

My Side of the Mountain

I sat in the car, waiting for the ride to end. It was a sunny Sunday in the middle of November, one of those unseasonably warm days when everyone proclaims that this winter would be a mild one. My sister sat next to me, napping loudly. Up in the front of the car, my mom gazed out the window, and my dad whistled under his breath as he drove. We'd been driving for almost two hours, and personally, I was sort of sick of it. Where I come from, which is densely-populated Edison, New Jersey, you don't need to drive anywhere for longer than five minutes. Moving to Virginia over the summer was a completely unexpected twist, like someone had jiggled up my insides and then put them back in the wrong places. A large part of me missed the Garden State. So far, Virginia had been relatively boring. Most of all, it didn't feel like home.

As our silver Toyota ambled along the highway, I noticed a change in the scenery. Towering apartment buildings morphed into small houses painted in endearing pastel colors. Trademarked supermarkets turned into rusty grocery stores, and paved streets into bumpy dirt roads.

I rolled down my window and stuck my hand out the window, letting the thick swirls of air wrap around it. Even though the school year was just getting started, this week had been particularly brutal; essays piled on top of projects and worksheets. I wanted to go home to Jersey where I knew all the kids in my grade and every teacher on a how-are-your-kids-doing basis. My preconceived notion was that living in Virginia was never going to match up to my days in suburban Jersey.

My sister interrupted my depressing train of thought. “Look! We’re here! It says, ‘Shenandoah Valley: Your Wilderness Oasis!’”

I rolled my eyes in response. “It’s a bunch of mountains and trees. I don’t understand why everyone gets so worked up about it.” It’s not that I didn’t like nature; I love bird-watching and gardening just as much as the next teenage girl. My feelings of contempt were probably more along the lines of never having the chance to see nature up close and personal.

Once we got some maps from the welcome center, we proceeded to drive slowly up Skyline Drive. The Blue Ridge Mountains dipped and waned around us. The Shenandoah River intertwined with the mountains, its pale sapphire waters churning and flowing in perfect harmony. Most of the trees had already lost their leaves, leaving stick-straight, hollow trunks, which were beautifully symmetrical in their own way. Bare branches protruded from their sides, holding their frail selves strong against the billowing breezes. Thin, browning leaves crunched underneath the car’s tires. The sounds of the nearby towns could no longer be heard. Birds swooped in and landed on trees, quietly chirping in melodious tones. I was stunned into silence.

As a scenic overlook appeared, we decided to get out of the car. The wind was mostly warm, with a slight wintry chill in the air. Standing on the edge of the overlook, I could see the beginnings of the Shenandoah River; I could see small cabins in nearby woods; I could see to the point where the sky’s milky horizon seemed to meet the land. The view was awe-inspiring, breathtaking, and thrilling all at the same time. I felt like I could fly away into the never-ending sky and glide past the woes and worries of the world.

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Suddenly, all at once, I remembered New Jersey. Crowded, cramped, and bustling with energy; that'd been my only idea of 'home'. But now, as I perched on a sturdy rock in the middle of the mountains, I couldn't imagine why I'd loved such a place. I'd be blessed to have this Valley as my home forever, with its soothing views and tranquil forests. I couldn't wait to come back when it was in full bloom or covered in snow.

Though it's true I won't ever forget my childhood days in the peeling-paint public schools of Jersey, it's also true that on my first visit to Shenandoah Valley, I learned a valuable life lesson: home is anywhere your soul feels free. I may not amount to much, after all, I'm no expert fisher or accomplished hiker, but even I felt the connection with my side of the mountain that afternoon. And I'm not about to forget that feeling of belonging anytime soon.