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Valley and Skyline Sketches

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Valley and Skyline Sketches

And in the Morning, We Fished: Memories of Franconia, New Hampshire

I like to imagine my father Gayton, or "Gayt," as everybody called him, taking in his first impression of Franconia, New Hampshire, from the windshield of the Cadillac automobile he had driven off the showroom floor of the Cadillac Oldsmobile dealership where he was a salesman.

A motor car was a rare sight in that little town. He tooled down its main street, the pavement still a new feature in a post–World War I world just beginning to feel the effects of what would be the Great Depression. He came in his fedora and camel-hair coat to claim his sweetheart, Kathleen. He had fallen in love with this North Country girl at first sight, just as he loved at first sight the New Hampshire soil that had nurtured her.

The wedding took place in the family home on Academy Street in Franconia some months later, a few days before Christmas during the first big snowstorm of the coming year. Because of the dangerous mountain weather conditions in treacherous mountain terrain, they couldn't manage the drive to Pecketts, the much loved ski lodge in Franconia Notch where "guests from "ahll ovah, don't you know" would stay. They honeymooned instead at Lovett's by Lafayette Brook, an inn right in town.

After World War II, when gasoline was plentiful, my father ferried me, my two sisters, and our mother to Nana's house on Academy Street for the summer. We arrived in Franconia the day after school closed for the summer and stayed until just after Labor Day. Having driven for four hours, he would pause long enough on the big front veranda to drink a tall julip flavored with the sauce my grandmother had made from the mint that bordered the house. He'd light a Lucky Strike cigarette and gaze out at the land he loved before making the long drive back to Brookline, Massachusetts. We would not see him again until the first weekend he felt he could get away.

When we knew he was coming for a weekend, we'd wait most of that day, looking for the Plymouth coming down Academy Street. He would turn it into the circular driveway and stop parallel to the back porch. "Daddy's here! Daddy's here!" we'd scream.

Mumma would come out onto the porch and down the steps in her cork-soled summer wedgies, and Nana came out in her apron waving a dish towel,

potholder, spatula, or slotted spoon, warbling, "I declare! I declare! I'm tickled pink!"

These memories shared with my sisters took on, with the passage of time, the sanctity of Holy Scripture. When my father came to Franconia, he became a different person. In Brookline, at home, he could be so often a remote, unsmiling, angry tyrant. I was afraid of him there and tried to stay out of his way.

The Daddy that got out of the car—as our dog Dukie, in a paroxysm of whining delight, held him around the waist with her paws—was my true Daddy, who I always hoped for. After greeting our mother, holding her close as they swayed back and forth in a kind of standing dance, he would hug each one of his girls and tell us things like, "You're as brown as a berry!" Or, "I bet you've grown at least an inch, but you'll always be my baby!"

Nana would throw her arms around his neck, and he would pat-pat her on the back, as if he were burping her. Nana had slaved over the midday dinner. We might have garden peas warmed in sweet cream and fresh buttered corn on the cob. My grandmother had shelled the peas and husked the corn on the back porch in the benign presence of Mount Lafayette in the distance. There would be pot roast or chicken fricassee, scalloped potatoes, a huge "just picked from the garden, don't you know" lettuce, tomato, and cucumber salad swathed in Nana's sour cream dressing, her famous blueberry muffins hot and ready to be drowned in butter. All this washed down with iced mint tea.

After supper, as the last meal of the day was called in that town, we three sisters squeezed next to our father on the glider that sat on the veranda facing the sunset, while Mumma and Nana fretted over a just-baked apple pie served up with cheddar cheese.

That was the evening of the first day. And in the morning, we fished!

We didn't have to wait for Daddy to get us up. We were awake and almost dressed in our shorts and T-shirts and sneakers when Daddy, making a great show of it, part of the ritual we loved, came tiptoeing, finger to his lips, into the bedroom Linda and I shared; Valerie would wait with us on the big double bed. He'd whisper, "We don't want to wake Mumma and Nana from their beauty sleep. Shshsh!"

"No, Daddy," we'd whisper back. All of us tiptoed down the front stairs, then stood in the middle of the kitchen chugging glasses of milk and stuffing as much of last night's blueberry muffins as we could cram into our mouths at one bite, while Daddy finished his coffee and took the last drag on a Lucky, and then out the back door we went, into the car, Valerie always in the front seat next to him.

Our destination that morning was Coppermine Brook, which meandered down along a mountain trail, a short climb from where we parked. He unpacked our gear: fishing poles not much fancier than long sticks with a line and hook on one end. There was a tin bucket of night crawlers, in a wriggling mass, both disgusting and fascinating to poke and look at. Daddy dug one out and put it on a hook for each of us. Linda, who was so impatient to start, was first and went ahead to capture the best spot brookside such as a flat rock or a hospitable outcropping of New Hampshire granite.

Daddy stayed with Valerie, finding the best spot for her. That was OK because I always found something I liked, but Linda was never able to locate something comfortable enough to sit on while she fished: too pointy, too damp, too far away.

"Daddy, Daddy! I can't find anything to sit on!"

Daddy got Valerie set with her worm, and her pole in the water, and found a perch Linda had somehow missed, nice and warm in the early sun.

Wearing waders, Dad fished too, in the deeper water near the center of the stream. He cast a grown-up fishing rod and reel further upstream, and almost instantaneously the line dipped hard and fast. A fish! "It's a trout, girls!" He yelled. "It's a big one!" In a minute the fish was out of the water, on the bank. With one motion, our father twisted a large brown brook trout, flapping furiously for its freedom, off the fly-topped hook, and laid it still flapping into a moss-lined basket, where after a few more jerks of its tail, it was still. Linda and I came over to where Valerie was squatting. We three peered into this container to view the unfathomable mystery and beauty that was the life of one of God's small miracles, with its glistening brown speckled skin and an eye, roundish with its dark pupil, completely deprived of motion and sight in the stillness of death.

"That's not fair," Linda shouted, as if Daddy was somewhere else. "We can't catch anything with these stupid things," as she threw the pole down.

"Of course, you can. I caught plenty with just such a pole when I was your age. You just need to put it out in the water, just there where the current makes it flow fast, and cast it up and down, in and out, like this."

As he was showing her what to do, the tip of the pole dipped deep and hard.

"It's taken the bait," he yelled, and we screamed, "It's got the worm, it's got the worm!"

In a blink, Daddy had the pole out of the water with a small fish flapping on the line.

Just then, I saw a burly man in a uniform come out from the woody trail. I felt scared. Did Daddy have a fishing license? Was the fish he just caught big enough to keep? "Daddy, Daddy," I whispered, "hide the fish!"

"Mornin,' Gayt! I see you got your girls with you. You catch anything worth keepin'?" And the man laughed, showing big tobacco-stained teeth.

"Landed a brown trout, a big one, maybe ten inches."

"That one you got in your hand? Don't think so!"

"No. The one in the basket there. But this one's a keeper, too, right?"

The burly man laughed again.

Just about every angler has experienced the small phenomenon of having multitudes of fish suddenly appear. And so it was on that day. Each of us got a fish every time the worm-laden hooks sank into the water. We shrieked and laughed and danced with the joy of it.

"Get the frying pan ready, Minnie," called Daddy as we three sisters tumbled up the back steps. "We're having trout for breakfast!"

—*Gayle Greene*

Gayle Greene is a writer, playwright, and actor who grew up in Franconia, formerly lived in New York City, and now lives in Berlin, New Hampshire, with her husband, Larry Watkins.

Editor's note: Fishing rules are ever changing with the times. We recommend everyone check local regulations for dates they may fish, for the minimum size and maximum number of fish one can keep, and the dates and methods of catch-and-release seasons.

A College Student Connects with His Father, with Few Words

My pulse pounded in my head as I looked out of the driver's side window. To my left was an infinite blue sky and a line of gray and white mountain peaks that ran at a 45-degree angle to my vision. On my right, was a drop-off into nothing.

"Turn slightly left, easy now," advised the voice of my unseen father in the shotgun seat. The tires of our rental Jeep slid around on the switchback's loose rock.

It was December in Lone Pine, California, and my dad and I were in way over our heads.

"Just a little farther now, bump over that rock there."

I braced myself as both passenger side wheels left the ground, spinning aimlessly in the air. Suddenly, I was at mercy of the wind. Cantilevered on the edge of a mule trail, some few hundred feet in the air, I wondered if our decision to drive to the top of an abandoned mineshaft wasn't one of our smartest. An unsettling amount of blue invaded the windshield. Panic began to take hold.

"That's perfect, just a slow, steady crawl from there," my dad, beside me, advised.

My tires returned to the ground, and I shot forward.

The sky righted itself, unfurling into the snowcapped peaks of the Sierra Nevada's rigid spine. I glanced at my dad, a wide grin across his face. His figure was almost a novel sight, for the previous night had been the first time I'd seen him in four months.

I'd flown out to Los Angeles that August, for the first semester of my senior year of college. For a matter of months, I traded my college town in upstate New York for an internship in Beverly Hills. It was new, and different and exciting—everything I had expected a semester in Hollywood would be. Most of all, however, it was hard. Long hours spent at my internship and working on my thesis were followed by sleepless nights and weekends locked in empty classrooms.

It's ironic how I thought a move to a place known for uninhibited behavior would leave my demons behind. It didn't. Instead, the anxiety and depressive episodes that'd plagued me in months prior remained, like a slowly tightening noose. I wasn't happy with myself and because of that, I felt angrier than ever before.

If anything, the bright lights of this big city illuminated an even harder truth: that growing up was a terrifying prospect.

I took to the desert for solitude. From others, sure, but mainly from myself. From the confines of my mind. At Thanksgiving, I didn't fly home. Instead, I drove to Palm Springs, seeking refuge in the San Jacinto Mountains. Storm clouds greeted me as soon as I ascended past the desert floor—nature's echo to my turbulent thoughts. I lost the trail as it disappeared into the mountains and spent much of the next ten miles frantically trying to find it, bouldering up dried-up waterfalls and bushwhacking across sagebrush-strewn slopes in search of the next blue marker. Grasping at something I couldn't find.

A few weeks later, I greeted my father in the back of a dimly lit car-rental parking lot. It was an oddly clandestine scene for a moment that was anything

but—for I had missed him, perhaps more than I realized. I wondered how I looked to him. It had only been a matter of months, but it might as well have been a year. We'd never been apart for this long.

We left Los Angeles the next morning and headed north to Lone Pine, home to Mount Whitney and the Alabama Hills. The plan was to explore the area for a couple of days, both on foot and by Jeep, before making the drive to Death Valley, our final stop before returning to the Los Angeles airport for the flight home.

Road trips had become a staple of our relationship. During my high school summers, we had driven up and down the East Coast for baseball tournaments. In college I'd visited him on his work trips to Arizona and Colorado, hiking with him around the West.

Everything about this trip, though, felt new: from the Jeep he'd rented (with plans of four-wheeling despite our extremely limited experience), to the destination, to the space between us that had widened from time apart. I was no longer a teenager but an adult, preoccupied with how and where I was going to start the rest of my life.

Daylight pitched its last embers over Mount Whitney as we pulled into Lone Pine. We turned onto a dirt path and unconsciously rolled to a stop, taken with the majestic scene. Behind us sat the one-traffic-light town of Lone Pine with miles of flat plane high desert behind it. Before us lay the Alabama Hills, foothills of the eastern Sierra Nevada range, a series of bizarre, bulbous rock formations bathed in the orange and purple glow of the sunset. It was as if the desert had decided to grow legs and walk, only to stumble and fall under the intense glare of Mount Whitney.

Over the next two days, we grew to appreciate and understand the area. Abandoned mineshafts removed some of the mystique, rooting us in history.

The road from Lone Pine to Death Valley was long and flat. Unassuming. It was early, so we didn't talk much. Death Valley didn't feel to my father and me like a place meant for understanding, despite how fascinating the geology behind its formation is. So we traveled to see something that was indisputably bigger than us.

Bizarre as the scenery was, each stop we made felt right at home in the canon of our adventures together. We scrambled through slot canyons in Furnace Creek, just as we had in Sedona, Arizona, a few years prior. We careened into the dried-out riverbed from atop the undulating foothills in front of Zabriskie Point—a standard practice dating back from childhood trips to Maine. The borax mounds of Twenty Mule Team Canyon reminded me of the snowdrifts in upstate New York.

We spent what felt like hours wading through the alien terrain, knee deep in borax, tripods in tow and cameras around our neck, just as we would on any other exploration. The time on foot rooted us in a way that the Jeep couldn't. As fun as off-roading was, there wasn't any replacement for actually feeling the dirt beneath our feet.

At day's end, we watched the sun slip behind the mountains from Echo Canyon. It set the clouds ablaze, like a natural flare, calling us home.

We began to talk as darkness swallowed the switchback roads leading out of the park. Until then, we'd kept our conversations light. Perhaps this was my doing. My battle with my mind was no secret to him, but still, those conversations were still tough.

Sometimes it takes events outside of our normal perspective to reflect on the moments that garner further introspection. Moments such as this trip, in which we experienced a world entirely alien to our own, brought us closer to our present situation. He told me that he was worried about my older brother. He'd graduated a couple of years back and had a steady job but had seen his social life evaporate upon coming home from college. I feared that upon graduation, mine would as well.

"He's lonely without anybody around," he said. "I'm worried that he's getting depressed and . . ." He paused. "I'm not sure that he likes himself very much."

We drove in silence for a couple of minutes.

"I think that's something we both struggle with," I responded, my eyes staring a hole through the windshield. "Liking ourselves."

"Why don't you?" he asked.

I wished he didn't have to ask that. I'm sure he wished that too.

"I'm not sure," I lied. Inwardly, I knew. I was ashamed—of my fear of the world, the volatility of my emotions. Of not being the man that I wanted to be. But that was too difficult to say.

"I wish that you guys would."

"Yeah, I do too."

We smiled painfully at each other as we traced our way through the night, out of the basin and into the range above.

—Dylan Campbell

Dylan Campbell writes for *SRQ Magazine*, which covers life in the Sarasota, Florida area. He is from Philadelphia and graduated from Ithaca College in 2020.

What the Badger Taught Us

For Amik, 1948–2020

Around the time that my Uncle Amik decided to lie down one last time on his favorite rock, my partner Derek and I were at 9,900 feet, biking through wildflowers and stands of aspen and pine. As we rode along the crest of Utah's Wasatch Mountains, I came around a turn in the trail to see something I had never seen before: hurtling up the trail toward me, a badger.

This stately fellow had someplace to be, and he was not going to be slowed down. He charged up the path, his body moving like a seesaw as he ran. After a long moment in which the badger continued to run toward me and I tried to decide whether or not I should back away, the badger veered off through the wildflowers, his coat flashing white and gold.

Derek started to follow after him, but I told Derek to let the badger go. I told him that the badger was off on his own badger adventure, and that a badger should do what a badger wants to do. I couldn't believe my luck to have met a badger at all. I couldn't help but believe that meeting such an elusive and notorious ornery being was an omen of sorts.

I have to believe that this was Amik's way of saying goodbye to me. Like the badger, Amik has always been utterly determined to stay true to his own course. Amik's way is the only way, and this is the way of being fearless and unafraid of diving into new adventures. He jumped from cliffs to trees, tree to tree, and tree to roof. He was an artist and a teller of tall tales. He believed in his own inventions. Being full of a million questions and asking them relentlessly and often, to the point that we all raised our eyebrows, Amik might have known it was time to stop, but of course he never would. Being a father and a grandfather and a husband and a brother and a friend, and my uncle. Bursting with creativity and mischief and half-baked theories about the meaning of everything. Amik's way means being braver and more stubborn than even the badger himself.

I am certain Amik left this world on his own terms; I have never known my uncle to do anything that didn't suit him. What I think happened is that Amik found himself in a moment in which he had absolutely everything he wanted, and he decided that this was enough. It was midsummer, the forest swarming with life. Seventy-two summers Amik had enjoyed in our world, and this one was as beautiful as every other. Lying down on his favorite rock in his beloved river, deep in the Adirondacks, with his grandchildren playing and his son nearby, and all of his children charging through life with their own beautiful, mischievous children—I think that moment was just so full of joy, Amik decided it was time to dance right out of his body.

I wish he hadn't. Amik was supposed to get old and kind of crazy and turn even more into Gollum. He was supposed to finish writing his stories and essays and read some of mine and be around for his grandkids to show them more of those beautiful moments he was always finding. He wasn't supposed to go now, but a badger always does what a badger wants to do.

I was about 11 years old, and it was late spring in the Adirondacks. We had camped the night before on Amik's property, a large field sloping down to an overflowing creek. The beavers had claimed the land, and through their tremendous landscaping and building techniques, the creek had started to transform into a swamp. Mosquitos swarmed across the surface of the water in the evening air, finding their way into every warm corner of our bodies. The air was sharp and brisk, and while we bundled ourselves in flannels and pants, Amik decided to go for a dip in the water. He waded in like a swamp creature, and he grinned with pride as we teased him from the bank. Still, even he did not last long in the frigid water, retreating to dry land after just a few minutes. We swatted and damned the mosquitos to a fiery hell, cursed the beavers whose landscaping had attracted such clouds of insects, and crawled into our tents at sunset to hide from their itching bites.

In the morning, we set out on a hike to Pharoah Lake, walking down a rocky, overgrown path through the wilderness area. I pushed my 11-year-old legs as fast as they would go, racing to keep up with Amik and his youngest teenage son, Dennis. My mom carried a loaded backpack with all of our gear, and I left her to walk alone, smiling in the rear, as I chased my male family members. I worshipped my cousin Dennis and wanted to prove myself to Amik; I was just as tough as any man, no matter how old I was.

Amik scampered up cliffs and convinced us to eat leaves and berries that he collected, enthusiastically chewing on bits of plants as he held them out to us. I would stall until my mom caught up and nodded her approval. Dennis called him a crazy old geezer, and Amik smiled and disappeared back into the brush. The miles passed and I didn't mention the blisters forming on my heels, saving my breath for the trail. (Later, Amik convinced me to hike barefoot and was very displeased when my mother opted for Band-Aids. When the sun set and we were still walking, wondering if we were actually lost instead of just disoriented, I thanked her.)

When we arrived at the lake, I sat down on the rock shore, dipping my fingers in the frigid spring melt. It was too cold to swim so early in the season, and my mom passed me snacks and bug spray. The sun kept us warm as we

rested, and the lake glittered blue-green mysteries. Amik crouched next to me, nodding. Yes, he said. This is it. A good rock. Good spot.

Yes, I said, and Amik sat down next to me. This is good, he said to no one in particular. This is what it's all about. He kicked off his shoes, closed his eyes and lay back on the sunbaked rock for a quick nap, and after a little while, so did I. We lay there with the lake kissing our toes, and when we roused ourself a while later, the sun had left us with pink brushstrokes on our cheeks and grins that lasted well past sunset.

When Amik took his final nap, we were deep in the clutches of a pandemic-stricken world, so I wasn't able to travel to the funeral and say goodbye the way that humans like to do. Instead, Derek and I drove up to Colorado, to the town where we were living when Amik came out to visit a few years ago.

We biked up a hill where Amik had taken Derek mushroom hunting that summer. Derek told me that Amik had buoyantly led the charge in a barefoot bushwhack through the aspens with armfuls of mushrooms. They had collected piles of chanterelles, eating as they went—only for everyone to end up with a serious case of the runs the next day. Afterward, Amik mentioned that it's usually better to cook them first, but that a little diarrhea cleans out the system. Like always, that wasn't quite the point, but he also wasn't wrong. It's impossible to disagree with someone who is telling their own story.

Sitting on top of that hill in the forest and imagining a joyful Amik charging barefoot through the trees, he didn't feel so far away. At the bottom of the hill, a rainbow bowed over the mountains, and I remembered a lesson from the badger himself: spin some yarns, get lost in the forest, and find a sunny spot to watch it all unfold.

—Stacy Allana Clark

Stacy Allana Clark is an environmentalist influenced by landscape and community. Her essays can be found in journals such as *Western Humanities Review, Barrio Beat*, and *Ponder Review*. Clark holds her MFA in creative writing from Northern Arizona University and currently lives in northern Vermont.

Tuckerman Family Values

The snow had melted on the lower Sherburne Trail, so I strapped skis to the pack for the remaining descent to Pinkham Notch on foot. It was my third 2022 spring trip to Tuckerman Ravine below New Hampshire's Mount Washington—a remarkable turnaround after missing the prior two years recovering from knee replacements and a broken patella. Hiking down the Tuckerman Ravine Trail with that heavy, awkward load was so much less painful than in 2019, a cause for celebration, but I was focused more on being disgruntled by my declining skiing skills.

Even though I had limited my three 2022 visits to the less steep Hillman's Highway ski route, rather than the steeper routes in the "Bowl" of Tuckerman Ravine, I struggled to put together many quality turns. On top of that, I had taken some long falls and was disappointed by my inability to quickly arrest my descents.

I was thus in a glass-half-empty mood when I encountered two men hiking up the Tuck Trail just above the second switchback. They didn't have packs and weren't dressed for much of a hike, so I made an erroneous assumption that they were likely inexperienced tourists up here for the first time. When they asked, "How was the skiing?" I answered, "Humbling."

The pair, clearly a bit younger than my 72 years, said that their Swiss father had taken them skiing here many times in their youths. Now they both lived far away, one in California and the other in Colorado. It was their first time back on Mount Washington in years. Their father was up ahead, one of them said. This confused me until they clarified that they meant his ashes. Their hike was clearly a kind of pilgrimage. They laughed when I joked that their father would be disappointed that they had not brought their skis.

The pair asked about the Tuck Shelter (the buildings at Hermit Lake Campsite), and I replied that things hadn't changed much up there in the past fifteen years. We reminisced about the previous shelter affectionately called HoJos after the restaurant chain Howard Johnson's; HoJos had burned down in 1972. It had an indoor space that served meals and a basement where you could store skis for a small fee. The brothers, grinning, told me they were glad they hadn't left their skis up there that season.

I told them about taking my own two sons to the ravine when they were younger. They smiled and congratulated me. I asked them to use my camera to take a picture of me with my heavy pack. Then we departed in our respective directions.

That encounter had "given my heart a change of mood" (as Robert Frost said in his poem "Dust of Snow"). I got to thinking about the immense beauty of the ravine and the power of sharing it with others. I recalled details of long-ago visits with sons Ben and Luke. I remembered that my wife had pushed back when I insisted on spending far too much money on a Christmas gift for one of them—a beautiful framed print of the ravine I had fallen in love with when I spotted it in a Concord shop window.

Maybe my sons would spread my ashes up there. The thought suddenly occurred to me. I had previously thought more about Zealand Falls, Moosilauke, or Franconia Notch, but the Ravine would be pretty sweet, too. Wherever would be best to create future family memories and gatherings would do just fine.

—Douglass Teschner

Douglass Teschner of Pike, New Hampshire, is a leadership trainer and coach who has published many adventures in this journal for five decades. He serves on the Appalachia Committee. Contact him at dteschner@GrowingLeadershipLLC.com.

Editor's note: The scattering of ashes in White Mountain National Forest is legal, but the federal government discourages it and urges care.

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