Barracks Gap, Virginia, U.S.A: "Day Gap" and "Decency\*"

*\* Since the 1982 edict, Barracks Gap has recognized the suburb of Decency as a "semi-official" appendage: its citizenry is included in the town's population figures, and may use some city services.*

Look us up, and you’ll read that Barracks Gap is an extended\* community of 36,000 people, located in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. There’ll be a dearth of information beyond that, not because fact sheets aren’t made available, but because the editors of reference texts rarely find anything beyond our population figures and location worth reporting. Or that's the explanation which will pop into the heads of any such editors, or any outsiders who might think to *ask* themselves why. We’re isolated, you see! And not much visited. There’s just no great clamor for details! The town is built halfway up a *bluff*, after all— with only one winding way in. For some reason, this last detail will strike all our briefly curious visitors as particularly convincing.

But do come, if you can find us, and you’ll no doubt think the place charming--not so charming as to make us remarkable, but then we’re fond of unremarkable. We have a sports stadium, and the usual pizza restaurants, and fast food chicken joints, and specialty coffee bars—local versions of them, rather than the national chains. You can buy fine pastries at Mama Mimi’s downtown, and enjoy a casual chatty meal if you like, and there’s a curious tacos and Chinese place right next to it that turns into our celebrated comedy club after dark. Celebrated by us, at least! It’s quite lively here downtown after dark; it’s just that not many out-of-towners hang around to know that.

There’s a really good community college—80% of the Barracks Gap kids who apply to college end up going there. We have an outdoor mall on one edge of town and an indoor mall on the other; we’re proud of our manufacturing zone, where some of us make carpets and clothing, furniture and flatware, a little miscellany of et ceteras, and the rest of us potter around the outlet stores set up at their front entrances. There’s probably nothing here stylish enough to be worth the trek in, though, if you’re from what we call “out of Gap”. There’s a signpost at the East Crossroads, on the left just past the fabrics shop, that tells of an old fort at the top of the Bluffs, but as the sign says, the place isn’t open to the public. You may hear that it’s fallen into disuse—indeed, some of it has; or that there’s a government research station up there—and indeed there is, although few locals will claim to know what’s being researched. Atmospheric studies, the tourist office fact sheet says, in the hope of not intriguing you enough for you to care.

Further down the Bluffs, there are fairly extensive suburbs, if you can call them that—the houses are scattered rather than clustered, and apart from the town’s high schools, two good nurseries, and a service station or two, there’s not much else in their vicinity. Except, of course, about 12 miles from downtown, on the main road in or out, where you can visit the Civil War Emporium and eat at the adjacent 2 star restaurant, The Mess Tent. Which is the closest most out-of-towners ever come to Barracks Gap. About halfway between us and Lyttleburg, the next town west, there’s that valley where 25 weekends a year the reenactors stage the same half-dozen battles. Reenactments are organized out of Lyttleburg, but there’s often a gungho contingent from Barracks Gap in attendance; our town may be isolated, but we don’t shun the world or anything. We wouldn’t want a reputation as mysterious oddball weirdos or anything.

Still, most of us Barracks Gappers suspect that quite a few of our neighbors are exactly that. Oddballs. Weird. And there’s no disputing they’re mysterious. Well, not just them. It’s the town itself, quite honestly, which is strange—right down to its climate and its botany—the range of plants that grows wild here is wholly implausible. And as to that one road in, or out, most of us have never taken it. And marvelously strange is the dark country that surrounds us: the ridiculously high woods behind the Fort; the network of caves, at least a few of which go all the way through to the back side of the mountain.

Let me put it another way. We're the public face of Barracks Gap (or the public façade, as my teenage kids have dubbed it), where the ordinary people of the ordinary United States live and work; amongst ourselves, we ordinary townspeople call this place *Day Gap*. But all of us, even those of us who never go there, or who may find ourselves there only once or twice in our lives, know about the *other* Barracks Gap, the side of town we call the Shadows.

Or *Shadow Gap*, as it was designated on the one map where I've ever seen it alluded to. Or *to Shadow Gap*, as the byways and alleys leading there were designated.

We have our ambassadors to Shadow Gap. We all know who they are, although most of us stay away from them, the same way we stay out of the Shadows. They help us live in balance with it, we know that; we respect them for it. We know the balance gets uneasy sometimes. We’re counting on them. We tip our hats to them when we run into them, in the grocery store maybe, to let them know we’re grateful to them; that we’re counting on them. And as best we can, we live our more or less ordinary lives.