

# On the Mountain

The last time my dad hit me was the time I hit him back. All of my good sense had fled from me that summer, and it would not come back for decades.

That morning I had not been singing with the rest of the church before the sermon, and he had caught me. My father was not a patient man, but on the ride home, he calmly asked why I hadn't been singing the praises of God. I told him there were some words I didn't understand. If I didn't understand them, why would I sing them as if I were being sincere? It was the wrong answer, even for a twelve year old.

After we got home and put on our work clothes, he determined to test his sons. He had my brother and I down on the vegetable beds he had planted by the creek. It was a punishment my brother did not deserve, and so when my muscles ached and I felt too hot to keep going, I sent him away, saying I would handle the rest of the weeds and the watering. As soon as he was gone, I abandoned the plants and went down to the creek. I told myself that I would just be resting for a little bit, to cool off and get back to work. I was gullible, or perhaps manipulative enough to believe the lie. It didn't take long for Dad to descend upon the banks of the river and find me napping in the green shade of one of the little poplars there.

When dad woke me up, he already had the switch in his hands. He stood tall and noble, his face was turned up as if he could not even bear to look down on a creature as low as me. Once, when he would strike, his instrument of correction came down with pious fury, and after came remorse, sometimes tears. I wish you wouldn't make me do this, it hurts me

too, God demands correction, but I do not find joy in giving it... But, as I grew older, and he came to realize that his son would not be hammered into shape like iron on the anvil, his strikes started to lose their righteousness.

He asked why I was not weeding the garden, as if perhaps there existed some circumstance that could spare me my inevitable pain. I gave no excuse, I was to grow into a man, and a man accepted punishment without trying to weasel out of it. I thought that an acceptance of my circumstance could win me at least a bit of respect in his eyes. Of course he saw it as defiance, and it earned me only pain.

After a pause that normally signified the end of the whipping, I started to pull my jeans back up over my swollen red skin, proud in the knowledge that I had shed no tears, I even tried to hide a smile. My defiance set fire to his wrath, but when he arced back to deliver another blow, the fury now unmistakable on his face, I did what all good sons do, and took after my father.

I closed the distance with fury of my own, and swung blindly with a hand that mirrored his not in size, but in rage. I struck the blade of his hip with the knuckle of my pinky finger as the rest of my fist sank into his abdomen. Though his strike did not meet its mark, the momentum of our swings threw me to the ground.

As I scrambled away across the smooth stones down by the rushing creek, he roared in pain and anger. I thought at that moment that he would kill me, and I knew that he did too. My fingers wrapped around a smooth stone, and as he dropped the switch and stalked towards me, eyes red and unblinking, I threw it through the air. Unlike David, my stone did not strike Goliath, but, unlike David, I did not need it to.

The rock knuckled past his left ear, and he ducked away from it. When he opened his eyes again, it was not as the monster that had pursued me up the riverbank, but as my father. His mouth hung open, his hand shot up to stifle a yelp of an emotion I had never before seen, and he ran up to the house like I had done the switching.

I took no chances when I got to my room. My brother was ashen-faced, and though I could see the question in his eyes, he never asked, he only stared at me as I rifled through my scattered drawer of junk and scrap paper. When I had finally found my pocket knife, I breathed. I stuffed it into my pocket, but did not dare let it go. I rushed to the bathroom and locked the door. Finally, my tears started to fall. They were not falling for pain or sadness. I had never experienced an emotion such as I felt in that moment. And so I sat on the toilet with my pants up, cursing the tears who boiled off of my face before they could fall onto the linoleum.

The bathroom had neither a window nor a clock, and so time passed by without my consent. My father knocked on the door and my grip on the knife tightened. I brought it out. It was a cheap blade, its handle was loose plastic, but it was my knife, and I knew it like my right hand. If swung with just the right speed and force, the blade could open in a flash. I practiced this motion without saying a word, and found that this new kind of rage I had only begun to feel, had sharpened my ability to draw my weapon with such cunning and precision.

My Dad knocked again. "Elijah... Let's eat dinner."

When I opened the door, knife hand concealed, he was not in the hallway. We ate at the dinner table without looking up, what happened down by the creek would not be

mentioned. Nobody dared ask about it, and I dared not speak at all, lest my guard go down. When we had finished and I crept to the kitchen to clean up, Dad spoke to Mom.

"Eli and I are going to go for a drive." It was not a question, he would never ask his wife for permission anyways. We walked out to his truck with deliberate steps, and my heart was pounding. It could have been an apology or a death sentence. I started running through all of the scenarios in my head. If he said these certain words I would respond like so, if he tried to crash the truck I would unbuckle myself and open the door in one fluid motion, if he tried to grab me I would swing my knife out and threaten him like this...

He started the truck and we drove without any words. We started to go up through the foothills. I knew the roads. If I have to jump out here, I can run to the Caparelli's place and try to explain to them that my dad has gone crazy-

Then he turned onto a road that I had seen many times before, but had never been on. The road went up, and up, and switched back on itself twice before doing a spiral up the side of a dry pine-strewn hill. The truck's engine strained, and the asphalt with a steep grade turned into red dirt with an angle so intense that it felt like the truck would roll nose over tail into the darkening sky. We came to a gate bolted all over with warning signs, and stopped there. Dad killed the engine, but left the key in the ignition and turned the radio on. On the radio, there was a man speaking passionately about nothing in particular. Suddenly there was a soft pop over the truck speakers. The man kept talking as if nothing had happened, then another arrhythmic pop.

"Look" My dad pointed out his window, and there was the sky. It was vast, red, and cloudy, we could see Mount Diablo silhouetted against a hellish backdrop of red clouds, and I

realized that I couldn't just see the sky, I was in the sky. I could see the whole Central Valley out in front of me. It was shadowed by a thick layer of storm, and when white bolts of lightning flashed between the clouds, the man on the radio was again interrupted with that muted "pop".

"The lightning—" I pointed to the radio.

"It's some kind of interference, a quirk of electricity." He said, nodding. He only let me see the back of his balding head. We listened and watched for a while longer, and the sun seemed to hang around only to give us light by which we could see down into the valley.

After a while, the sky started to grow darker, and he turned the key out of the ignition. Back still to me, he opened his door.

"Get out."

My grip tightened on my knife, but I left the truck as well.

He strode up to the gate, hopped, and vaulted it. I blinked, and the tension in my body was replaced by surprise. So strong was the whiplash, so long had I been focused on survival, that I nearly pissed myself.

"What about the warning signs?" I whispered.

He looked back at me, his smile wide. There was a sparkling tear that ran down the side of his nose. "Nobody's ever here, come on, there's more to see."

Dumbstruck, I let him lead me all the way up the hill. I wondered if Abraham had cried while he led Isaac up the mountain, then wondered if Isaac brought his own knife, thinking he could protect himself.

There was a building at the top, with none of the trees around reaching higher than the great metal masts on its roof. I asked him what it was and he told me that he didn't know. It was all steel beams and metal triangles and dishes and wires and antennae. Its walls felt old, like they were built for a future that never came to pass. It was lit, and thrummed with low buzzing frequencies, like a microwave turned out. It wasn't any larger than a camping trailer. My blood surged in my head, my mouth watered and tasted like pennies, all while my father, who had murder in his eyes hours ago, skipped up the hill and peeked around trees like a magpie. He waved over to me and we scrambled up a rusted steel ladder that reached to the flat roof of the station. Beeps and hums emanated from the building while we sat clutching our knees, and we looked over the valley from our perch.

I watched as the clouds over the valley spiraled into a storm like I had never seen. I saw the clouds fall down onto the fields and lights in heavy red-gray lines. Lightning flashed more and more, and the storm drew out my rage and turmoil. I let go of my knife, it clattered onto the flat roof and I didn't pick it back up. My father's rage was feeding the storm too, I could feel it leaving us and joining the late summer tempest.

It was heretical and we both knew it. We were not praying to God our father to lift the anger out of our bodies and cleanse our souls; but the storm accepted us, and she fed on our rage. There was something about the clouds, their hues were darker than what Yahweh would create. Their unholiness surged across the valley, pillars detonating out of them like ripples of bloodstained silver. As my heart slowed down, the winds picked up, whipping and whirling around us while we sat on that profane electromagnetic temple. My muscles relaxed, and my blood rushed in to cool them. My Dad's tears did not stop, and when he finally turned to me, he said, with shame in his teary smile.

"I'm sorry. It's not right, but I don't know another way."

"I forgive you." I said, and the breeze blew the tears diagonal down my cheeks.

"Don't, not yet." He faced the darkening valley. "You don't know what I just did."

Nobody ever talked about what happened by the river. For a week I could not feel or move the knuckle that struck bone, or the finger below it, but I said nothing of the injury. I had earned it and would not sully the act by complaining of its consequences. As I grew into a man, the finger did not grow right, and it was never able to move the way it should have.