

## These Old Mountains



Odyssey, the sunglasses-wearing otter, stretched with a yawn, his blue fur catching the first rays of the sun peeking over the ancient Appalachian Mountains. These weren't just any mountains, mind you. These were giants, older than anything Odyssey could ever imagine, their peaks once touching the clouds like the wrinkled elbows of a sleeping giant.

1.2 billion years old they were, and their rocky hearts held stories from a time when the Earth itself was young.

Odyssey's den was nestled along the gurgling Toxaway River, right where it snaked through the Blue Ridge Escarpment. This escarpment, though much younger than the mountains themselves, was still a mighty wall, rising from the valley floor like a challenge. While the mountains whispered tales of a bygone era, the escarpment hummed with the energy of its "young" 200 million years.

But Odyssey wasn't one for history lessons, at least not the kind that involved sitting still. He was an otter of action, and today, adventure called! With a flick of his tail and a splash, he joined his otter pals for their morning game. They chased each other through the crystal-clear water, its purity a testament to the health of the ancient mountains. The water, filtered through layers of rock older than time itself, teemed with life, making it easy for Odyssey to catch his breakfast - a plump crayfish scuttling across the riverbed.

After a satisfying meal, the otters reached the foot of the escarpment. With playful barks and excited chirps, they took turns launching themselves off moss-covered rocks, their sleek bodies slicing through the cool water. The current, born from the slopes of the ancient mountains, carried them on a thrilling ride down the mountainside. They weaved through submerged boulders, each one a silent sentinel from a forgotten age. These weren't your ordinary rocks, Odyssey knew. They were special, formed under tremendous heat and pressure, a story etched in their very being.

Some, like the smooth, banded rocks they often used as slides, were **gneiss** (pronounced nice). Gneiss, Odyssey learned from his wise grandma otter, was once like other rocks, but the incredible heat and pressure had squeezed and stretched them, swirling their minerals into beautiful bands like ribbons in a braid. Others, the flaky ones that shimmered like mica in the sunlight, were **schist** (pronounced shist).

These, grandma otter explained, were once sedimentary rocks, like the sandy beaches far downstream, but the same intense heat and pressure had squeezed and baked them, transforming them into these layered beauties.

As the sun began its descent, painting the sky in hues of orange and purple, Odyssey and his friends paddled back to their den. Curled up together, the warmth of friendship chasing away the mountain chill, they listened to the whispers of the ancient world around them.

For Odyssey, every day was an adventure, a chance to learn the stories whispered by the rocks and experience the magic of living in a place touched by time, a place where the whispers of the past mingled with the playful splashes of the present.