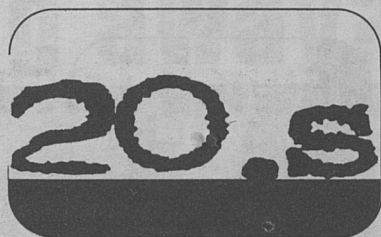


feature

TWENTY SOMETHING
 by thomas henning


Solid as a Rock

When I was young, my family lived in a small New Hampshire town. Our house was nestled in the woods, and on the road to our barn, there was a giant rock. I loved that rock. It was mammoth, charcoal gray, exposed on two sides, and encrusted with dead trees on back. It had a slope effect that made it exciting to climb and walk to the highest point, where you felt as if you were on the edge of a cliff.

Whenever I felt sad, which was often, I would go to that rock and sit – just sit and think about whatever childhood angst was plaguing me. Its size made me feel safe, as if nothing could harm me when I was on it. (Stay with me, pumpkins; I know I lost a few of you there.) I would sit for hours, thinking how I would construct the world if I were its architect. It was completely exposed, but somehow, when I was on that rock, I felt hidden from all the evil in the world.

My brothers and I would play warrior there. The trick was to get on the rock first so the others, wielding limbs from dead trees, had the disadvantage. If they stormed the rock in force, you would abandon the fortress and find a more

powerful woodland weapon.

When we weren't playing warrior, we were daring the others to jump from the rock, with nothing but the rocky earth to break the fall. Hey, when you grow up with an all-brother ensemble in the country, you're forced to find adventurous ways to spend your time.

The rock would also act as a shield when we got into epic acorn wars. Oh, pumpkins, you haven't lived until you've played war in the forest with nothing but a birch branch and a pocket full of acorns as weapons. We were merciless (which might explain my competitive streak), throwing those acorns with all we had, climbing trees, ducking behind the rock, and doubling back for surprise attacks.

It has been years since I was in an acorn war. I have grown up; times change and events ensure you can never have that exact moment again. I understand that, but every now and

then I miss those times. I realized that when I went home for the weekend recently.

I have spoken often of how I miss my brother Sam, who died several years ago. I rarely speak of my other two brothers, Michael and Nicholas.

You haven't lived until you've played war in the forest with nothing but a birch branch and a pocket full of acorns for weapons.

Seeing then that weekend reminded me how much I love and miss them. I miss running with Nicholas as his little feet tried to keep up and his hand clutched mine desperately. (It's a wonder I never pulled his arm out of the socket!) I miss planning brotherly pranks on my siblings, playing arcade games, even competing over something as simple drinking the most glasses of water in the

least amount of time. We were young and the world didn't seem so overwhelming, people didn't seem as complex, and all we needed was each other.

I am older now and don't see my family as often as I would like. Gone are the Thanksgiving football games, afternoons spent sledding, and late nights in the kitchen making holiday ornaments. What isn't gone is their love. I look into the faces of my family and see so much love. I am so fortunate to have a family that, despite years of dysfunction (I'm talking dysfunction super-sized), love one another. I wish you could feel the love I have for my brothers. I am not an emotional person, I have said

ride it until it bucks me off into the mud. But I will always have those memories. When things get too crazy, I can just close my eyes and remember four little boys under the covers in a single bed during a lightning storm, each telling the others it would be okay in one breath and a scary story in the next.

Those boys are my rock, and I love them and am proud of them. We experienced some things that no one, especially a child, should ever have to experience, but we also were given each other as a gift and a shield to survive those experiences and to thrive as individuals and a family.

I don't know where I was going with all this, except that being reminded of that rock and the time spent on it reminded me what is important to me in my life. Obviously, that's my family and friends, but there is more. It is the quality of life that rock represents that I have come to realize is crucial to my happiness.

I fell off that rock and got banged up more time than I can remember, but I kept going back because of all the love and joy that surrounded it. I hope for you, pumpkins, that you find your "rock," and you not only realize it, but cultivate it.

I love you, Michael & Nicholas.▼

repeatedly, but I when I think of my love for them, it is a Hallmark and FTD commercial all rolled into one.

I may no longer have that big rock to protect me or be that little boy running around with a pocketful of acorns trying to be "king of the rock." I don't think the day will come again that I put on brown corduroy overalls, jump on a pig, and

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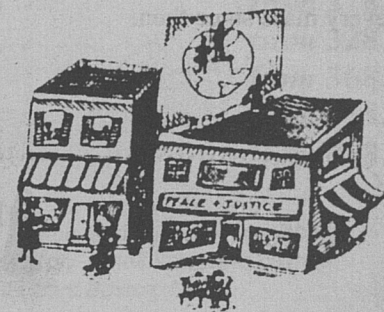
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