



Twelve Things I Remember About Home

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1. The Mispunctuated Town

Cox's Mills is a tiny place, even for West Virginia, with a population of maybe 75, two stores, a post office, a closed schoolhouse, and a church that holds services one Sunday a month. It lies stretched out along Rt. 47, following Pike Fork between Horn Creek and Hog Run. Cox's Mills is "five miles from everywhere," my grandfather used to say, if everywhere is defined as the surrounding communities of Burnt House, Auburn, Alice, and Troy. Alice is a ghost now, but Cox's Mills is not too different from the surviving other three, a small community, insulated and static, growing gently shabbier as the years pass.

On the map and in the postal directory the town's name is spelled Coks Mills, no apostrophe, apparently because map makers and zip code cipherers don't like apostrophes. I've always spelled it Cox's Mills, anyway, because I do like apostrophes, and I like things to make sense. I've never heard anyone else offer an opinion about the spelling of the town's name, and since I go there now only in memory I probably never will.

2. Millstones and the Bridge Pool

My mother told me that the millstones for Cox's mills had been just upstream from the bridge where Rt. 47 crossed Horn Creek, and I tried several times over the years to find them, wading up the shallow part of the creek under a dark canopy of sycamores and willows, under a water gap and on up. I never found the millstones, and my guess is that they must have been buried under the silt and fine gravel washing off the hills, buried and lost like so much else. Below the bridge there was a large, deep pool where Pike Fork flowed into Horn Creek, and I did my first fish-

ing there, catching smallmouth bass and bluegills. Sometimes I would fish off the bridge abutment, cringing when log trucks or well-service trucks from Dowell or Halliburton raced by. In the lot next to the pool was an olive-painted, corrugated metal building, an old gauging station for Eureka Pipeline that my grandfather had worked in. One damp December day a truck came and loaded up the building and hauled it off somewhere. In later years weeds grew around the concrete foundation and multiflora rose snaked around a rusted old steam engine whose original purpose no one could tell me.

3. Hunting under the Hickories

I have been told that before the chestnut blight hit the eastern hardwood forests, chestnut trees were where you went to look for squirrels. It wasn't unusual to see as many as thirty squirrels working in one tree. But the chestnuts are long gone, the remaining dead hulks chopped down and used for fence posts, long enough ago now that even the fence posts are gone, even though chestnut made the best and longest-lasting fence posts. Now the squirrels in our part of the country gather mostly around hickory trees. The leaves of the hickories turn bright yellow in the fall and stand out between the reds and browns of maples and oaks, and when I went hunting I would sit beneath the trees, quietly, beneath the soft falling leaves and hard falling green nuts. Squirrel season was the best time of year: the days were cool and usually sunny, and the woods were silent but for the falling leaves and the rustlings of small animals. One time I heard fallen leaves crackling—something moving—and instead of a squirrel, a gray fox came over the edge of the hill. He trotted right toward me until, when he was six or seven feet away, I said, "Hello, little fox." The fox stopped and

regarded me for a few moments before angling off, circling around my hickory tree but still heading to wherever he was heading. I told my grandfather about the fox and he said, "I'd a-shot the son-of-a-bitch."

4. Apple Trees

Below the house, along the creek, we had two immense apple trees. In a good year the trees would be utterly loaded, groaning under the weight of the apples. My grandmother would literally spend all day in the kitchen during apple time, canning apples, making applesauce or apple butter, the kitchen windows dripping with steam. The ground beneath the trees was pocked with holes and tunnels of ground squirrels that ate fallen apples, and beyond the fence, under the rocks, there were snakes, copperheads and blacksnakes, that ate the squirrels. At night deer would come down off the hill and eat apples, and we could sit in the porch and hear them chewing and sometimes choking. In the summer of 1988 the trees finally died, and the people who were renting the house cut them down, leaving the stumps standing high enough to run a clothesline from one to the other. After the trees died I lost interest in the place.

5. Farming the Hills

The hills there in that part of West Virginia are hills, not mountains, but they rise so steeply away from the road, away from the creek, that they hem in the sky and induce a sense of confinement. I remember my mother telling about her first trip away from home, to Iowa to visit relatives, and how sick the prairie landscape made her: "All that space. There was nothing around to hold up the sky!" No doubt flatlanders would get sick in Cox's Mills, and feel trapped and nervous. In the days of my grandfather's youth, the hills were still covered in virgin timber. His family—and the other pioneer families over along Rocky Fork and Old Field Fork—would work their way through



the woods, uphill and down, cutting down the trees, selling the solid old timber, burning the rest, rooting up the stumps with mules, planting wheat the first year, corn the second, then grass for cattle, working on and on through the woods. He said the hills were so steep they had to plant the seed corn with shotguns—just stand back and fire it into the hillsides. But all that ended. Farming was difficult at any time in that country, a crazy idea, really, and impossible after the topsoil washed away, and so the farms died out and the trees came back, slowly, thin young forests that have grown more robust over the years. Still, my grandfather would say, "By God, when the Russians take over, they'll have people out working on those hills again."

6. My Palm Prints in Concrete

Sometime in late 1962 my grandfather poured concrete for a new walkway that led around the front of the house, from the front door to the east porch. We were down that weekend, and he had me put my hands in the cement to make a mark. I remember the icky texture of the cement—it was cold, and sticky, and I didn't like it. My father took a nail and wrote my name and the date beneath the palm prints, and I guess it's all still there. At least, it was when I finally sold the house. The concrete had buckled, bulged up by the roots of a maple tree, but my prints endured, faint and shallow but legible.

7. *Our Hill*

When I was very young my grandfather ran cattle on the front of the hill, the side that faced the house, and the cattle grazed the hillside down to short grass, dirt and a few blackberry vines. After he got rid of the cattle the hill began to regrow. Brush—filth, we called it—took over, mostly thorny multiflora rose and more blackberries; then a few trees began to poke through, sycamores at first and then maples and oaks. The top of the hill had been left wooded and was very dark and shady, and you would pass through those first woods and come out on a flat, more or less open area that had once been a planted field. Rocks had been pulled out to let the plow through and were piled at the upper end. We had peach trees up there (peaches down below by the creek would not bear fruit), short lived trees that were all but dead by the time I began exploring the woods. The dead trees stood for years like skeletons until they began to rot and collapse into the brush. From the top of the hill you could see miles of land that were empty, used very hard in the past and now all but unsettled.

8. *The Hay Barn and the Meadow*

Directly across the creek from the house was a small hay meadow and an old barn. We used to get two cuttings a year off that land until people started running fewer and fewer cattle and no one bothered to come by and cut it. The grass would grow and fall over, pushed down by rain or pulled down by gravity, and there would be

wide trails through it where deer would pass to get to the apples. The old barn where the hay was stored grew more and more decrepit over the years and became a home for yellow jackets and snakes. When she was dying, my grandmother would look out the window at the meadow, the wasted hay, and one time she said, "It makes me sad looking out there at that. You know some old cow'll be wanting that hay this winter."

9. *Pike Fork*

On the maps the upper part of the creek is called Coxcamp Fork, but I never heard anyone call it that. The local name was Pike Fork, but I never heard anyone use that, either, at least on regular basis. It was just "the creek." It ran through our property, separating us from the hill. As a child there in the summers I usually spent all day down in the creek looking for fossils, catching crayfish or trapping minnows. It never occurred to me to be lonely. I would be down at the creek all day, and then in the evenings I would go back up to the house. At night fog would drift down from the hills, and I always sat out on the porch and listened to the creek run, and I could hear crickets and frogs and other animals, and I could hear owls hoot and deer stomp around by the apple trees. I could hear all the thick dark night noises, and once I saw a snake crossing the road in the headlights of an oncoming car.

10. *High Water*

In high water, people upstream would throw trash into the river, sometimes plain garbage



but more often large chunks of wood that were too expensive or impractical to haul off, like rotten lumber or trimmed tree branches or brush. As a very young child the junk in the high water always excited me—I imagined the old logs and boards as naval vessels, battleships—a fleet attacking the minnows. In very high water, the creek would stretch clear across the meadow to lap at the base of the apple trees, and though our house was high enough up on the hillside that it never got flooded, we could feel the rumble of the muddy brown water as it pushed downstream.

11. The Langford House

The Langford house was across the road and down a bit. The Langford family was long gone, died out or moved away, and the house was rented out occasionally to very poor families, until at last it grew too dilapidated and run down to rent to anyone. One night, after it had been vacant for a several years, my grandmother claimed she saw the house all lit up—glowing in the dark. My grandfather dismissed her, said she was probably dreaming, but I suspected ghosts. By that time I was living away from Cox's Mills, and I was familiar with ghosts—not just the ordinary spirits that might take over a property, but ghosts that got inside your head, ghosts not only of the dead, but of the living, too, ghosts of family and ghosts of place, ghosts that can follow a person around and bother them with guilt and shame and regret that cannot be exorcised.

12. The Tree that Didn't Fall Until Later

It was late when I arrived home for Christmas in 1981, driving in from Texas, and I was very tired, and I was hungry, and I wanted to sit around and decompress, but my grandfather was all agitated and he was saying, "Where'd you park? Out by the barn? Well, you get out there and move your goddamn truck. There's a tree a-going to fall on it." He followed me out into the dark and pointed across the road into the night. He said there was a big tree over there that had been struck by lightning and might fall any moment. So I moved my pickup. The next day I could see a big oak that had been indeed struck by lightning—there was a pale vertical stripe running the length of the tree where the bark had split away. But the tree didn't fall—not then, at least. Years later when I sold the house I came by to take one last look around, and the new owner was walking me out to where I was parked. He was a nice man, retired and living alone, and he said he would take good care of the house. "I know all your family's memories are wrapped up here," he said. By that time everyone was dead, and I didn't really care, or thought I didn't. I didn't say anything. Then I looked up across the road and the lightning struck tree wasn't there. It had finally fallen, not down the hill but across it—but, still, the damn tree had finally rotted and keeled over, and for some reason I just didn't know what to make of it. I stood there for a while, staring dumbly at the hillside, and then I got in my truck and drove back to the new home I was making in Texas. ■