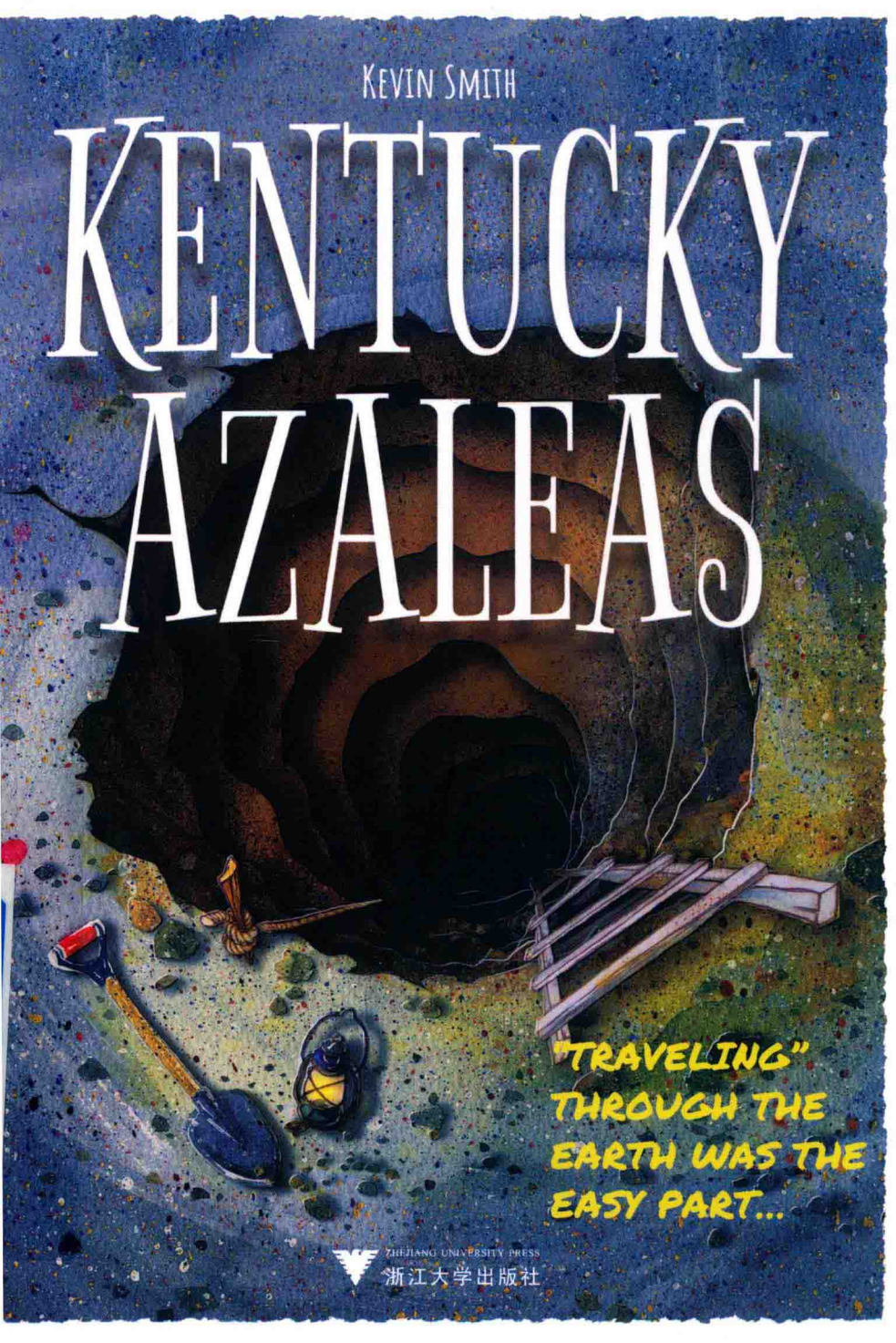


KEVIN SMITH

KENTUCKY AZALEAS



**"TRAVELING"
THROUGH THE
EARTH WAS THE
EASY PART...**



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*For Julian Boivin,
a shooting star who had once walked amongst us as a boy,
his imagination boundless,
his curiosity golden.*

Acknowledgments

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**“Science does not know its debt to
imagination.”**

In 1692, Edmund Halley, a famous English astronomer, immortalized after discovering Halley's Comet, put forth the controversial belief that the earth, like a chicken's egg, was largely hollow. His theory stated that what we lived on was nothing more than the crust or its shell and within the earth was a giant fiery core, and, not unlike the yolk of a chicken's egg.

Over the centuries, Halley's "Hollow Earth Theory" was enlarged and encompassed many more beliefs, such as gigantic holes or fissures within the crust, strange, unbound rules of gravity that supposedly exist within the earth's center and the existence of a hellish land that acts as the earth's internal heater.

While the majority of today's scientists are quick to dismiss the possibility, a select few hold fast to this belief. In regards to Halley and other like-minded scientists, this passion — both obscure and against academic profession, and deemed eccentric if not completely absurd by most — consumed them with the thirst of discovering what the world may possess.

Rosy

In the time it takes the sun to chase the moon beyond the hills and back, I, Rosy Tecumseh Sullivan, had done what no man, boy or child had done before!

Let me tell you, it sure was about time. From the day I was born, slapped on the behind with a name that weighed more than the whole of Appalachia, you could say I was destined for glory.

But with a heavy name came heavy expectations, and juggling no less than three would leave most kids screaming “uncle!” Fortunately I came from a long line of hard-nosed tough nuts, who stood tall and didn’t shy from a fight. Giants amongst men, the Sullivans before me tackled dangers that left ordinary folks whimpering behind their own shadows. They were tougher than homegrown Kentucky beef jerky. But, sadly as tasty jerky tends to go, chewed up just as fast.

What I mean to say is, what with family traditions and all, from Daddy to my great-great-great-grandpa, Sullivan men weren’t long for the world. I knew lady luck may just snatch the rug right out from underneath before I’d notched my mark on the Sullivan family tree of legends and legacies.

With the clock ticking, I couldn’t be lulled into the everyday happy-go-lucky, humdrum life of Wonder Bread sandwiches and pick-up baseball, morning cartoons and afternoon pudding snacks. No Siree, Bob! While other kids were busy wasting zombies on PlayStation or dreaming about being the next UFC champ, I’d been risking it all to ink my name in the history books. I was determined to turn run-of-the-mill into king of the hill!

To just think, before this day, going on eleven years, four months and thirteen days, I’d been so far from the

target, “Couldn’t hit the backside of a bull with a bass fiddle” as Grammy used to say, I’d started to wonder if I even were a Sullivan.

But I came to the realization that if you don’t like the pitches life’s throwing your way, best to take a step back from the plate and stare her down until she lobs just the one you need.

Well, hold on now, soon enough, you’ll hear an oddball, off-the-wall tale that may leave you disbelieving. This is for every child who’s ever dreamed of digging and not stopping until they popped out the other side of the world.

A dare-deviling, cliff-diving fool from Littleton, Kentucky, hadn’t just dug to fulfill his legacy, but with each bone-jarring crack of the shovel, I did it to show that if you’re willing to quit listening long enough to those who’re always telling you what you can’t do, you may just find you did it.

Li Mei

In a village where traditions were valued as if cast from gold and a family's lineage as precious as a string of pearls, where the inhabitants still rose and went to bed with the sun, a girl was lost.

Sadly, if what my people held dear really was measured in gold and silvery pearls, then our family didn't even possess the string that held them together. Neither rich nor poor, we struggled through life alongside our neighbors. But I was regularly callously reminded that we'd broken custom and had severed our ancestry line. And for that, we were considered broke.

After the sun's passing, within the hours of the rooster, its silence an end to another day, I watched A'pa and my grandfather, Da'bi, as their pale, skinny legs, rest wearily in fire-warmed buckets of steaming water. While only eleven years old, I knew these two men could not do without me. With every stick pushed into the small brick stove, my heart as clogged as its soot-covered chimney, I felt another part of my being was devoured by its hungry flames.

It had been one year since A'ma's passing. A'pa and Da'bi hardly seemed fit for the living world. Each night they would bed beside a painful reminder of a tradition they couldn't change. Me. Fellow villagers didn't hesitate to say so. Our people, like many Chinese, believe that with A'pa's failure to father a son, a filial duty, so will come an end to our family line. At no fault of my own, but at the same time knowing it was, our family, like the great Bengal tigers that once roamed these valleys, was facing extinction.

The Li family had been the recorder of Slippery Mountain Village's history since the first stone was placed. But that was

coming to an end.

In our tiny mountain village as throughout the entire country, all had high hopes as this was supposed to be an auspicious year. That is, all but me. I expected no good fortune but was soon to discover that nothing was solely based on fate and sometimes, you must go far to understand what is near.

Rosy

Beyond Littleton's blacktop, skidding across gravel on Bucyrus Pass, keep on rolling until the saps turn to sequoias. Another mile in, shaded under telephone pole poplars and chameleon-like maples, rests Sappy Valley. Perched high atop my favorite oak, I've dreamed about as often as the sun shines, which is pretty much every day around here, what my legacy would be.

Now, a legacy's not like chancing upon a dropped twenty-dollar bill on the sidewalk. Passion's got to be discovered. Inspiration's got to be bred. In the only woods I've ever known, the sign I'd been waiting for arrived from the bottom of a mailman's postal bag.

Last Christmas Eve, dug from the bottom of Smiling Eb's — people said "buried six feet under, sucking dirt and munching worms, he'd still be grinning ear to ear" — mail pouch, it dropped with a thump, like possum road-kill, in the wicker basket on our front porch.

Readied for a trip to Bloody Gully, the local sledding hill, two hundred feet of thrilling, tree-choked terror, I nearly tripped over the basket.

Lifting the brown package, I glanced at its front.

The return address, written in a thick black marker: Dead Horse, Alaska.

The sender: Smokes Sullivan.

Bloody Gully was gone in a flash.

Uncle Smokes was Daddy's older brother and the only living full-grown Sullivan male. In my opinion, the man had tasted, smelled, lived and breathed all there was, and then asked for seconds. Brought up with Daddy in a hill shanty, where "nothin'

ran, but moonshine and rain water,” he had an answer to every question, a saying for every problem.

Above our address was my name, Rosy Tecumseh Sullivan.

That’s all the invitation I needed. Holding the package to my chest, I leapt off the porch. Scooting onto a tractor-tire swing that hung from a barren apple tree, I tore at the package’s twine and out jumped a humongous book.

Snug in the tire’s center, I read the cover, a single word: ATLAS.

As if I were Pastor Biggs, and this were my Bible, I opened it with a religious reverence. In a way, it was.

Under the atlas’s jacket, was a scribbled note written with a runny fountain pen I’d only seen my uncle use, and it read:

Rosy, how often have you conjured up a fool’s paradise? Well, let me tell you: the world’s just over yonder. And I’m not just talking about the hills that nurtured you or the rivers that acted as mother’s milk, but one bigger and more amazing than you’d ever known. Like a fattened Christmas turkey, it is ripe for the plucking.

Fly as high as an eagle, and where’ll you end up? Sail the longest sea, and where’ll you dock? Conquer all the land and what’ll you find? It’s up to you, my dearest nephew. With your guts and a pinch of sense, you’ll find that nothing can’t be done! From one fellow wool-gathering, star-gazing dreamer, drifter, adventurer and nomad to another!’

Love, Your Uncle Smokes

And just like that, I was sucked inside that atlas. Uncle Smokes’ letter was quickly memorized word for word, stroke for stroke, possibility to endless opportunity. And the usual Christmas hullabaloo passed faster than green grass through a goose.

That night, like Christmas Eves past, before I found out

you-know-who wasn't who-you-know, sleep wasn't going to happen. Though this year was due to a whole new kind of excitement. Minnow, a six-year old brother who brought annoying to Guinness proportions, more bother than brother, slept in the bed next to me. Pulling the quilt over my head, flashlight my guide, I soaked up the atlas's color-coded maps, like toast to a runny yoke. From the east coast to the west coast, I traveled through each and every state in America. I didn't just stop where the maps turned to blue. I just kept right on going beyond the oceans until my eyes began to sting.

Having only known the world from what I could see atop Turner's Point, I suddenly felt like I was drowning. My backyard had become nothing more than a fluff of dust that couldn't stir a sneeze.

I guess, I just never thought much about what was out there.

But since the package, all I wanted to do was get as far away as possible.

While Uncle Smokes gave me my "bus ticket," I had no idea which bus to take or how to take it.

That being a tomorrow problem, I was ready today!

Slamming the book shut, I threw off the quilt.

And in all the excitement, the flashlight was catapulted into the air.

It bounced against the wooden end of my bed frame, rolled back and forth for a moment, and then lay still.

A white beam shot across the room and beyond my bed.

Worried it would wake up Minnow, I quickly looked to the little bed across from mine. Minnow's finger still lay close to his nose, the tip stuck up inside its hole. Some suck their thumbs, while others, well, can only say that the kid picks a boogie worth showing every time.

He hadn't budged.

My eyes went back to the end of my bed.

Something, or I should say, someone, was caught in the spotlight.

My eyes flew back to Minnow's finger. It flinched, then came alive as it wormed its way in.

Gulping loudly, I tried to understand why something that hung from our bedroom wall since who knew how long, had now left me covered in goose bumps.

Li Mei

There was once a time, when every dish imaginable spread across our table, a drink in one hand, a bamboo water pipe in the other, and A'pa would proclaim, "In a remote mountainous plot of land in Yunnan Province, the people of Slippery Mountain Village will celebrate China's most favored holiday, the Spring Festival, as generations have done for centuries." For fourteen continuous days, there seemed no end to the festivities. We would celebrate the Chinese New Year and the prosperity it was sure to bring. Fireworks would light the night sky, a burst of bright, flowering colors flashing over the mountains. Deafening claps that would rumble over the mountains and rapidly shot cracks, which followed the colorless, but deafening firecrackers, would leave our ears buzzing for weeks. Red envelopes, stuffed with lucky money, overflowed children's happy pockets. Dancing and, of course, what made our people unique, our long-breath songs, where a single note can last for days on a solo breath, were often performed throughout the night.

Unfortunately, if there was once magic, it was no longer found in our home.

Fuses have been cut. Music silenced.

And even if there was, its happiness wasn't wanted.

On its eve, we sat on a small wooden bench. Da'bi, a shrunken, frail old man who was nearly blind in both eyes, snored softly as he leaned on his granddaughter. My father, a broken man, haunted with grief, bent over his bamboo water pipe, rested on the other. His eyes never left the ground as he lit the tobacco with a burning stick.

In the center of the room another family, one still whole,

sat around a square table. They munched on pickled chicken feet, glutinous rice balls, and other treats that were once cherished, but now looked cold and mushy.

My father gently patted my leg. His hand, streaked with blue veins, was rough. They let me know he was there, nothing more. Smoke trickled from the end of his two-foot long pipe.

The family enjoyed themselves around the table, forgetting or ignoring a burden that waited in the corner. One by one, the bowls were scraped clean, little red envelopes full of lucky New Year money were collected, and the bottles of homemade fire-water were drained. At one point, someone stuck an envelope in my hand. It was empty.

Everyone had left. We were alone. I wished we had never been invited. I was sure they felt the same. If asked, I didn't think I could even tell whose home it was. We'd been invited out of a neighbor's obligation, nothing more.

Once the carriers of our village's history, we were now viewed as an inauspicious sign of its end. The Jiao people believed it was best to retreat from bad luck for it may visit upon you if you ventured too close. My great-grandfather bore a single child, a son. And his son did the same. And while my father did not treat it as so, the heavy burden to bare a male offspring was his to carry. The Jiao belief had come true.

Careful to lean Da'bi's back against the wall, I pushed myself off the bench. I dragged myself to the open window. My turtledove slippers' cloth bottoms slid across the floor. My leather vest's spirit bells chimed quietly. I squeezed them in my hands as tight as I could, wanting to — no — needing to feel their tiny voices.

Streaks of light, resembling shooting stars, lit the wooden village below.

Laughing children and drunken men ran like stiff robots between the many bursts of light.