

Family Trees | RICK ATTIG

AT 6,873 FEET, SPANISH PEAK rises above mahogany thickets, wind-bent pines, and a grove of quaking aspens a few dozen miles from the geographic center of Oregon. It's the 261st highest peak in Oregon and the 14,086th highest in the United States.

- My sister's name, Kim, and her birthday are carved deep into the soft white bark of one of the aspens that tremble in the wind just below Spanish Peak. There is no record in the aspens of my parents' hurry-up marriage that year, or their ages at the time: Dad nineteen, Mom seventeen. Years later, my father sat me down for a one-and-done talk about sex, a conversation awkward in every conceivable way, and he confessed to having mistakenly believed that a woman could get pregnant only if she and the man reached orgasm at the same moment.
- My dad had lost his mother to pneumonia when he was five years old, and he was orphaned at fifteen when his father lurched out of an easy chair—his last bottle of beer plunging from his hand to the floor, spouting foam—and died of a heart attack. Floyd Attig was forty-three. He had sometimes left the youngest of his six children, my dad, to sit alone in a pickup outside a favorite tavern.
- In the aspens below Spanish Peak, there is no mention of my grandfather, not even the date of his death.
- My dad, his two brothers, Gary and Gerald, and his brother-in-law, Friday, discovered Spanish Peak by accident. They intended to go deer hunting near Izee, one of those lonely grocery store-post-office-gas stations in the rural West with snacks long past their sell-by dates and deer heads that stare down from the walls. In the darkness, they missed the sign to Izee and drove into a maze of forest roads until they finally gave up and stopped for the night in the middle of the grove of aspens below the peak. They slept in the car, a borrowed Buick convertible.

- Izee is sixty-one miles from Spanish Peak. It would not be the last time my dad and uncles would end up good and lost in these woods.
- In the morning two inches of fresh snow coated the convertible's rag top. Spanish Peak was jumping with deer. My dad hunted with a double-barreled twelve-gauge shotgun loaded with slugs, a brute of a weapon. By lunch, his shoulder and face were bruised and swollen. He spent the afternoon carving his name, Stan, and the names of his brothers into the aspens. More than a half-century later, you can still make out many of the letters, now high in the scarred trees.
- Four of my dad's five siblings were living on their own when their father died. My dad and Gary, teenagers less than two years apart, were left homeless. For several weeks they lived in a lean-to shack before a neighboring farm family took them in. Later the two brothers shared an apartment in the small Willamette Valley town of Harrisburg. The few pictures of my dad in his high school yearbook reveal a gangly boy who was six-foot-four with bony shoulders, a shock of dark hair, and a reluctant half-smile meant to hide his crooked teeth.
- A grove of aspens is not a stand of individual trees. It is a single life force, male or female, and the scattered trees and saplings that spring from the ground all share the same root system. Aspen trees grow flowers, but seldom pollinate and produce seeds because stands of trees usually are all clones of the same sex. As far as I know, no one has ever determined the sex of the aspen grove below Spanish Peak.
- Later in life, my dad and his brothers rarely saw one another outside of hunting camp, even though they lived only an hour apart. My dad had a sharp sense of humor, but was shy and quiet around people he didn't know well, and that included his older brothers. My dad was a union carpenter. He would come home from laboring all day on a school or a hospital, eat dinner, and go to work on one of the houses he built on the side. He worked more, and harder, than anyone I knew.
- Botanists believe that quaking aspen leaves twist and turn to dissipate the force of strong winds that could otherwise snap the thin trunks of the trees.

- My dad once bet a co-worker he could beat him in a mile race. He trained in his leather work boots, jogging a loop near my high school. My dad won the race, got hooked on running, and eventually became one of Oregon's fastest masters runners. He said it was because he could run through more pain than most people.
- A clonal colony of male aspen in the mountains of Utah covers more than a hundred acres and includes more than 47,000 trees. It's called several names, including the "Trembling Giant" and "Pando," which is Latin for "I spread." When the leaves of aspen colonies such as the Trembling Giant turn from glossy green to yellow-gold in the fall, they do so in unison, like an entire section of colored cards flipping at halftime of a football game.
- Uncle Gary was a charmer always surrounded by new friends and new women. He owned or managed bowling alleys, two of which burned to the ground in somewhat suspicious circumstances. There were never any criminal charges. Gary later became a successful car salesman. He always drove nice cars.
- My dad's other brother, Gerald, the eldest sibling, was a gentle, soft-spoken man, the only member of the family who graduated from college. He ran a county public works department until he was jailed for tax evasion. Uncle Gerald later suffered from intestinal cancer, and I remember him roosting in the out-house tucked behind the aspens, his guts ripped up by chemotherapy, then finally wandering back into camp, a weary smile on his face, and reporting that he was in the smelly john long enough to observe the entire lifecycle of the house fly.
- When I was a kid a lot of Oregon school districts closed on the Friday before the opening weekend of deer hunting season.
- The first time I went out hunting with my father, or tried to, I kept tripping and falling down. He kept count: sixteen falls. We didn't see any deer that day.
- The aspens below Spanish Peak carry the names of six women who married my dad or one of his brothers: Patty, Jeri Lou, Susan, Marjorie, Charlotte and Joyce. A seventh, Roberta, is up there, too, even though she had the good sense

never to marry Uncle Gary. Roberta is the only one of the women who ever killed a deer.

- There are a few other female names in the aspens, ones I don't recognize, and when I try to put faces to them all I see are women bundled in thick coats sitting in lawn chairs around a crackling fire, their arms crossed, glaring at my uncles.
- When I was ten, a bearded, beer-inflated friend of my uncle's came into our tent shivering and stamping his boots, and said, "God, I'd like to put my feet up the crack of some gal's ass." On cold days, four decades later, I still chase that image away.
- When my cousin Brad and I were four or five years old, we went out on a deer drive with another cousin, Benny, who was sixteen. As we tiptoed along, one of Brad's shoes came untied, and he whispered this to Benny, who leaned his gun in the crotch of a tree and knelt to fix Brad's laces. Just then, a buck with a massive rack burst out the sagebrush in front of us. It was gone before Benny could reach his gun. Benny was furious. That night in the tent, I practiced tying my shoes. Benny would die in a one-car accident two years later. The date is recorded in the aspens.
- My dad would often go too far, hunt too long, and as darkness fell he would end up stranded miles from camp. I would sit anxiously in the back seat of my Uncle Friday's four-wheel-drive as we bounced over rutted logging roads, my uncle fiddling with the squelch on the CB radio, my dad's voice fading in and out, like he was calling from deep space. We would drive on and on, and I'd grow more and more worried, until we'd finally swing around a corner and I would see the silhouette of my father standing by a blazing fire, rifle slung over his shoulder.
- Almost all the times in my life I've gone too far, I've been with my dad.
- The Mid-American Bigfoot Research Center lists as one of its more credible reports a 1995 call from a hunter who reported that a large creature had followed him through the darkness near Spanish Peak. "It made lots of noise;

breaking sticks and such,” the research center reports on its website. “The thing came within 10-15 feet of him, and whenever he would stop walking, it would also stop. There was no smell. He never saw what it was.”

- In the early days our camps in the aspens were big family affairs, and I ran with a pack of cousins that pursued chipmunks with BB guns and waged sword fights with severed deer forelegs. My mother and other women would sit at a camper table playing pinochle or hearts. Sometimes there would be twenty or more people gathered around the fire, laughing, telling stories, and lying about all the deer they saw that day. I would wander off into the dark to pee and gaze up at the brilliant stars and the froth of the Milky Way spilling across the black sky.

- My dad saw more deer when I wasn't crashing along behind him. When I was ten or so, and packing a .22-caliber rifle, he began sending me out open ridges while he dropped into the trees. One ridge he told me to follow came to a sudden, unexpected end. Standing there, fear rising, I imagined him walking on through the forest, leaving me behind. I took out a silver whistle and blew it once. He didn't come. Panicked, I blew harder, the whistle screaming in the silent forest. My father came out of the trees and I saw the frustration etched on his face. But all he whispered was, “You okay?” I nodded and stuffed the whistle in my pocket as I fell in behind him. It would be many years before he again suggested that we hunt separately.

- In the last memory I have of my parents together in hunting camp, my dad is behind the wheel of our old Chevy pickup, which is the faded green of an unnourished lawn. He is trying to level our Caveman camper and my mother is outside giving him directions, but neither one sees the danger coming, and my father backs into a thick lodgepole pine and breaks off the pickup's side mirror, the shattered glass falling silently onto a blanket of pine needles.

- After my parents' divorce, my father's life came a little unspooled. He once picked me up at my mother's house, almost two hours late, to go on an overnight hunting trip. He'd promised to get the food, but all he had grabbed at the store was an eight-pack of RC Cola and two bags of miniature candy bars, Snickers and Milky Way.

- There are few moments in my life that I treasure more than sitting on a rimrock shoulder to shoulder with my dad in the darkness below Spanish Peak, sunrise a thin streak of orange, rifles cold in our gloved hands, the only sound his soft, steady breathing, both of us imagining that we can see dark shapes in the sage, hoping, expecting, that as dawn crept across the sage, those shapes would come alive.

- I majored in journalism, mostly to avoid math and science, and went to work at a weekly newspaper. My father never said much, at least to me, about my chosen career. Whatever he had dreamed that his son might become, it was certainly not a liberal Portland journalist. But when we had something to inscribe in the aspens, he would open his buck knife and hand it to me, saying, “You’re the reporter.”

- My first marriage, Rick + Debbie, and the year, 1987, is engraved in the aspens. There is no notice of our divorce ten years later.

- We record our loves, not our losses.

- I took my first-born son, Mitchell, hunting when he was about five years old. Swaddled in blaze orange, he followed me through the pines, trying hard to stay quiet. We spooked a doe, and when Mitchell saw its big, white rear end bouncing away through the trees, he shouted, “Rabbit!”

- Every deer I ever killed is as vivid in my memory as my first kiss and worst car wreck. Every moment is magnified, like looking through a rifle scope, the shaky cross-hairs bouncing on the shoulder of the buck trotting through the sage and bitterbrush, my father’s urgent whisper, “Now!” I squeeze the trigger and the buck goes over backward and in the flying dust I see its black hooves in the air. My father yells, but my ears are ringing and I can’t make out the words. My father shouts again, and this time I hear him: “He’s up!” The buck is trying to drag itself forward on its front legs. My shot has broken its back. I shoot again, and again, but it’s a mess, I’m a mess, the rifle waving all over the place, the buck struggling through the sage. “Get closer!” my father hollers. I run until I’m close, so close, too close, to the dying buck. I look into its wild eyes as it struggles to pull its hindquarters forward. I aim at its neck and shoot again, and

I'm desperately trying to chamber yet another round when I hear a rush of air, the animal's last breath. It is the biggest buck we will ever kill on Spanish Peak. My father has its head mounted, and it hangs for a long time in his house, and then in my eldest son's house. But never in mine.

- For the first twenty years of my journalism career, newspapers boomed. I went from reporter to editor to member of the editorial board of *The Oregonian*, the largest newspaper in the Pacific Northwest. At the peak in the early 2000s, when we won a series of Pulitzer Prizes, *The Oregonian* was distributing nearly half a million newspapers on Sundays, and four hundred thousand on typical weekdays.
- We never recognize a heyday until it's over.
- I finally persuaded my father to stop driving home with our trophies proudly displayed on the front bumper of his pickup. Pulling into town with a sawed-off deer head, its tongue lolling out, had begun to draw a lot more grim stares than thumbs-up signs. My father finally gave in, but he still carefully positioned the heads in the back of his pickup so at least the tips of the horns would show over the tailgate.
- Our hunting camp started to dwindle like a diseased deer herd, slowly at first, friends and relatives quietly slipping away, one by one. Mothers stopped coming. Marriages failed. Cousins found other interests or grew up and moved away. The deer grew scarcer, too. And then Oregon passed a limited-entry system that required hunters to apply for tags to hunt in places like Spanish Peak. Sometimes my uncles didn't draw tags. Our hunting camp beneath the aspens went from twenty-five people to fifteen, then a dozen, then fewer than ten.
- Aspen wood is too soft to be much use in construction. It is used mainly for pulp products such as books and newsprint.
- By my mid-thirties, my father and I often argued about politics and religion during the five-hour drive to Spanish Peak from our homes in the Willamette Valley. Our debates were especially hot during election years, when hunting season fell right in the crosshairs of the campaign season. I once demanded to

know if he had ever once voted for a Democrat. “Yes I have,” he shot back. “John Kennedy.”

- The two of us once split up at a mahogany thicket a couple of miles from Spanish Peak. He waited outside the thicket while I picked my way through the twisted trees and tall sagebrush. I was halfway through the thicket when I came face to face with a cougar crouched less than twenty feet away. The big cat had not caught my scent and must have thought it was stalking a deer or elk. Both of us froze. I raised my rifle, but all I could see through the scope was tawny fur. The cougar didn't move. I lowered my gun, but kept it pointed at the cat, safety off, finger on the trigger. The cougar stared another few seconds and then finally turned and strolled away, its long, thick tail swishing through the sage.

- Shoot or don't shoot? That was not the only question I wrestled in the frightening moments that I confronted the cougar. There was also this: Should I yell for my dad? My father was right outside the thicket, but I made no sound. Not a whistle.

- On one of our long drives to Spanish Peak, my father asked if I believed in Jesus Christ. I'm not sure, I answered. I told him I didn't like organized religion, but that I wasn't prepared to not believe, either. Maybe there's something out there, I said. Much later, remembering the awkward conversation, I realized that it sounded like I was speaking not about God, but about Bigfoot.

- In 2007, The Oregonian's circulation began to collapse as readers and advertisers moved online. I was among a group of senior editors ordered to attend a webinar conducted by an expert on writing for the Internet. The cocky twenty-something man spoke to anxious journalists gathered in Portland, New Orleans, Cleveland and other cities, veteran reporters and editors whose reporting had stopped abuse, exposed corruption, even saved lives. “Readers like lists,” the online expert told us. “You guys know what bullets are, right? Write with a lot of bullets. Readers like bullets.”

- Aspens are short-lived trees. Their larger branches dry up and die, then fall away. They typically live only sixty to seventy years.

- My Uncle Gary died of cancer at age sixty-five. He left no burial instructions, and when his estranged son, my cousin Brad, didn't want his ashes, they ended up with my father. That fall there were only three of us in hunting camp beneath the aspens—my father, my son, Mitchell, and me. A cold October wind was coming off Spanish Peak, spinning the yellow-gold leaves, when my father removed the twist-tie from a plastic bag bulging with ashes and, without a word, turned the bag upside down. A gray cloud billowed into the thin mountain air, and then a gust of wind blew the ashes right back onto my father, coating his sweatshirt and jeans with gritty dust. While I searched the aspens for an open square of soft white bark in which to carve the news, my father brushed the remains of his brother off his pants.
- The Oregonian began slashing its staff and benefits, including the pharmacy coverage from our company health insurance. My migraine medication cost thirty bucks a pill; some mornings I lay in the pre-dawn darkness trying to decide whether or not I had a thirty-dollar headache.
- My father and I won a lottery for hard-to-get Rocky Mountain elk tags, and on opening morning he wanted to hunt down from Spanish Peak to Rock Creek, where I would meet him. It was dark and fat snowflakes spattered against the windshield as we sat in the pickup on opening morning. Usually he started off in the darkness, hoping to be in position by sunrise. That morning he lingered in the truck. "Well, get out," I finally said. When he opened the door, snow blew inside. I heard him load a shell into the chamber of his rifle and slam shut the bolt. We wished each other luck, and I drove the ten miles down from the peak. My father was hours late in reaching our rendezvous point. Worried, I hunted up Rock Creek, and found him sitting three quarters of a mile up the trail, exhausted, his face gray. He had gone too far.
- That fall there were two lawn chairs by our campfire in the aspens, mine and his. Ours wasn't the only hunting camp that was dying, the old branches falling away. In 1980, more than 400,000 Oregonians bought hunting licenses. Even though the state's population has ballooned by more than two million people since then, fewer than 170,000 Oregonians obtained a hunting license in 2014.

- No Oregon school district now closes the Friday before hunting season.
- After thirty years at Oregon newspapers, I left journalism. Every workday had begun to feel like showing up for another funeral: new layoffs, more budget cuts, some other loss, all of it cheered on by the venomous anonymous commenters that lurked on the newspaper's website. I didn't leave for another job. I just left.
- At a party for my father's wife a few months later, I was introduced to some of the people in their bible study group. A sixty-something woman gripped my arm, smiled, and said, "It's so nice to finally meet you. We've been praying for you."
- At Christmas I made my father a video with forty years of photographs and movie clips of us hunting and fishing together. I titled it "Sixteen Falls."
- I have not killed a deer in more than two decades. My youngest son, Will, who is suddenly thirteen, has never gone hunting with me.
- My wife's initials, CAT, and the date of our marriage fifteen years ago are carved in the aspens, but she has visited the grove of trees only once.
- I am not certain, but I think I am the only parent in my son's entire seventh-grade class with an Oregon hunting license in his wallet.
- My father got lost driving to my house for a salmon fishing trip to celebrate his 73rd birthday. He'd been to my house many times. He wasn't carrying a cell phone, and was two hours late before he finally stopped to call me. He sounded fine on the phone. I gave him directions, and he drove around for another hour and a half before he called from a tavern, told me the address, and suggested I come get him.
- My wife happened to be closer, and she found my father outside the tavern leaning against his white Jeep, drinking from a bottle of beer. He almost never drank. When I met him at the door, he seemed mildly embarrassed about getting lost, but insisted he was fine. His deep blue eyes were vaguely cloudy, and

he seemed a little quieter and more distant than usual. He tromped into our house, always a no-shoes zone, in his leather work boots.

- I feared it was Alzheimer's. It took three days to get him an appointment with a doctor.

- It was a brain tumor, a fast-growing malignancy known as a glioblastoma. On the CAT scan, the dark, angry swirl of the tumor in the middle of my father's frontal lobe looked like the radar picture of an approaching hurricane. Forty-six days later, I sat close to his rented hospital bed in his living room. He had slipped into a coma, and his breathing was ragged and loud. There was a college baseball game on TV, with the sound off. The game ended. His breathing grew even more labored, and after another hour or so, it finally stopped. I took one of his hands and looked at the clock. My father died at 9:58 p.m. on June 19, 2013.

- He was cremated, and his ashes placed in a simple box made of the same clear cedar that he had loved to use during his carpentry work.

- I wrote his obituary and paid \$394 to have it appear in two of the same Oregon newspapers that published thousands of my stories and editorials. For no extra charge, the papers posted my father's obituary online. It's up there still, in the cloud.

- I have not gone back to Spanish Peak since my father's death. But in my imagination, my sons are munching on miniature Milky Ways as we drive through the maze of forest roads to the aspen grove below Spanish Peak. The boys help me set up the tent and place three lawn chairs in an arc around the cold fire pit. The yellow-gold aspen leaves tremble in the October wind. The ground is soft and spongy; the rains have been plentiful. Everywhere there are skinny aspen shoots, knee-high saplings, all nourished by the older trees' deep roots. I give my oldest son a knife, and clutch my younger boy's hand as his brother carves the news of his grandfather's death in the soft bark of our family trees.