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## How Strange, Innocence

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# HOW STRANGE, INNOCENCE

**CLARE MENAHAN**

I am only seven years old when I visit Yellowstone National Park for the first time. I race up and down the boardwalks, full of wonder and questions, the smell of sulfur and sunscreen overwhelming my senses. My sister holds my mother's hand tightly in her fist, pointing at tourists. My father watches the birds flying overhead through his binoculars. His wristwatch catches the sunlight as he moves to watch the birds, temporarily blinding me. I watch him for a moment, peering through his binoculars at the sky before turning to run down the boardwalk to the river.

I sit down on the bank, pull my socks and shoes from my sweating feet and plunge them into the river, gasping from its icy touch. As the minutes pass slowly, I lose feeling in the tips of my toes so that the water feels almost warm. The sound of it moving over the rocks fills my head, drowning out the din of tourists around me. I sit like this for several more minutes before my father finds me resting on the ground with feet submerged, toes tingling. He sits down next to me and doesn't say anything as he removes his own shoes and socks. We watch as a school of minnows swirl around both our ankles. He holds two hands out in front of him, as if to applaud, but instead he moves them underwater. When he pulls his cupped hands back, there are two minnows trapped in the pool of water cupped in his hands. I look up at him and smile.

For my eleventh birthday, my father takes my sister and I backpacking in the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness. His pack is old, with an external frame in hunter's orange while Kate's pack is a deep blue. I use my school pack to carry the few things that my father and sister cannot, holding a feather that I found by the side of the trail delicately in one hand. We have made our camp next to a lake that sits in a bowl, surrounded on all sides by towering mountains. I watch him from the top of a huge granite

boulder by the edge of the water, hugging my knees to my chest to warm them from the onset of cool mountain air. The lake is glacial blue and very still so that the towering mountains on the opposite shore are reflected on its smooth surface. My father fishes from the shore to my left, holding the line delicately between two fingers and clenched teeth. He balances his rod on his shoulder with the butt end resting on the earth, his fingers moving in complicated patterns tying a fly to the end of his line while my eyes strain from the effort of trying to make sense of his motions. He glances up at me and I smile and wave back.

He moves his arm right arm in great, sweeping motions, his fly rod flitting back and forth like a giant pendulum keeping time. I watch the bright green leader closely as it gently falls to the water's surface, spread out in a long, thin ribbon. I grip the rock underneath with my toes in anticipation. When he hooks a fish, I scramble from the rock and slide to the ground, cutting my hand on a sharp edge. I hold the thumb of my uninjured hand over the cut to stop the bleeding as I run the short distance to the water's edge where my father is kneeling in the water. The small fish gasps for breath, turning over in his hands. Its streamlined body is lined and dotted with intricate patterns that resemble some ancient world map. The water is clear and cool on the backs of my knees as I wade in to stand next to him.

My father cradles the fish gently between two hands underwater, moving them back and forth in an attempt to get oxygen flowing through its gills, but the fish rolls to its side every time he removes his hands. We do this for several minutes before I ask my father if the fish is going to die. He doesn't answer. We take turns holding the fish upright underwater as it opens and closes its mouth. The water makes the cut on my hand bleed more freely. My father notices and sloshes to shore, dripping water as he walks into the trees to our tent. He comes back with a cloth bandage, expertly wrapping my hand. He assures me that everything will be fine. I don't ask if, by this he means my hand will be fine or that the fish will live. When he wades back to shore to make a fire, I stay knee-deep in the lake, cradling the fish in my good hand, willing it to wriggle free. It never does.

I am fifteen and walking home from school when a green suburban swerves off the side of the road, crashing into a telephone pole. There is the sound of breaking glass accompanied by the car horn's uninterrupted wail. I sprint to the driver's side door, my heart pounding in my chest. Inside, the man's eyes stare blankly back at me, unmoving. The weight from his head resting on the steering wheel pushes the car horn in. He is bleeding from his nose and the left side of his face is mangled, spattered with brain matter.

"Oh my God," I whisper. "Oh my God." I back away, slowly, not able to look away from the

dead man's face. When I close my eyes, the image of him, lifeless in his car swims across my vision. I turn and run the six blocks to my house in a dead sprint, dropping my backpack from my shoulders in one, fluid movement.

"Dad!" I scream before I am even inside the house, tearing through the front yard and up the front steps. My legs burn from the effort.

"Dad!" I look around the front entryway wildly, relieved to see him appear at the top of the steps.

"What's wrong?"

"There was an accident, a car crash, just down the street. Please, you have to do something." He moves quickly, grabbing his EMT bag, taking the steps two at a time. We leave the front door open in our wake, running down the middle of the street all arms and legs and gritted teeth.

On a Friday night, we go to the symphony. The usher, a tiny, gray-haired woman, shows us to our seats on the aisle of the second row in the balcony. I sit, sandwiched between my mother and father, reading off the program in my father's hands. When the lights dim and the curtain rises, I can see my sister seated with the violins, wearing a black dress that fits loosely on her small frame. My father settles back into his seat when the music starts, resting his elbow on his armrest, his chin in his cupped hand. His watch reflects the light from the stage every so often when he moves around in his chair. My mother turns to glare at the person behind me when they take out a piece of candy, unwrapping it noisily during the second movement. I try to roll my eyes at my father, but I don't know if he can see me in the dark.

After intermission, I find my way back to my seat, a cup of water in one hand and a program that I found on the floor in the other. I take the aisle seat this time and flip through the program. As I wait for the lights to dim, I stop to read an advertisement for a local bank. I recognize the section of river on the page, thinking about the last time my father and I fished there. I smile at the memory as the lights flash on and off, my parents taking their seats beside me. I hand my father the program, flopped open to the page.

"Do you remember this?" I ask him, grinning. He glances down at the image and, smiling warmly, looks up at me and nods back. I take a sip of water, setting my glass back to the floor as the lights go out in the theatre. I absentmindedly trace the scar on the palm of my hand as the music starts. When I look over, my father has his arm wrapped around my mother's shoulders. I am shocked to see that his face is streaked with tears. I quickly look away. I cannot shake the feeling that I have just witnessed something I was never intended see. I try not to, but I nod off at some point during a par-

ticularly slow piece, head dropping to my chest. When I wake up, I won't remember my father crying in the dark theatre until I am much older, when Kate asks me when I knew something was wrong. We drive back to our house in silence, snow falling in white sheets to the ground. I am sixteen.

I am sitting in a plastic waiting chair, reading the same bank advertisement from a year ago at the symphony when a nurse walks in. She holds a clipboard in one hand and a pen in the other. Her nails are painted red to match her lipstick. We make eye contact and her face falls slightly. She walks the length of the room in a few short strides.

"I'm sorry," she says. "We did all we could."

The magazine falls from my hands to the floor.

My legs shake from exhaustion and my chest hurts from the effort of running the last two miles at a suicidal pace. My feet pound the earth rhythmically, sending clouds of dust into the air as I pump my arms and crest the top of the hill, my breath coming in short gasps. A distant train blows its horn in one long, lonesome note as the old clock tower chimes twice. I slow to a walk and look up through the tops of houses, admiring the few stars that are not covered by clouds. I rest my hands on my hips as I walk up the middle of the street to the house, relieved to find the windows dark. The old sofa that we turned out a week ago is still sitting in the middle of the yard with a 'FREE' sign taped to one of its cushions. Milo has managed to flatten himself pancake-style along the length of one armrest, his eyes reflecting the light from a street lamp. When I sit down, he curls up in my lap, purring loudly.

"Why do good people have to die?" I ask him. He flicks his tail in response.

I am eighteen, skipping rocks from the shore off Flathead Lake. Kate sits on the dock, hugging one knee to her chest and dangling her other foot off the edge, toes skimming the water. The wind catches her hair, whipping it across her face as two birds chase each other, tumbling through the sky. She stares across the water to the mountains on the other side, not really seeing them. When she stands, she is lost in the folds of her loose clothing. I can feel her ribs through the fabric when I hold her at night, rocking her back to sleep when she wakes up screaming from nightmares of our father in his hospital bed, his mouth opening and closing, unable to form any real words. I throw the rock hard into the waves and it skips five or six times across its surface before sinking to the bottom.

As the sun begins its slow trajectory across the sky, dipping behind the mountains, I lie flat on the cold ground parallel to the shoreline and listen to the waves as they wash across the stones. I close

my eyes as my hands and feet grow numb with cold, listening to a fish rise out across the lake. I listen to Kate's crunching footsteps as she walks from our cabin down to the shore and when I turn my head and finally open my eyes, I find that her bare feet are mere inches from my face. She moves to sit next to me, by my head. Several minutes pass before we are brave enough to say anything to each other.

"Why do good people have to die?" she asks me. I move my head to look at her, but she is back to staring out over the water, searching the distant mountains for the answers to her questions. I take a very long time to respond, thinking that maybe it is because we did not love him enough.

"I don't know, Kate," I whisper. She reaches out to pick up a small stone, turning it over in her thin hands. Half a dozen pelicans float into view, their fat white bodies and the bright orange of their bills contrasting against the gray lake. The birds huddle together, turning left and right as they watch the water's surface for signs of life. One of the birds dips its head and reemerges with a fish flopping against the confines of its long neck. The bird flaps its wings as if to right itself and then resumes its silent vigil, bobbing silently on the waves. Kate holds the stone up to the vanishing sunlight.

"There are scientists," she begins, "who study those birds or even something as inanimate as this rock, but no one seems interested in studying our own species in a similar way. Doesn't that seem odd to you? I mean, doesn't it seem odd that we can explain why two bull elk lock horns and persist, often until one of them dies, but we are powerless to explain why our own species does much the same thing for what we can only assume are for different reasons?"

I study the stone in her hands. "It looks like a heart," I tell her.

"I know," she says, turning it over once more in her hands.

"I think Dad somehow knew he was running out of time," I say. "We all knew the risks, he knew working on an ambulance was dangerous." I pick up a rock from the bank and toss it into the water. The pelicans turn in unison to confront the splash but are otherwise uninterested in our presence.

I am nineteen and sandwiched between my mother on my left and my sister on my right. I hug my father's ashes between my thighs as I use my hands to focus the lens of my camera, staring into the yawning crevasse that is the Grand Canyon while the river below slowly winds through its walls on its journey to reach the ocean. I remember reading somewhere that the Colorado River hasn't actually made it to the sea in over a decade. I wonder if my own life will parallel that of the once mighty Colorado, if I am destined to lead a life full of potential and purpose, only to dry up before making anything of my life. When I turn to ask Kate if she knows how long it has been, I am surprised to see tears falling from wild eyes, softly into her lap.

We sit on the same sofa that adorned our front yard for all those years, the upholstery dirty from decades of use. I let my camera fall to my chest, hanging from the strap around my neck as I gently pass the urn to my mother. I take a folded note from my back pocket, flattening it across one armrest. In a voice I hope won't betray my true feelings, I read from the letter addressed to my deceased father.

"Dad," I say, my voice already too quiet. I start again, clearing my throat. "Dad, I wish you could've been there with me to fish the Missouri last week. I used the Adams flies we tied two summers ago on the stretch outside of Craig. I saw two herons building a nest across the river, and a Swainson's thrush when I was having lunch on the bank. It made me think of you." I pause to glance at my mother. She clutches the box containing my father's ashes to her chest. Her eyes brim with tears, nodding for me to continue.

"I really miss you, Dad. I miss the sound of your voice and your hugs. I feel like I'm starting to forget you because I can't remember certain things, like the sound of your laugh and whether you liked cheesecake or apple pie better. I want to introduce you to my friends; I want you to embarrass me in front of them. I miss playing music with you outside our house in the yard on the sofa you and Mom bought with the house. I like to listen to the tapes we made together every few months, just to hear your voice." At this, hot tears fill my eyes and run down my face, blurring the words on the page.

"I won't get another chance to surprise you on your birthday or wish you Merry Christmas or tell you that I love you, but I can still be proud of you when people talk about what a great man you were and how you were always there for them when they needed help. You can still inspire me with your selflessness. You left people with so many good memories of you. They always mention how you made them laugh, always listened, how you always helped whomever you could with whatever you could. It gives me so much joy to hear these things about you and inspires me to be the kind of daughter you'd be proud of.

"The universe works in strange ways. I will never understand why bad things happen to good people or why bad people aren't always held accountable. I don't remember if I told you I loved you before you went to work the day of the accident. I know I told you before, I know that you knew I loved you, but I don't think I told you enough. I don't think we ever tell the people in our lives that mean the most to us how much we appreciate them. I make a point, now, to tell my friends and Kate and mom how much I care about them and how much of a difference they have made in my life. I try not to forget, and thinking about you helps me to remember.

"When I was growing up, I thought you were the most wonderful person in the world because you taught me how to skim stones and whistle. It makes me so sad now knowing that I won't ever get

to do those things with you again. I take comfort knowing that you had a good life and that you died making a difference in the world. I also know that this sadness will change into something different in the years to come, that the pain won't ever go away, but one day I won't feel quite so raw and hollow. I miss you so much, Dad. No amount of consolatory words will ever change that. Please know that you are never far from my thoughts."

I wipe the tears from my eyes on the back of the worn leather band of my father's wristwatch, its face gleaming in the setting sun. My mother stands from the sofa, a fistful of my father in her slender hands. In one fluid motion, she moves her arm to release my father's ashes on the breeze over the Colorado River. I smile, knowing he will one day reach the sea.