

## **23 Pairs of Shoes**

**By Kaitlyn Conner**

I have 23 pairs of shoes in my closet. Each sole shows signs of wear from consistent use and scuffs from living. I have name brand heels for events, fashionable sneakers for casual wear, high boots to show off my legs. But still, my feet aren't baby soft like my friends from the bigger cities. Mine are solid from the trees I climbed as a girl and from sprinting through the grass during games of neighborhood tag. They are coarse from my mom pulling splinters out of my toes and from scaling cliffs I'd jump off of at Summersville lake. I guess all stereotypes come from somewhere, they are mostly just exaggerated truths. But I'll be honest with you, I've seen the stereotypes everyone laughs at. I've seen the unfiltered, uneducated, unimaginable hardships of a West Virginian not born in the right zip code. I've undoubtedly known of an actual inbred family. The product of young girls being taken advantage of while wondering with heavy hearts if what is wrong is just their fate. I've witnessed forest floors scattered with pine needles and real needles. I've seen tooth decay from years of Mountain Dew addictions. I've seen this reality that Hollywood has done their best to profit from, trust me. I'm just not dense enough to believe that this defines Appalachians.

My truth is that I was born in Cary, North Carolina, and moved to West Virginia when I was six. I was raised in over a dozen homes, but none better represent my initial depiction of West Virginia than the isolated double-wide I moved into at 10. It sat hidden amongst an army of oak trees and deer, in a neighborhood full of tenets suffering from addiction. They were nice enough people, but they were all interconnected from neighborhood disputes over heroin, drunken fights over women, and children threatening other children with their father's pocket knives over a popped basketball. The kids spoke like grown-ups while the adults acted like

children. It was a rough neighborhood to experience puberty in, especially when you talked like an outsider as I did, as my peers were persistent with their distaste for “big-city accents”.

I was fortunate enough to have the occasional new outfit at the expense of my rich city relatives who loved me deeply: My 12th birthday present being \$100 sneakers that stood out against my friend’s hole-ridden shoes. I watched as the size 7’s she had sported since I had known her began to constrict her growing toes more and more with each passing year. Of course, these Appalachians weren’t just defined by their circumstances, let alone their running shoes. I had also created some of my best memories of adolescence there; of four-wheeler slay riding, of relentless snowball wars in the holler, of burnt marshmallows sticking to my fingers during neighborhood campfires.

But then, at 16, I moved to the inner city of Charleston. I went to live with my aunt and uncle who, as adults, knew of nothing but privilege in their townhouse beds, wrapped warmly at night in their satin 600 thread count sheets. Truth be told, the sheets were pretty damn comfortable and so was having a washer and dryer in the house and a working dishwasher. I quickly got used to this new and improved lifestyle, hence my lovely shoe collection. Undoubtedly, my aunt and uncle indulged in the finer things in life, such as freshly caught shrimp and tilapia when we went on vacation and nightly strolls with their golden retriever on their freshly paved roads. And they especially enjoyed filet for dinner, forgoing the Tupperware in favor of feeding the scraps to their dog.

I mention all of this to say, West Virginia and Appalachia in general, is not filled with copies of just one outcome. The people who live here are complex and live off of physically demanding jobs and shopping and mountain dew and filet. It may be like your home and it may not be—it probably isn’t. But it is my home, from the hills and the hollers to the high-end

boutiques on Bridge Road. From the neighborhood bonfires to my favorite bakery that makes the best snickerdoodle cookies. What I'll say is this; I hate it and I love it here. That's just called being a West Virginian.