

## In Reverence to Silent Rock

I remember the day I took notice of my father's impairment. I couldn't have been more than eight or nine at the time. Curiosity called me to it.

It was a sultry summer's day, a rarity in the Northwest, and I had just poured myself a cup of lemonade. I strolled across the house with the sweaty glass and nestled under the shade of the oak tree in our backyard to investigate the commotion my father was making.

I watched him wrestle with the blue two-stroke. He pulled the cord rhythmically until it choked to life with a chaotic sputter. Tufts of brown smoke emitted from the small machine as he pushed it across the lawn, cutting diagonal lines in the overgrowth. The air with the smell of freshly cut grass. Every other step he took, he'd sink one side of his body, giving him an interestingly choreographed gait. My head cocked to the side as I watched in silence. It seemed involuntary, but it didn't seem painful. I don't know how I hadn't noticed before. Maybe I was too young to realize such things, maybe I hadn't even cared.

But on that day, I was old enough and I did care.

It wasn't until later, however, that I'd actually find the courage to ask him about his stagger.

\*\*\*\*\*

I recall it being a Sunday. The house smelled of cinnamon from Dad's *world-famous* french toast. I was face first in the funnies. Dad liked his daily paper, but I only ever caught him reading two sections religiously, both of which were on Sunday: The A&E section and the Comics. He liked to argue with the critics who "don't know their asses from their faces" about

movies he'd never see and chuckled at cartoon strips made for people half his age. After he had his turn, I'd get my chance at deciphering what was going on over at Family Circus. Though I never quite got it, I still giggled as if I did.

Dad hobbled around the kitchen, as he usually did. The apron he wore was two sizes too small for him and it barely hung on for life. He was dreadfully singing some song from his youth, dipping bread into his "secret blend" and sipping on black coffee. Delectable smoke filled the air until it set off the fire alarm and he had to open the windows. The aromas wafted into the world, making the neighbors jealous, I'm sure.

He waited until he had a sizeable amount of toast on a plate before he brought it to the table so that all of us, my father, mother, brother and I, could eat together.

"Soups on!" His mealtime catch phrase to gather us around the table, though at this point, the smells had already drawn us to the table. He placed the plate on the center of the table and watched us all go at it like a pack of wild dogs on a pile of ribeye steaks. He sat back, sipped his coffee and waited with a smug grin. Looking back, I am pretty sure it was pride, but at the moment, I thought it was just him being polite.

After we had our fill, we sat at the table, our stomachs satiated. Mom blessed her husband's delicious meal and Dad made a joke about how he'd have to buy larger pants. I stared at my plate, took a breath, and figured it was the perfect time.

I asked him about his limp, cautiously, unsure of how he or the family would respond. My mother stopped chewing, wiped her mouth and stared lovingly at my father, awaiting his reply. My brother twirled his finger in the syrup pile on his plate and subsequently stuck his

entire digit in his mouth. Dad paused for a second, picked his teeth with his tongue and finished off his coffee.

“Well, son,” he said, as all fathers in sitcoms used to begin their stories. “I didn’t always walk like this...” And thus, he rambled off a story about how he permanently disfigured himself. Mom silently watched as he vigorously spoke with his hands, using powerful statements, emphasizing how masculine he once was and how he was lucky to be alive. The smirk on her face was a dead giveaway.

I was in awe, of course. It all made sense to me at the time, why wouldn’t it? My father would never lie, I thought naively. Youthful ignorance.

Throughout the years, I’d ask him to retell his story and he’d have a different one every time. Clearly a testament to his humor, which in turn, was my dismay. Or so I had always thought.

“Well, you see, it was the final game of the state championship and I was running for the winning touchdown...” Or “I sneezed walking down some stairs and caught myself wrong...” He’d also wrestled a bear, fell off his motorcycle, was born with it, kicked someone’s ass too hard, etc., etc.

My father had lived several lives and was clumsy in every single one of them.

I was never quite sure if it was my dad’s dry humor on display or him never coming to terms with what actually happened. However, it always made for a good story on an otherwise dull day.

But there was always one story that stuck with me. *Silent Rock*.

\*\*\*

“I used to be an avid skier. Both of us did.” The ice in his glass jingled and the whiskey swished as he motioned to my mother, “almost every weekend, we’d be up there on Mt. Hood.”

Dad paused in reverence as he looked at the snowcapped peak in the distance.

At the time, we lived just outside of Portland and on most days when it wasn’t cloudy, you could see the silhouette of the gem of the Cascade Mountains, Mt. Hood. It stood as a beacon, looking over the valley and kept a watchful eye on the residents below. A dormant volcano with breathtaking scenery, unmatched both from afar and on its surface.

“You see, there’s only one way to reach the summit of her beauty and that’s taking Highway 26 straight up her thigh.” Dad had a whimsical way with words and occasionally made the strangest things oddly sexual in nature.

At the edge of his outstretched arm, he pointed his index finger towards the mountain and closed one eye as he traced her angled edge all the way to the apex.

“Yeah, 26 is a winding road, a gorgeous one, a man can really get mesmerized by her sensual curves. There are some great views coming through that pass, granted, but there’s also a quiet danger.” His voice deepened at that statement and remained in a distressed tone as he continued, “plenty of steep drops and slippery roads. Black ice and accidents. And, above all, Silent Rock.” He paused to take a drink of his whiskey, for emphasis, and gulped as condensation from the ice formed droplets on his moustache.

My dad knew how to tell a story.

“Silent rock?” I asked. I was entranced by his prelude. I tried to focus while being slightly irritated by my brother chasing the dog around the yard, oblivious to the adult conversation we were having.

“Mhhmm.” Dad wiped his upper lip, “Silent Rock. That cruel mistress. Some say there was a terrible accident that happened up there. A semi-truck lost its footing in the snow coming off the mountain and took out a few cars on its way down to the valley below.” He let out a solemn lament. “Some say a poor construction worker was up there minding his own business, when he slipped and fell.” He bowed his head in memoriam.

“Either way, as legend has it, you need to be completely silent as you pass that part of 26.”

“And what if you aren’t?” I asked as I leaned closer to him, sitting on the patio early that evening.

He placed one of his elbows on his knee and leaned closer to me. His face contorted into a serious glare and his voice became graveled, “...then God help you.”

He must have seen the fear in my eyes as he said that because he backed off and dug his smile out of hiding.

“Jesus.” My mother, who I had forgot was there, hit him on the shoulder. “Don’t scare the boy.”

“Hey, I am just saying.” He turned to her. “You remember that day.” He chortled.

“I remember *A day*.”

He turned back to me. “Of course, the first time I heard about Silent Rock, I thought it was bullshit. I was young, I had a hot lady on my side (a slight giggle emerged behind mom’s red cheeks) and a sweet ride. We were champions of that mountain. A little rock couldn’t stop us.” He paused and took another drink, gulped, and continued, “so, I turned up the radio and gave the rock the finger as we drove past.” He raised his fist in the air. “ROCK AND ROLL, BABY.”

I chuckled awkwardly at his outburst, but also in fear of what was to come.

“Some rock,” he said boastfully. “We ended the day just fine. Got in plenty of smooth runs, a few drinks, and headed back home for the evening, all the while laughing and having a good time.” He exhaled. “Then my tire blew.”

“Oh, shit.” I gasped.

“Oh, shit is right. I assume the chains must have come loose, or we ran over a loose rock, or something. But either way, I immediately had to pull over.” He took a deep breath. “I got out of the car and grabbed the jack and the spare and began to jack up the car. All the while, cars were whizzing past spraying old slush at me while a light mist hung in the air. It was horrible.”

*Winter in Oregon. It’s bearable. Unless you have to change your tire on the side of a mountain.*

Sip. Gulp. “So anyway, I have the car jacked up.” He squatted down at this statement. His animated arms acted out the story so I could picture exactly what he was doing, “I am about to unbolt the flat when the car starts to slide. Long story short, the car hops off the jack, falls on my ankle, your mom has to flag down a car, they take me to the hospital and I had to get three surgeries and some badass scars.” He stumbled backwards to emphasize the conclusion. My eyes

widen. He grimaced and rubbed his ankle hidden under his denim covered leg as if it flared up whenever he mentions it.

“Can I see the scars?” I asked with glowing eyes.

“Maybe one day.” He continued to rub his ankle. “But not today, not now.”

“Aw, c’mooon!”

“And spoil the mystery? No way.”

Mom loudly sighed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Years went by and Dad never repeated that story. Much like his other sagas, it was lost in the narrative of time, a “you had to be there” kind of moment. But I was there. I was present. And for some reason, that story always resonated with me.

As I got older, I’d taken several trips to the summit of Mt. Hood with friends and family. I thought I’d be a snowboarder at one point. Or I’d try my hand at being Jack Torrance with a cup of hot cocoa and a laptop writing the next great novel in Timberline Lodge. Or we’d pass by visiting family on the other side of the state. Either way, every time I passed the rock, I remained silent and I always asked my companions to do the same.

Dad was right. Silent Rock is perfectly nestled on the edge of the universe overlooking the glory God has to offer. The rock itself, however, is less mythical in image and more like disregarded remnants of Mt. Hood. It lays there, motionless, after construction workers and semi-trucks unloaded hundreds of feet of earth, etching Highway 26 into her side. Regardless,

those who know, know that Silent Rock means something. It's not just a tall tale, but it is a part of the community. A life all its own that should be respected as such.

I'd speak to people in passing who'd have similar stories and experiences. Several, "Well, what I had heard," and "No, it wasn't *that*, it was *this*...", but they all culminated on one conclusion: the subject only tried their hands at making a commotion at Silent Rock once. It only takes one broken ski, one dislocated shoulder, one empty tank of gas, one snowstorm, one loose car jack, to ensure a person never tempts fate again.

Everyone had a story. Everyone *has* a story. Local legends spawn local narratives.

You just don't make noise at Silent Rock.

\*\*\*\*\*

Inside a simple black frame, an 8x10" picture of my father rests at the corner of my desk. I sit back in my chair, sipping the lukewarm coffee masked by hazelnut creamer and stare at his image. Yellowstone, 1993. The hike wasn't long, but at the end, there was a beautiful viewpoint of the earth and my father had conquered it. He stood there proud, snotty handkerchief he'd always carry with him wrapped around a walking stick he found on the trail, like a flag flapping in the wind. The shorts he used to wear left very little to the imagination. One of his ghastly white legs props itself on a stone, the only saving grace would be the long socks he would wear. They'd creep up way past his ankles and rest unfashionably on his calves. He overlooked the world below his feet through a pair of binoculars he haphazardly bought at the gift shop moments earlier.

That was my father. An explorer. A visionary. A man of myth and legend. But also, a man who was resourceful and just went with the flow. Maybe that evolved from growing up in



the Sixties or being the middle child of five. There was no right or wrong answer. But that was never part of the discussion. The only mark he left in this world was his modest bravado, which was measured in inches and not in feet.

He stoically stands on my desk, commanding respect, humbly of course and with a hint of humor.

That was my father.

It's been four years since Michael Patrick Connor left us and not a day goes by in which we don't mourn his absence. It was a simple funeral. The wake filled with whiskey and laughs and mythic tales about a man who left an impact on so many lives. It was a sad time, but sorrow was the last thing on anyone's mind that day. The room fluttered with smiles and jokes and voices of a wonderful life well lived.

I tried pressing my mother about his limp once after his death and she simply grinned. The same grin she had at the breakfast table that Sunday morning. Maybe she never knew herself or if she did, she wasn't about to give up the truth to that narrative. In some ways, I was content with that response. It no longer mattered. The mythos already burned into my brain. Something planted years ago watching him wrestle with the lawnmower, something passed down through the years from mouth to ear. A simple idea sprouting multiple endings.

And they were all right.

Nowadays, whenever I travel up Highway 26, I pass Silent Rock and take my time, turn down the radio, hush my passengers and hold my breath. I do so in reverence to those who died in that wreck. In reverence to that poor construction worker. In reverence to Mt. Hood for

gracefully allowing me to travel up her thigh. In reverence to those who think they can tempt fate, even once.

And in reverence of my father, a man who survived it all.

THE END