



Simon & Garfunkel

"The Sound of Silence"

Wednesday Morning,  
3 A.M.

10/1964

Columbia

# Only a Motion Away, or Why I Flew Cross-Country to Paul Simon's Last Show in Memory of My Mom

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Here's the degree to which I grew up on Paul Simon: my mom once made her book club read a sheaf of Paul Simon lyrics she photocopied from the album liner notes.

She preferred the solo albums, particularly those that didn't sell as well—*Hearts and Bones* (1983), I'm looking at you—to Simon & Garfunkel. But, of course, she had all the old Simon & Garfunkel vinyl, too. I went through a phase when I was 13 or 14, just before *Graceland* (1986) came out, when I borrowed and obsessively played all the hippie-est vinyl in my parents' collection. They were never hippies—they were married and settling into conventional life by 1967—but they went to Berkeley in the 1960s and bought all the music of the day.

I can't remember when it was, exactly, that my mom gave those copies of liner notes to her book club. I wonder if it was just after the split with my dad, when she was raw and unhappy and several of her longtime friends were unsympathetic and continued to socialize with my dad and his new girlfriend (who was soon to be his new wife). I think it must have been earlier, though, before *Graceland*—that sharp dividing line in Paul Simon's career, his extraordinary phoenixlike rebirth—came out, and before the sharp dividing line in our own family, from married to divorced. My mom thought Simon (whom she mostly just called Paul) was a great poet, and she loved the wordplay of his earlier solo albums. It only occurred to me recently how far ahead of her time she was, like the Nobel Prize in Literature committee *avant la lettre*.

Her daughter to the end, I think she chose a better poet than the Nobel committee did in Bob Dylan. Direct comparisons to Bob Dylan marked Simon's entire career, and in recent years he has addressed them: "One of my deficiencies is my voice sounds sincere. I've tried to sound ironic. I don't. I can't. Dylan, everything he sings has two meanings. He's telling you the truth and making fun of you at the same time. I sound sincere every time."

No wonder my mom usually preferred Simon to Dylan, as my brother pointed out. Our mother was earnest and honest to a fault. Irony frustrated her, leaving her with the feeling of being mocked. That tendency mixed unfortunately with me, her GenX daughter who spoke in sarcasm and irony like a mother tongue—or rather, in my case, a father tongue.

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I can still hear, echoing, my mother's music: the Suzuki albums she played over and over for my brother to learn the violin, the ska beats of "Mother and Child Reunion," which opens Simon's eponymous first solo album. Actually, I can hear them any time I want, because we kept all her vinyl (including, even, those Suzuki albums) after she died, by suicide, at age 64.

When Paul Simon turned 64, his friend Paul McCartney, called to sing "When I'm 64," its upbeat strains turned bittersweet by loss and the passage of time. I sigh and think of my mother when I hear it now.

There's no real meaning in coincidences of numbers like this, but my mother was always a numbers person, mildly obsessed with interesting or resonant dates and the like. She would point it out whenever she saw a clock that read 10:06, my birthday being the sixth of October. That date appears, I realized recently, in a Simon lyric, one of the songs from his unloved Broadway venture "The Capeman."

She killed herself by overdose less than a month before she turned 65. Based on her journals, she was sure that nobody still loved her or needed her when she was 64. At the time she was deeply depressed after a long period of mania, unwilling to see the private-pay psychiatrist I found for her and stressed about choosing Medicare coverage when she turned 65 the following month.

When my mother was depressed, she didn't believe that I loved her. She was wrong about that, but she was right that by that time, at age 37, I didn't strictly speaking need a mother anymore. I don't think I had for a long time—something that irked her. "You're so independent," she would say to me with a frustrated sigh. *I had to be*, I never said back to her.

When I was weary and feeling small, I tried not to let my mother know. She would take it personally. She had many strengths as a mother, but offering comfort wasn't high on the list. Once, in the midst of a health emergency of my brother's, my mom wailed, "Why do these things always happen to me?" The problem was that it wasn't happening to her, and she was unable to see that.

Did my mother love me like a rock, as Simon's lyrics would have it? She did. Did she get down on her knees and hug me? She did not. I don't remember cuddles or closeness when I was a child, though maybe that is just the failure of child memory. I remember, though vaguely, the time of her first major depression. In my mind it just looms as the strange time Mom went to bed. For weeks? For months? I don't know. I was seven then.

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Paul Simon's first hit was "The Sound of Silence." It's also the last song he played live, at a farewell concert—the "Homeward Bound" tour, naturally—at Corona Park in Flushing Meadows in the fall of 2018. My brother and I flew across the country on something of a whim to see that show. California to New York for a weekend, 24 hours in the big city. Simon spoke from the stage of growing up in Queens. He tossed a baseball into his hometown crowd, name-checked his nearby alma mater when he played "Kodachrome," and got the crowd to roar when he sang about Rosie, the queen of Corona, in "Me and Julio Down by the Schoolyard." As quixotic as flying 3,000 miles to see a show was, it felt like magic to be there.

I went, and talked my brother into going, because our mom would have bought a ticket and flown across the country to see Paul one last time. She would have loved to see that show. In her later years, she went to concerts almost obsessively. We saw Simon together just once, when he was playing an open-air show at South Lake Tahoe. I've seen him three times: the first with my mom, at Tahoe; the second with my brother, at Berkeley's Greek Theater (there was a minor earthquake during the show), a couple of years after our mom's death; the third and last time, also with my brother, in New York at that farewell show.

The echoing notes of "Sound of Silence" date back even earlier than the 1960s and his first hit. He invented the guitar line in the Simon family bathroom, in the dark, the sound of the plinking guitar echoing off tile. He retreated there to play and learn the guitar.

It's odd, considering how famous Paul Simon was and is, how often he was in the shadows. Critics long saw Art Garfunkel's voice, for instance, as the secret to Simon and Garfunkel's success, though honestly I prefer Simon's straightforward tenor to Garfunkel's dramatic sweet treble swoops. Simon was always cast, including by himself, as a straight man: against Chevy Chase's goofy bluster in the "You Can Call Me Al" video, in *Annie Hall*, with the late Carrie Fisher, even often on Saturday Night Live.

My mother, too, was cast in our family drama as the humorless one. That's a common trap for moms: we're no fun. Now that I have my own children and am in my busy, draining 40s—soft in the middle—I understand it better. The course of a lifetime runs over and over again. Moms point out it's bedtime, enforce the rules, tell everyone to stop roughhousing, don't have time for jokes. Our kids are the burden of our generation. But my mother's friends, who saw her outside the constrained hothouse of our family, recall of how fun and funny she was. All of us, when we think about our family dynamics, seem to lean on old familiar ways.

Darkness was my mother's old friend, too. After my mom's death, a friend of hers from way back in elementary school told me that she had always sensed a sad inner core, some deep darkness, in her friend. Of course, she said that after my mom's suicide, when it was easy to look back and see a long straight line of depression and decline to a natural endpoint. Lives are always more complicated than that. I could try trace the ups and downs of my mother's mood and functioning over the years, to find the reminders of every glove that laid her down and cut her. I could worry away at the question of when exactly she stopped taking the lithium that had helped her for decades and try to chart her trajectory. But what would be the point? All I would meet is the sound of the silence she ultimately chose.

At Corona Park that September night, the first notes and the last notes of Paul Simon's first and last song rang out in an endless circle. He was expansive, performative, a star: not at all the straight man of reputation or *Annie Hall*. After the last plinking notes of "Sound of Silence" died into the New York night, he stood arms wide, soaking up the energy and adoration of a crowd one last time.

Paul Simon chose his time to exit the stage. So, in her very different way, did my mom. Neither would be convicted by a jury of their peers for those choices. I was there to bear witness to both, one farewell sweet, the other I hope the bitterest of my life. It's no small thing to exit on your own terms. They may have left, but the fighter still remains.