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# The Mountain Man's Relativity Theory

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## THE MOUNTAIN MAN'S RELATIVITY THEORY

My father and I were working our horses up the side of a shale ridge in the Wind River Mountains of Wyoming when I first met Hilden Olsen. He was making his way east toward the Bruce Camp trailhead, down a coarse switchback laid down across the face of the mountain like long and sharp rolls of concertina wire. Hilden was pulling a hesitant old gray burro by a lead rope and sitting high atop a monstrous mule (no shit—just like Mad Jack and Number Seven from *The Life and Times of Grizzly Adams*). He was like a caricature, and I could smell his rank furs from ten feet away. Turns out my father was an old acquaintance of this guy, and we stopped to gab right there on the steep, jagged mountain face, our horses anxious and shifting their hooves back and forth over the loose shale of the skinny trail. My dad leaned over his horse's head and shook Hilden's hand, all the while looking calm and loose, his forearm pressed easily between the saddle horn and Spike's thick-maned neck. The hand he shook was gnarled like a root and looked just as strong. Mr. Olsen was wearing thin deerskin chaps and a light, filthy-looking wool sweater with no T-shirt underneath. He had this terrific beard hanging from his face that had a big old pine needle sticking out of it, and when he spoke, his teeth were large and tan and hard, like carved-up pine tree nuggets—square and tough and perfect. "Goddamn it," he said. "Abe Christensen. How long's it been?"

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My father crossed both his arms on the horn of his saddle, and he looked casual, as if he were a high school senior leaning up against a newly scrubbed Camaro while chatting up a female admirer. That's how cool and easy my father always seemed to be when in his element—such a change from the uncertain and awkward man he was in town, among regular folk. On the other hand, my horse was belting out huge squeaking farts and tripping back and forth, bumping into Spike's hind end. "Gosh, Hilden—must be six, seven years. I guess it was the plane wreck, weren't it?"

"Goddamn it," Hilden said, "that's right. That was eighty-five, I guess." He took out a hunk of purple elk or deer jerky from his pannier and offered it to my dad, who refused, before tearing a portion of it off with his big old teeth. "You up here hunting out of season?" he joked, and I liked him immediately for the way his whole body danced with his laughter.

“Oh, hell no. You know my son, Jake, here?” He thumbed over his shoulder without looking back. Tess, my mangy-ass, no-good horse, kept bumping her chest into Spike’s rump; I let go of my saddle just long enough to wave hello. I had the reins in my hands and was gripping the saddle in terror every time she slipped back on the trail, sending shale tumbling madly down the mountain’s thousand feet of jagged teeth.

“Howdy,” I said, trying my best to look loose and easy like my dad.

“That’s a good-looking boy you have there, Abe. What, fifteen? Sixteen?” He was really going to town on the jerky, chewing it around as he spoke, which I will be the first to say looked very tasty after having been on the trail for five hours without lunch. He didn’t offer me a chunk, so I kept quiet. “Goddamn. You didn’t never tell me you had ’nother son.”

It was kind of an unspoken law that we didn’t talk much about Tanner, and I could tell that it still pained my father to be reminded of his dead son. Tanner had been eleven years older than me, so I’d never really known him on any deep level, but he had been my hero nonetheless. He was the mysterious bigger brother, and I’d spent every moment since his death in the plane crash trying to live up to what little I remembered of him; in turn, my father spent every moment comparing me to his unrealistic memory of Tanner. It was just a fluke airplane wreck, they said, and unluckily, my father was the one who had finally found the wreckage. That was eight years ago in May. Tanner and his instructor had gone missing in January of that year, and the search party for them had long since been called off, but my father had continued to look for the small training Cessna, exhausting all his horses in turn in the deep snow and frigid cold of the Stow Creek Basin. When he finally found the wreck and the remains of his boy, it seemed to take the wind out of his sails. He might have found some small solace in the fact that Tanner had obviously died on impact—I don’t know, but it was what the bishop of our church used over and over to try to give him peace—that Tanner hadn’t starved to death or been killed by a pack of wolves or a lonesome mountain lion, alone in the cold of a bitter Wyoming winter.

My father waved his hand as if he were shooing a fly, dismissing the memory of his son. “Well, it has been six, seven years. And he’s just a big twelve—can’t even keep him clothed half the time, the way he’s sprouting up. Gonna be twice the size of his old man.” Dad took his straw cowboy hat off his head, ran his hands through his thin red hair, and then slipped the

hat back on as if he were sniffing the leather brim first before he moved it into place. “You still contracting for the forest service?”

“Oh, shit,” Hilden drawled, “yeah, I still do some trading with ‘em—sumbitch from Casper’s been sticking his goddamned head in down there, asking them what the canned and dried goods are for, and they keep telling him it’s for an emergency, but I’m sure someone’ll slip and fuck it up for me. I’ve been stocking for goddamn near fifty years for ‘em, and the trout and grayling minnow packs get bigger and the supplies get thinner. I should go down and scalp the whole fucking lot of ‘em.” He was smiling in a way that I couldn’t be sure if he was joking, but my dad was laughing, so I laughed a little, too.

“Aw, you know, Hilden—you should get a salary or something and just take some cash so you can get what you want. I keep telling you, the service you do for the state is worth way more than the dented cans of Dinty Moore beef stew they give you.” Spike was nearly asleep under the confident control of my dad, but my horse Tess was trying to turn around on the trail. I was sawing on the reins when Dad looked back and yelled, “Jake! Control that goddamned horse, would ya? Smack her on the ear when she gets ornery!” His eyes were shining with his quick anger, so I balled up my fist, which looked more and more like my father’s every day, and whacked her a good one while I yelled, “Tess! Whoa!” Her ears turned back in that stubborn way she has, and she bent her head down, turned around, gave everyone an insolent little toot, and began to saunter down the trail in the opposite direction, as if that had been her plan all along.

From over my shoulder, I could hear my father still yelling at me to control the goddamn horse, but Tess had made up her stupid mind to fixate on some mean greenery on the trail below. My failure with horses was one of my father’s greatest shames—he was a rancher and a trail guide for hunters in the fall, yet his youngest son couldn’t even keep a goddamn horse under control. After about a hundred yards of sawing back and forth on the reins, practically gagging Tess with the bit, I resorted to grabbing her ears and yanking back with all of my weight. She huffed, and her back legs nearly went out, and her rump shivered, but she finally stopped. I let go of her ears, and she bent her neck down to nibble on some wild oats like nothing had even happened. I was crying soft hiccups from the humiliation, and when I looked back up the trail, I saw Hilden and my father looking at me and talking. I couldn’t help noticing that there were no other patches of wild oats

anywhere but where we had stopped, and it occurred to me that Tess probably didn't stop because I yanked her ears. As it often went with Tess, I began to wonder just who was in charge.

I decided I would just let her eat, then join the two of them on the trail above when she was finished—that way, I could salvage some dignity without fighting her any longer. Hilden and my father were still looking at me as they talked, and I caught garbled messages in the echoes of their voices, which overlapped one another and sounded like a recorded conversation being eaten by an eight-track tape deck. I settled into my saddle, but my back began to ache within a few moments, so I dismounted and held Tess's reins like a steward in a restaurant while she contentedly ate her lunch.

Hilden and my father were still talking, so I got behind Tess and took a leak, making sure to piss a little on her oats. My father was dismounting when I walked around her from the back, my hand sliding along her torso, careful not to let her kick me accidentally. My dad started rummaging around in his homemade cowhide panniers, and I saw him pull out five or six orange cans of our cling peaches. Hilden had a long, black object in his hands, what I thought looked like an old six-shooter or maybe a slaughter hammer for steers. My father looked the item over, then after handing over the cans, placed whatever it was in the leather satchel hanging from his saddle horn. After the trade, Hilden held up one of the cans in thanks, and they shook hands.

I walked Tess up the slippery trail as Hilden and my father exchanged a manly clap on the back and a hug, each of them hooked to their seats by only their saddle horns and the insides of their knees. Hilden's handshake for me was as rough as a cracked tire tread, and the hand he tussled my hair with felt like a coiled rattlesnake—cold and rough and twisting. “Well, you be good to your father, there, son,” he said, his far hand absently scratching his mule's neck. “He's one of the best mountain guides I ever seen. Heck, he doesn't come up here more'n two fuckin' months out of the year, and he knows more about living in the wild than I do.” He shook his head and chuckled a bit, then continued down the trail, his hand held up in farewell.

Later that evening, sore and beaten from eight hard hours of riding, I asked my father about Hilden. “So, Dad, what does Mr. Olsen do?”

“Old Hilden,” he said, as if sorting through the many people we had come into contact with that day, “he is an odd one. Stocks the thousand or so lakes up here with brook, rainbow, lake trout, grayling, whatever they have

in minnow packs for him. Does it from first thaw to first blizzard. Gets paid in supplies under the table by the forest service. Doesn't take any cash—just supplies. I'd bet he doesn't even have a Social Security number."

"He said you know more about these mountains than he does. Where does he live when he's not stocking the lakes?" I was fiddling with a willow stick, trying to shave it to a point with my dull hunting knife so I could roast some marshmallows. Impatiently as always, my father took the stick from me and cut it in three quick swipes of his knife, which he flicked open from his pocket and back again in one motion.

"Well, I don't know about all that—he lives up here, after all. Probably has a name for every mangy grizzly and crippled moose on this range." He sat back on his heels, letting his knees pop, and stirred the fire with a big stick, flipping the foiled corn and steaks he had laid on the coals. "You know where Gannett Peak is from here?"

There would always be tests of my knowledge on our trips, so I prepared for them as best I knew how, but I seemed to fail them as regularly as I failed my school studies. I knew Gannett Peak as a landmark, but in the dark spiral of the mountains, I couldn't have told him north from east. "I know what it looks like," I answered, "but I don't know where it is."

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This annoyed my father. He believed that things should only have to be taught once—a notion I have found to be espoused only by the brilliant or the crazy. He tossed me the marshmallows, and they hit me square in the face, but he offered no apology. "You're telling me you can't find the largest mountain in Wyoming right now, just cause it's a little dark. That you traveled all day along the ridge to the east of it, and now you don't know where it is, just cause you can't see it. That's what you're telling me." He was working himself into a quiet rage, so I tried to venture an educated guess as to where the mountain was. "Well, I know about where it is," I said vaguely, pointing with all five fingers to his left. "It's right over thereabouts."

He looked at me like I was the dumbest person on the planet. "Jesus, son. You best hope you don't get separated from me, or you will be one sad god-damn sack." He grabbed the willow and stabbed it into the foil-wrapped food in the fire, letting the juices drip out over the fire, then slapped the packet onto my metal camping plate. He licked his fingers, carefully reached down into the fire, picked up his own food with his fingertips, then slowly undid the foil wrapping, letting the delicious steam envelop his face as he snuffed it up with genuine pleasure. He poked my stick at me and said, "Eat your

dinner, son, then you go check on the horses. Gannett is right behind you, just so you know.” The disappointment on his face was something I knew well but never could figure out how to change.

The next day, I woke before sunup, and my father was already making a breakfast of burnt black coffee, eggs, and sausage. The early morning light at this altitude was gray until almost noon, so even the yellow of my eggs seemed monochrome—like the color of the world was filtered away this close to the heavens. Gannett Peak squatted under some ominous black clouds exactly where my father had pointed the night before, which just made me sorer at him, and for the first time in a while, I wished Tanner was here. After we finished breakfast and I had cleaned the dishes off in a nearby creek, my father tossed me an oily bundle. “You don’t go waving this around. And don’t you ever let me catch you showing it off to those Baptist kids next door, neither.” I unfolded the rag that my present was wrapped in and realized that it was a pistol my father had traded those canned peaches for. It was an old Colt .357 revolver, but in perfect shape. “It uses the same bullets as my Remington, so we can fire off some rounds before we break camp.”

130 I wasn’t pissed at him anymore for making me feel stupid the night before—this was the best gift that I had ever gotten, and I was definitely the first kid in my school to have a handgun. “Man, Dad! This is the coolest!” I spun the chamber and let the smooth clicking of the gun’s action hum. It didn’t bother me that he had traded only six lousy cans of peaches for it.

My father pulled a box of cartridges from his panniers and loaded the gun for me. “See, Old Hilden? He gets stuff like this all the time, and it don’t mean nothing to him—all he cares about is not having to eat elk alone for every meal. This gun doesn’t mean four hundred dollars at a pawn shop to him—it means he gets to slurp down some peach syrup and put sweet peach slices on his toast. It means he gets to have some variation with his meals, and he knows I would have given him the marshmallows and chocolate and graham crackers, too, if he would’ve asked.” My father had his tongue in his cheek the way he does when he’s concentrating. Then he blew hard into the workings of the gun and slipped the bullets snugly into place. “But Hilden wouldn’t ask for more than he thinks something is worth. Old Hilden isn’t like most men—he’s a man from another century, a man who plays by fair rules that he knows in his heart. For Hilden, six cans of peaches was a steal for that gun. Someday, that’s how you’ll define relativity, when your teacher asks you in English or physics class, if you ever

take them.” This was how my father was brilliant, like I said before—he always sounded like a hick from Wyoming (which he was), but he was able to explain things to me in a way that I would understand when I grew up. As it was, I didn’t have the faintest idea of what he was talking about, and I didn’t care to ask him to explain—I just wanted to shoot at something with that gun.

We lined up about fifty feet from a big stump, but even with twelve shots and at a distance of twenty feet, I couldn’t come within three feet of hitting it—the Colt was too heavy in my hands, and I closed my eyes involuntarily with every squeeze of the trigger. In a rare attempt at consolation, my father said, “You’ll get better, Jake. It just takes some practice. Maybe if we make it across Gannett to the north ridge tonight, over by Hilden’s winter lodge, we can try again.”

We began to break camp, rolling up the tent canvas, packing the black-and-white cowhide panniers evenly for the mules, dousing the fire thoroughly, cleaning our site until there was no evidence we had been there. Not even a worm of smoke trickled from the buried fire pit. I wanted to prove to my father that I could navigate the mountains, so I asked, “Where are we headed today?” He explained that Hilden’s cabin would be our final destination, and that it would be a difficult ride on little more than a mountain goat trail. Our purpose was to prepare the cabin as a waypoint for the steady flow of green-horn hunters from Texas and Arkansas that my father would be guiding into the mountains in a few short weeks. Hilden’s cabin was situated beyond the head of the Popo Agie River, about three-quarters of the way across the ridge that formed the foothills between Gannett Peak and Jackson Peak. In the daylight, I knew exactly where he was talking about, so I whipped Tess around and took the lead, determined to do something that would warrant praise from my father, but he simply turned Spike to follow me.

The sky had been darkening all morning, and a fine, late-season snow began to fall through the pine canopy as we departed. By the time we reached the end of the tree line, we were in a thick haze of snow. The temperature had dropped forty quick degrees, and the wind had picked up to twenty or thirty miles per hour. My father began to realize that we could be in real trouble. Tess and Spike began to complain with snorts and shakes of their shaggy heads, and our two trail mules began to huff and honk their discomfort. My father held us up on the slope that led to Gannett Peak. He seemed uncertain as to what we should do and uncharacteristically asked me

what I thought. “Goddamn, son. Well, we’re in a fix. This snow is just gonna keep coming, and I reckon it’ll fall harder the longer we’re out here. We can do one of two things: we can climb to the snow line and look for a good place to dig a snow cave, but that could mean we lose the horses and mules if this is a big bitch of a storm.” Spike suddenly spun on him, agitated, and my father sawed on the reins and whacked Spike on the ears, just like I’d done the day before. “Or we can see if we can make it to Hilden’s lodge. Neither are good options. It would take four hours riding in normal conditions, and who knows how big this storm front is.”

I didn’t know what to say. My father had never really asked me what I thought before, and, frankly, the fact that he did now made me realize that we could be in deep trouble out here. Even though I hated Tess, I didn’t want to see any of the animals freeze to death, so I offered what I thought he wanted to hear: “I say we go to the lodge, Dad. We can make it.” My father seemed to take this into consideration, took the lead ropes for one of the mules, and tied it securely to his saddle. He hopped down from Spike and tied a lead between each of us, until we were all tied in a tight line. He remounted, whipped Spike around, and set a bone-jarring pace. The snow came harder, and I could feel the windchill biting through my thick woolen coat and leather insulated gloves, which I’d quickly changed into during our stop.

The mountains had completely dissolved around us, and the most I could make out through the snow were the shadowy silhouette of the snow-covered mule in front of me and the icy rocks passing under Tess’s feet. We were in the empty tundra of a bald-headed mountain with nothing to use as markers for our advance, and it began to feel like we weren’t moving at all—that we were suddenly in a strange dimension that cared nothing for distances, for the friction of hoof on rock, for heat or labor. We were in a world of white ice and bitter cold, a world of numb pain, and I began to suspect deep in my heart that we would die out here, on an empty expanse of ice and snow, and this made me sad for my mother, who would not survive the loss of two sons and a husband.

We were unwelcome riders moving against time stretched still—time metered only by the pain of the cold pulsing from fingers and toes, time measured by cracked and frozen lips, by the hard ache of our asses bouncing in our saddles. I held the reins in my freezing hands, then tucked them into the muffler on the front of my jacket. They felt like cold rocks against the dissi-

pating warmth of my belly, and my shivers began to control me so completely that I feared they would unhorse me. I had no idea many hours had passed, and I hadn't the energy to check my wristwatch. My legs began to cramp from the cold, so I pulled my knees up as high as I could and leaned forward onto my thighs. It felt as if the cold wind blowing down on me was trying to eat away my flesh, to reveal my tiny purple heart beating behind my ribs. I withdrew into myself as tightly as I could, every nerve-pulse of pain bringing me closer to what I was sure would be my last living moment. I didn't know it, but I was crying in a half-sleep, and when I regained consciousness, I realized that our line had stopped moving and my scarf was frozen stiff around my face from the tears.

In the whiteout of the blizzard, I could finally see a landmark protruding like a horn from the side of the mountain above us. My father slogged Spike back through the snow and came abreast of me, the snow up to Spike's heaving belly. "You all right, son?" he asked. His scarf was spotted with blood where his lips had split from the cold, and his leather gloves were iced over and cracked at the wrists when he moved. "This is as far as we go. Spike doesn't have nothing left, and I don't know where we are. The compass says we're heading north still, but I can't gauge the distance. We're gonna have to get up to that outcropping and just hope we can form some kind of shelter against it."

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We turned our line uphill, and what we thought was an outcropping of rock slowly materialized as the frame of a mostly intact, six-seat airplane wreck. It was like seeing something hurled out of the future, a time machine falling from the sky. I thought that I was dreaming, that I would see Tanner waving to us from the cockpit as he taxied away from us. But I knew this was no dream, that this was a new and different wreck, and that Tanner was long gone, his plane a spot of rusting metal hanging off the side of a mountain scores of miles from here.

We dismounted and tied the horses on the downslope of the wreckage, near the joint of the left wing and the fuselage, where it formed a small wind-break. Even with the cold, my father immediately began to dig furiously with his entrenching tool against the buried door of the airplane. I was so cold I felt like my spine had fused together, and as I unfolded my entrenching tool, my hands were so cramped that I couldn't lock it into place. I began to cry again in frustration and fear, and after a few moments of struggle, it snapped into place, and I started to dig with my father in weak little stabs. He noticed

that I was struggling and gripped me in a bear hug while he slapped and rubbed at my arms and legs in an effort to get the blood circulating. “You just keep digging here. I think we can stay in the airplane and get a canopy over the windbreak for the horses.” He split off from me and began taking the saddles from the horses and the panniers from the mules. He stacked them against the openings between the wings and the ground as a wind barrier, then tied horse blankets and extra parkas around the torsos of the four animals. He pulled the four of them in tight to the airplane where I was digging and tied them all head-to-head near the wing supports. Even with the cold and wind and snow, I could feel the animus of their heat and the rank must of their sweat washing over me, and I drew some comfort from their sweet wet heat. We continued to dig around them, lining the perimeter with a thick circle of snow. My father tied the canvas cover for our tent over the four horses and stretched it between the tail and the wing of the airplane. Despite the sharp flapping of the canvas, our animals stayed immobile under the loud buffeting, their senses still sharp enough to know that if they left the protection of the cover, they would die.

134 Finally, we were able to open the door to the airplane. Inside, the plane was miraculously in one piece—only the nose and right wing of the plane were completely destroyed, and snow was only coming in through the sheared-off windshield and open engine compartment. We crammed everything we had into the holes, using snow as mortar, until the whistling of the wind stopped pouring into the cabin. It was nearly pitch black in the cabin, so my father lit his gas lantern, and we huddled around its heat until the temperature began to melt the ice from our shoulders and boots. We took off all of our wet clothes and pulled dry ones on from our packs. My feet felt like cubes of ice, and I couldn’t point my toes to get my long johns on. As we were thawing, my hands and feet ached as if the bones had been broken into tiny pieces and were piercing my flesh. My father rubbed them in his cold hands, and I could see that his fingertips were white and unmoving. “Looks like we both might have a touch of frostbite. We were mighty lucky to find this wreck.” A few tiny tears spilled into the wrinkles lining his eyes, but I couldn’t be certain if it was from the cold. He blew hot air on my feet and kept rubbing them until the pain finally subsided. “We may get through this yet.” Only the stuttering of his words and the trembling of his lips let me know how close we had come. Those were all the words that were spoken that night and the follow-

ing day, as we slept huddled around the gas lamp, the cold white of the world pounding ceaselessly on the walls of the aircraft's cabin, begging to be let in.

On the morning of the second day, we were awakened by sunlight peering down through a window into the hull of the wreck, and it was through the new light that we saw the human bones scattered about the rear of the plane. The scouring wind from the storm had unearthed them, and they were completely picked clean, with small gnaw marks at the tips of the bones, probably from rats or weasels. There were only a few dried-up pieces of flesh here and there, and there was a skull with beautiful strands of auburn hair loosely held by a faded pink bow that was slowly peeling from the white bone. I wasn't scared like you would think—the remains of this dead woman actually comforted me in a way, as if she were merely a topographical landmark—something to let me know how deep the waters were, and how close I had come to losing my life and losing my father.

We opened the door to the plane and stepped out into a world thawing around us, the heat from the sun already melting the snow packed on our canvas shelter so that it dripped down on our animals. We checked each of them, feeling for frozen legs or lameness, and gave them half a bucket of oats each. We began to break camp like we had two mornings before and prepared ourselves for the last leg of the journey to Hilden's lodge. As we came around to the other side of the airplane, we saw that there were three short pine poles planted in the ground; we could only assume that they marked the remains of the rest of the airplane party. Something inside me told me that I should feel pity for those people, that I should have sadness welling in my heart, but all I felt was relief—they were who I could have been, but we had survived where they had not. For this I felt no guilt—and still don't.

We rode sporadically for about an hour and descended into the tree line again. We were forced to rest the team often—they were exhausted and hungry, and it was hard going in places. The snow was up to our ankles under the horses, and so deep in places that we had to find alternate routes. When we came upon Hilden's lodge, we saw a sliver of smoke twirling lazily from the smokestack. My dad immediately knew something was wrong when he saw the mule and donkey still in their tack, strolling about and looking for shoots, their reins dragging in the snow behind them. "Stay right here, son," he said, dismounting and pulling his Remington from his pack. He turned the gun and checked to see if it was loaded, then moved around to the rear

of the cabin, gracefully and silently plowing through the waist-high snow. A few moments later, he appeared at the doorway and beckoned me to come.

I gathered our animals and rounded up Hilden's mule and burro, then climbed the uneven steps to his home. Inside, Hilden lay slumped against his thick pine table, all of our cans of peaches opened and empty next to an unstopped caramel-colored medicine bottle. Old Hilden's face was frozen in a grimace, even though the cabin was warm and his body was relaxed in his chair—it looked as if he had simply fallen asleep after a night of hard drinking. Dad searched the cabin, stopping at a photograph of Hilden and a man I later learned was Teddy Roosevelt, then went through Hilden's clothes. Around his neck, he had an old set of dog tags and a medical tag that listed him as having diabetes. "Well, you think you know someone," Dad said, "but I've known him for probably thirty years, and all this time he had diabetes. It's a wonder he could live out here like this at all." He set about cleaning up around Hilden, as if he was worried that someone else would find him with his house in disarray. I didn't ask my father if he knew what Hilden had drunk from the dark bottle, if he had simply had a heart attack, or if it was just his time, but the fact that his mule and burro were still in their tack seemed evidence of a sudden death.

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Outside, the sound of water dripping from the roof sounded like an audience clapping their approval. My dad didn't have much to say, but I could sense a profound sadness coming from him. "Hilden was a good man. This is a sad day for Wyoming, though I doubt many will miss him. He's what kept Wyoming wild." We drug him outside and packed him in a high, shaded snowbank, then spent the next few days playing cards and filling out crosswords we'd found in the cabin, keeping a bonfire roaring in a tiny meadow nearby, hoping that it would help the ground thaw enough so that we could bury him. We whittled a nice cross for him, using the thick timber from one of his chairs, and my father taught me how to sharpen my knife and how to fire my Colt with some accuracy. He lovingly checked my feet and fingers every couple of hours, and his attention felt like an apology or a compromise of some sort.

Once we were finished with Hilden, we packed up our animals with the valuables and personals from the cabin, along with Hilden's mule and burro. I thought we would head south, the quickest way to our base camp and the old International with the horse trailer. Instead, we crossed over to the wreckage of the airplane on our way back down the mountain. My

dad scoured the wreck and wrote down all the information we could glean from the paperwork strewn around the cabin, scratching serial numbers and dates in a pad he always kept tucked in his shirt pocket. Then we cleared the remaining snow from around the plane, found four shallow graves scratched into the earth, dug up the bodies, and added the four skulls and jawbones from their corpses to our packs, careful to wrap each in its own torn canvas package. There was no telling how the barbed wind and winter snow would change the topography, or when there would be a thaw long enough to unearth the wreckage again, so my father felt it best that we collect as much of the evidence as possible. It was long and hard work, but not as distasteful as I initially thought. Burying Hilden had been way worse—it had felt like we were mashing him into the shallow grave we dug, twisting and turning his arms and legs until he fit as tightly as we could get him. I thought the grave was too shallow—that the wolves or bears would get to him—but I kept my opinions to myself. I never knew how Dad would react to words coming out of my mouth—sometimes he would laugh, and other times I would get a cuff to the head, and I still couldn't figure out why one and not the other.

In the end, I was getting used to the sight of dead bodies—burying people seemed more like a chore to me by the time we finished. As an adult, I dream about the woman with the auburn hair often—I have fixed her face hard in my mind from pictures we later saw in the paper and from obituaries for the men and women lost in that wreck. In my dreams, she is beautiful and happy, but her hands are worn down to the bone, and her fingers are bent and bloody from the digging. She never speaks, but simply digs at the cold earth in front of the crashed airplane. In the end, I guess it is just my mind failing to grasp how a person does it. Didn't she know she was going to die? Didn't she know that exhausting herself by digging those graves made it more certain that she, too, would perish? Was it love that forced her to do it for them? Duty? Fear? I will never understand what she must have felt, even though my father and I were as close to those four men and women as anyone ever could be—this is the knowledge that follows me out of those mountains, what follows me into my dreams.

When we finished burying the bodies, we cut down a couple of small trees and fashioned crosses for the headless skeletons that we had reburied. I listened as my father prayed for them, placing my palms together as I had seen others do, but this felt awkward, so I just held my right hand over my heart as if in pledge. Dad said simply, "Thank you, God, for sacrificing these

unfortunates so that my son and I could survive this storm.” I wished then that I could have believed some beautiful myth about my brother’s accident, that Tanner’s plane had gone down in these same snowy mountains for some higher purpose; I wished that I could put my arm around my father’s shoulders and let him weep away the pain I knew he held preciously within him. As we turned our animals toward home, I could hear the skulls in the panniers softly and hollowly bumping against each other, and I hoped against all hope that the dental records would be enough to identify them, that we could somehow bring them back to the world, to those families who waited in front of cold hearths for their return.