

40 TONS OF MARBLE

I was clutching the cross between my middle digits, surprised I could remember the rosary sequence. The Apostle's Creed went off almost without a hitch while I stared at the 40-ton Carrara-marble high altar imported from Pietrasanta, Italy. Yes, it weighed 40 tons—solid rock, literally. I kept looking at it, realizing it was just another immovable object, or an irresistible force Tim would mock me for, like all the others. "You think that's weighty enough to keep you from flying off into orbit, Roger Over-and-Out?" He would say. "You may as well be meditating on a pile of pigeon feathers."

The next bead in the rosary was the Our Father of course; I got through it in less than ten seconds and proceeded to the Hail Marys, finishing all three in less than a minute. If I couldn't get him out of my head, perhaps I could blow past him at the speed of righteousness, leaving him behind in the deepest recesses of my mind.

I knew the best place to look for the rosary would be the attic, where yesterday was covered over with knee-ripped *Toughskins*, *Kid Power* sneaks, mom's bell bottoms, platform shoes and that seventies summer staple, the skort—a skirt and shorts combined into one with a series of four buttons adorning the front. (Mom had all of the colors of the rainbow.)

Yes, everything was packed away neat and tidy, even with dates broken down by year. Dad was going to donate all of it, he promised, but as soon as all of our yesterday "stuff" got organized, packed, and stored away, it slid out of his mind faster than mercury. We could probably clothe an entire family with everything we had; I made a mental note to take care of it myself as I rummaged around in the box marked 1977.

This one had two of our family photo albums. While I dug

around in the contents, the first one flipped open to a picture of Tim sporting his red-white-and-blue wristbands. He was holding one up for the camera, pointing to the long, scabby scar that ran from wrist to elbow. Yes, he got that one after his famous roller-skate handstand down the steepest part of the steepest hill in San Francisco, that one-way section of Filbert Street where the descent angle was 30 degrees. But that didn't stop him, did it?

I slammed the photo album shut and jammed my hand through some old *Superfriends* pajamas until I felt the links of a chain. I pulled with no regard for the weighty clothes or knickknacks on top.

The rosary came out without snagging the legs of any of the toy soldiers or *Star Wars* action figures I'd so hastily neglected in my youth. If I had kept those in their original packaging those things would be worth hundreds each. They were certainly beaten up; the paint was worn off feet, heads and hands; all were missing their weapons. However, the rosary wasn't missing a bead—and there wasn't a single chink in the links.

I lifted my eyes and fixated on the marble high altar and the centered crucifix, flanked by saints Peter and Paul. I wanted to look up at the painting of the ascended one, but I couldn't bring my eyes that high even though I knew the words in Greek almost 50 feet above.

I picked up the pace of my prayers through the first Glory Be, finishing in four seconds. (I started using my stopwatch.) It's almost like I was provoking you know who to keep up, which he was of course, without breaking a sweat. Actually, how could he break a sweat if he was already burning head to toe?

"Well played my friend," Tim said between my ears.

He was running in a road race, weaving in, out and through a motley crowd of costumed joggers climbing Hayes Hill, supposedly

one of the most heartbreaking climbs in competitive running (unless you include heartbreak hill from the Boston Marathon).

Tim slapped his forehead. "I forgot the Bay to Breakers was this weekend. Where's my mind?"

Tim circled around and somehow through a group of 13 bungee-cord-linked runners known as a *centipede*. This particular one was costumed as a steam-engine locomotive; the lead runner wore a conductor's cap with a cardboard engine that included a triangular grille extending from the waist. Smokestacks jutted from the top of his head and both shoulders. The middle 11 runners wore passenger-car boxes; some even had windows with waving travelers painted on their torsos underneath. The caboose costume was appropriately worn by the most diminutive member of the group; he couldn't have been taller than five feet. He sported a single red box that covered everything with only two slits in front to see. Before I could even begin to wonder how hot it would get running the full seven-and-a-half miles, Tim opened his big fat yapper.

"You boys are running under steam power? And just how do they make steam anyway? You can't get anywhere in a steam engine without fire, can you!"

Tim circled the passenger-car runners, setting their attaching bungee cords alight, but somehow not breaking the links. He ran backwards in front of the conductor runner, making a pulling motion with his right arm. Yes, conductor man obliged—steam actually came out his mouth and the cardboard stacks atop his head and shoulders—neat little white columns of smoke. However, the sound was more akin to the foghorns you hear over the bay.

Tim turned to face me; apparently I was in the director's chair for this little vision.

"If a steam engine can't outrun me, what makes you think you have a chance, Roger Dodger? It's the Bay to Breakers for crying out

loud—over 40,000 runners, including world-record Kenyans—not to mention every egomaniac on the planet who thinks he can don tights and a cape for a single morning and become the fastest person alive. Nobody can keep up with me buddy, let alone a gimpy coma-recovery patient who can barely make it three steps without leaning on a knee—oh how you slay me, Roger Rogelio.”

Another snaking *centipede* passed Tim decked out just like he described—tights and capes, perhaps they were a makeshift version the *Justice League*. “See what I mean,” Tim said, circling the group effortlessly. He left flaming tracks that turned all 26 feet into shuffling, grounded torches. They started to scream, but Tim shushed them with a finger to the lips.

An elderly couple entered the pew in front of me speaking to each other in Italian *sotto voce*. I looked straight ahead at the high altar, trying to absorb its everlasting presence. The two empty booths flanking the east and west sides of the marble weren’t confessionals, although that’s what I was hoping.

Was I doing enough to repent? The questions raced through my head as I quickened my prayer pace, turning the corner on the rosary into the second series of Hail Marys.

Yet my vision of Tim was still in the lead, igniting runners by the dozens. Some elbows caught fire; thighs flared up in orange and red; torsos sparked like embers at the bottom of a campfire. Tim still had his index finger over his mouth; apparently screaming from any victim was not permitted.

“Of course I could just blaze to the finish line in ten seconds Roger Rampart,” he said, “but what fun would that be? I have to offer a glimmer of hope that they might be able to catch me, right?”

Two no-nonsense singlet-clad Kenyans flew buy in tandem, leaving Tim ten, 20 yards behind. “Oh, so we have a few rabbits in the

pack, do we Roge? This should be interesting. Where are your tall ears, wet noses and whiskers?" He asked them. "Don't they know this has been the world's most famous costume race since 1912?"

In two lunges Tim bypassed the Kenyans, who caught fire and instantly crisped into spindly cinders with charred limbs.

He smiled at me. "Rev those rosary prayers into overdrive, Roge. See if you can get through the whole chain in five minutes or less—it still won't be fast enough! Do you know how long it takes a thought to travel from one brain cell to the next? 150 milliseconds! That's an eternity my friend!"

Flaming balls of yellow, orange and red swelled across my mind's eye. An atomic burst detonated with enough force to throw me across the pew and into the aisle—which is exactly what it did.

The elderly gentleman at the communion rail did an about face; the vail-clad Chinese woman in the next row gasped and stood for a moment, but just as quickly composed herself and returned to her knees.

From what the history books tell us, when they finished this current version of the Saints Peter and Paul church in 1924, there were five terrorist bombings within two years. Was that anything compared to Tim's TNT megatons detonating in my forebrain from the fourth-row pew?

I finally reached the end of the rosary, but still waters were not running deep. There's no doubt I needed to be more official about it; I came in unannounced without any regard for the confessional schedule. Maybe that's what I needed to do. There is an intermediary between man and God after all—and it most certainly isn't yours truly.

The gilded, arching colonnades running down the nave and all 29 of the stained-glass windows crafted from the finest European masters told me I had to be in the right place.

Then there was the 40-foot rose window above the choir loft. The lamb and the scroll radiated from the middle; his 12 rays extended to the perimeter, finishing with detailed medallions of all 12 apostles awaiting orders from their master. The power and glory were before my eyes in a rainbow, enough to light up the darkest minds with cleansing fire. But the only fire between my ears was that combustible adolescent frozen in time, whether I was asleep or awake.

I rose from my knees to walk out, keeping my eyes straight ahead to the vestibule. There had to be a flier with the confessional times; I was too preoccupied to notice on the way in. I looked back at the 40-ton marble altar once more, wondering how they imported it from Italy, how much it must have weighed down the steamships—it was something substantial indeed; perhaps it was brought over in pieces—that must have been the case. The cupola over the crucifix alone had to be 30 feet high.

Tim wouldn't block my path down the nave, would he? I kept looking up at the rose window, hoping I wouldn't trip or bang into the pews. Fortunately one foot was moving in front of the other like it was supposed to—but I still couldn't shake his voice.

"You just added the Saints Peter and Paul high altar to your list Roge—another landmark that will keep you stuck to the earth—ha ha ha! You are the best entertainment on the planet, Roger good buddy. So let's go over the list again, just like you do before closing your eyes at night—or at least try, right? We've got The Rock of Gibraltar—The Pyramids of Giza—The Grand Canyon—The Great Wall of China—Stonehenge—The Giant California Redwoods—The Great Barrier Reef—and now, as an added special attraction, the ultimate encore, the *pièce de résistance*—the Saints Peter and Paul Church 40-ton Carrara-marble altar, painstakingly handcrafted by Charles Fantoni in 1946, in unmistakable Romanesque detail featuring the master front and center, Saints Peter and Paul at the high places of honor to the

right and left, not to mention perching angels with their wings poised awaiting dispatch orders—don't forget three beautifully crowned turrets, the center cupola gilded in gold, pointing up to you know who."

His laughter sped up in a cackling word volley, with hiccups mixed in where he caught his breath. "Don't worry Roge, don't you worry—when they send you to the can, when they send you to the chair—have you forgotten what I already showed you good buddy? My flame cannot be extinguished; I proved it to you by riding the lighting right before your eyes. Never forget that Roger Home Base. I'll be with you day and night, night and day. After all, blood brothers aren't just bonded for life, but eternity."

I knew he was going to show me his blood-brother scar, that fleshy token created in the basement of the Whelan household, where he used an *X-acto* knife to manifest our pact in a bold crimson dash a half-inch above the wrist. I looked down at my arm and ran my fingers across my mark; it was still as clean and straight as an arrow, almost like Tim used a T-square for guidance, although he would never need such a thing, who was I kidding. Did he need any guidance at all? He was the one running the show—and running in it, literally.