven in Morganton, in the shadow of Grandfather Mountain. It seemed I could live and work anywhere—as long as there were mountains in view. But after all that time as tar heels, as our children began to fledge, we felt those persistent currents of belonging were carrying us back to Virginia. Ann imagined a white farmhouse waiting for us there—“A house with double porches and a creek nearby” she dreamed out loud. We longed for roots, and the mountains of Carolina were beautiful. But they didn’t hold the soil where we were meant to grow in the autumn of our lives. Virginia did.

When we made our first exploratory trip to Floyd County early in 1996, we knew nothing about it beyond what one can see from looking at a map. It lies within the Blue Ridge mountain range and stands on a plateau that falls off sharply on its northeast end toward Roanoke. It drops even more sharply down the escarpment south of the Blue Ridge Parkway that forms the county’s entire southern border. There is no national forest in the county. There are no airports, no interstates, few villages and one major intersection and a traffic light in the town of Floyd, population 400. It seemed unlikely that there would be a job there for me, I thought as we quickly passed through the one busy intersection in town: no entertainment; no culture; nothing to do. I wasn’t encouraged.

And so it was no small surprise in early July of ‘97 to find myself living alone in a cabin on Walnut Knob, just off the Parkway. The next day, I would begin work as manager of a physical therapy outpatient

clinic in town. Across the street from 'my' clinic was the Country Store—long-time home of the Friday Night Jamboree. I could see Ralph cutting hair, or playing the guitar with the boys if things were slow, over in the barbershop in the heart of downtown Floyd. All of this was no more than a hundred feet from that single traffic light that I'd snickered at the first time we drove through the sleepy community a few months earlier.

So. We had established our relocation base camp back in Virginia. We'd pitched our tent here (or at least I had) but it would take an eagle to give us hope that we'd find in Floyd the permanent home we had been longing for all our years together.

In May, 1999, we began work on the century-old farmhouse on Goose Creek in the can't-get-there-from-here northeast corner of the county. We undertook the work with a growing confidence that we were watering roots that would go deep and endure. Could it be possible that this was our last move, our ultimate destination all along? Just then, the PT clinic in Floyd was closed down—not the last professional disappointment I would suffer in our new chapter. I began seeing home health patients in the county and was able to stop by and help with the reconstruction several times a day.

It was a busy six months getting the house ready. First, a new foundation went in—an under-girding for the long haul, a new stability in our lives; then, a new front porch went up on the sunny south side—a welcoming invitation to sit and talk. New windows went in all around and the house filled with light. Two woodstoves gave the promise of warm winter nights by the fire. Wiring and indoor plumbing were added for the first time; and from within this venerable old house built almost exactly the year that the telephone was invented, I would have an internet connection to the larger world.

By November, the workmen had made a couple of rooms livable for us and we moved from Walnut Knob to Goose Creek. Ann wanted to give the place a name. She called it 'Heres Home.' I hoped that she was right.