

# Matraca Berg

## *Headwaters*

**The** headwaters of the Cumberland River are pristine. Like many residents of eastern Kentucky, they have carved out a path over time, trickling down from the surrounding mountaintops and into the hollers below. Each of the three tributaries—Poor Fork, Clover Fork, Martins Fork—flows briskly through Harlan County over beds of rock, past the small communities along their banks. Sand Hill, Ages, Grays Knob. They meander into the town of Baxter like three unruly tree branches, joining at the confluence to form the trunk of the river itself. Its current winds lazily toward Pineville alongside U.S. Highway 119, drifting under swinging bridges and modern concrete and steel overpasses.

Like most other geographic boundaries, the Cumberland River marks the lives of the people who live on its banks. This is especially true in Wallins Creek—just a few miles from the Bell County line—where one of the town’s communities is called “Across the River.” Founded in the late 1800s, Wallins Creek quickly became a booming mining town. By 1912, the hamlet boasted three hotels, two theaters, a bank, several restaurants, an A&P grocery store, two pool halls and bars, a candy kitchen, and various other businesses, all connected by an elaborate boardwalk. Despite the town’s steady growth, much of its wealth was shipped out on railroad cars, carried north through the Cumberland Mountains and Ohio River Valley to Dearborn, Michigan. There, Wallins Creek coal helped build Henry Ford’s automotive empire.

After a fire destroyed the burgeoning town in the early 1920s, its residents were determined to rebuild. Their efforts were so successful that Royal Crown Cola erected a bottling plant there. A big band entertained the locals in one of the bars. But as Wallins Creek’s mines began to close in midcentury, many businesses also shut their doors. Countless families joined the Great Appalachian Migration, moving north in search of factory jobs at companies like Mosler in Cincinnati and General Motors in Detroit.

The Cumberland River remained a constant throughout this upheaval, a physical and spiritual marker for the people who remained in Wallins Creek.

They knew that to be fully “washed in the blood of the Lamb,” they first had to be cleansed in the murky waters of the Cumberland. Congregations speckled its banks on Sundays during warm weather, murmuring a ragged chorus of “Bless her, Lord” and “Thank you, Jesus” that impelled the new believer to join the preacher out in the current.

Total immersion, this was, and she became one with the river, plunging beneath its surface, her dress ballooning in a pocket of air.

“Hallelujah,” shouted the observers along the riverbank, knowing that they, too, had been baptized in its flow, marked by the inevitable April floods, the bluegill on their supper tables, the swimming hole of their youth.

The Cumberland was part of their collective memory, a current connecting them to their sons and daughters and grandchildren who had crossed its border in search of better opportunities. They knew that to leave these waters was to never truly be gone.

Matraca Berg left Wallins Creek in utero, carried away from the place of her conception by a Greyhound bound for Nashville. As the bus sped around the treacherous curves of Highway 119, Icie Calloway’s desperation must have been palpable.

Perhaps she stared vacantly out the window at the passing cliff faces, numb after being abandoned by the baby’s father. Or maybe she simply smoothed her cotton dress and let out a weary sigh, punctuating the longing she felt for a stable life and career as a singer-songwriter in the capital of country music. Regardless, the eighteen-year-old Icie had few choices in 1964, an era in which unwed girls “in trouble” were sent away before their indiscretions began to show.

“She had to get out of Wallins to keep up appearances,” Matraca explains, “so she came here to have me.”

Forty-six years later, Matraca is perched in a booth at Fido, a hip coffee shop located in Nashville’s Hillsboro Village. It’s a surprisingly warm afternoon in early March, and the doors of Fido are wide open,

allowing the sounds of pedestrians and traffic to trickle in from Twenty-first Avenue. They mingle with the shouts of two baristas straining to be heard over the roar of a blender and espresso machine.

Matraca tests her chamomile tea in silence. Bitter. She stirs in a few drops of honey. Another sip. Just right. She returns the fat cup to the table two-handed.

Her angular features look flawless against the lacquered wood of the bench, framed by strands of mocha-colored hair that cascade down past her shoulders. But the focal point of her face is a pair of dark, wide-set eyes that say everything. They are equal parts power and vulnerability, joy and melancholy, a rich brew that reveals a mature knowledge of the world and its workings. One glance conveys that she knows what it means to be an outsider, to defy the odds. Make no mistake: Matraca Berg is fierce.

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