

## The Pass

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Sherlock Holmes peered through the labyrinth of autumn-colored leaves and thin brown branches. I avoided his gaze and then followed his khaki overcoat through the woods. He was an elderly man. His tired eyes peeked from under the rounded brim of his tweed cap. He only wandered down from the mountain in the mornings. My father and I sat in a white Dodge van, waiting for my bus to arrive. We spent the last ten minutes of the morning playing cards on a wine-colored leather briefcase. I guessed chocolate or vanilla to determine which game we'd play. My father would designate each flavor as a different game. Chocolate was usually Bridge, which meant that vanilla was Gin Rummy. I used the brief moments when my father was pondering his next move to steal glimpses of Sherlock. Eventually he'd emerge from the tangles of the woods, but not empty-handed as before. His left hand might have been clutching a crumpled McDonald's paper bag, his right a Hostess cupcake wrapper or Pepsi can.

As soon as I noticed that our random encounters had become routine, I wanted to know the truth. Of course, I had constructed numerous elaborate scenarios, but my imagination would no longer suffice. "Who is he?" I asked my father.

In 1998, South Mountain Pass's dirt road surface had eroded. The majority of it was covered with major defects such as potholes, alligator cracking, and rutting. The deterioration indicated serious base problems, which could only be corrected by reconstructing from the bottom up. However, South Mountain Pass is an historical mountain road. It intersects with the oldest section of the Appalachian Trail, completed in 1923, and is a sanctuary for those who want to escape the jaws of industrialization. While the inhabitants of South Mountain Pass

demanded that their roadway remain untouched, the issue of safety arose. The winter months crept in, covering all surfaces with a blanket of coldness that had sealed many fates.

"Stop it with the radio!" insisted my mother. I obeyed silently as we drove cautiously through the Blizzard of '93. We were almost to my house when my heart plunged. Our tires lost all traction as we uncontrollably weaved to the right, and then to the left. The back of the car swung around to the right, guiding me and my mother towards the cliff, under which a plethora of cars had landed. I didn't move. My shrieks were confined to the back of my throat, thus only allowing a high-pitched whispering noise to escape my mouth. And then we stopped. South Mountain Pass had taken mercy on us that day. Two other families, however, were not so lucky, and were confronted with death upon meeting she with whom they shared their land and livelihoods: nature.

In 1998, Robert Quimby and his wife fought against the county when word spread that there were plans of paving South Mountain Pass. They, along with the rest of the mountain's inhabitants, realized that with pavement, comes intruders. The intruders were the frantic morning and afternoon commuters that jumped at the thought of a paved shortcut through traffic. The pass is narrow, and not meant for heavy thru-traffic. It is merely a way for residents to travel to and from their homes. The pass must be approached with ease; more than fifteen miles per hour would be risky. Unfortunately, the people who use this road as a shortcut do not take the time to respect, much less recognize, the innate magnificence of the pass. They toss their coffee cups and plastic bags to the deer, foxes, and turkeys, and to the rest of the inhabitants (fellow humans included) who call the mountain home. Such disregard for safety and cleanliness takes a large

toll on the surrounding community. Accident rates and pollution vary directly with the fluctuation of daily trespassers.

My home straddles the county line between Westchester and Putnam. Westchester County is a suburban county consisting of approximately 940,000 residents. It thrives on industry. Putnam County, of which most of the mountain is considered a part, consists of less than 100,000. It is a quiet and rural county, praised for its maintenance of natural beauty. After much debate, it was decided that South Mountain Pass would be paved up to the county line, adjacent to my garage, and then left alone. However, many of the commuters waiting in traffic on Route 9 saw this pavement as an open opportunity, despite the "no thru-traffic" sign, and took it. Since then, whenever driving to and from our homes on South Mountain Pass, we have had to assume the presence of out-of-control maniacs carelessly barreling around each turn in the opposite direction. Commuter-dodging has become a part of our daily routines.

Legislation to formalize New York State's Adopt-A-Highway Program was passed back in 1990. The program encourages individuals or groups to clean up highway roadsides and to recognize the volunteers who do. A sense of community ownership of the roadway is established, as well as a sense of pride in its appearance. While we do not live on a highway, we certainly take pride in where we live, and strive to ensure its lasting beauty. Members of our small mountain community can be found along the pass at all times of day, either with big black trash-bags, like my father, or a few wrappers clenched in their fists. Our volunteers contribute to varying degrees. And while their efforts are not officially noted, they are recognized and commended by their neighbors.

I inch towards the slick pavement in my grey Nissan Pathfinder. I crane my neck to see around the lush greenery obstructing my view. Droplets of rain fall onto my windshield from the saturated trees above. I fiddle with my iPod to add some sound to the muggy silence of spring. I slow down to accommodate any cars that may be approaching the same hairpin turn. A maroon Subaru quickly whips around the turn down the middle of the road. I swerve into the driveway next to me to avoid a head-on collision. I take a few moments for my heart to slow down. I slowly pull back onto the paved road. As I cautiously round the next turn, I spot a lone figure emerging from the woods. Sherlock Holmes appears next to the line of mailboxes. He looks up and our eyes meet. I quickly turn my head to look straight ahead. Before I merge onto the busy route of morning commuters, I glance in my rearview mirror. He looks down and smiles as he makes his way back up the pass.

Suddenly, it all makes sense. We are a community, in the true sense of the word.