

## John Denver Is Dead

Jason L. Hanson

When I was eighteen I watched a boy dance in the lightning of a sudden afternoon storm in an alpine meadow that lay beneath a jagged peak. He came out of the trees into the wind-beaten swells of tall yellow-green grass, wearing no shirt or shoes, only faded blue jeans dyed a shade darker by the rain and torn on his left knee. He had shoulder-length blond hair that whipped around behind him as he leapt and twisted wildly through sheets of rain and wavering stalks, whooping and bellowing with mad exuberance, his arms flailing, spinning, sometimes falling, but always springing back up to move with the storm as though the stumbles were choreographed. Each time the lightning arced and cracked across the sky his body jolted with it, his frenzy building with the storm's intensity like a conductor leading a symphony into its furious climax.

As the storm reached its crescendo, he halted abruptly and turned into the rain so that it hit him squarely in the face and chest. Slowly he raised his arms out from his sides and tilted his head back so that wet matted hair blew out behind him on the gusts. He shuddered as he began to scream into the roar of the storm and the lightning flashed simultaneously with a concussive blast of thunder directly above us and his body jolted again, his back cambering as his arms flew up, and he buckled and fell backward into the wet grass and lay still.

He lay in the rain, not far from the rocks where my friends and I had crouched for cover, chest cut and scratched, heaving so you could see the cage of his ribs, knees muddy and torn, blood trickling from his lip in watery rivulets, eyes closed, not much older than me. The storm began to move past us, the thunder that had seemed to jar the ground just a few moments earlier grew faint as the rain tapered off into a complacent shower. It wasn't long before the sun came out, shining rainbows through the still-falling drops and giving a vibrant sparkle to the moist world. When the boy felt the sun on his skin he grinned and stood up, as if he had been waiting for the cue, pausing only a moment to steady himself before walking off toward the trees from which he had first appeared. The steam that had already begun to rise from the sunheated ground obscured his receding figure before he reached the edge of the meadow. He seemed to be alone.

This was my last camping trip at home in Colorado, a last hurrah in the mountains with my three close friends from high school before the college diaspora. When we came down at the end of the weekend, we would turn our attention to the excitement of elsewhere – the Pacific Northwest in my case, with its promises of channeling Kurt Cobain and scribbling caffeine-fueled poetry amid the drizzle – each of us departing within weeks to schools scattered from coast to coast. Like all American kids raised during the Beverly Hills 90210 era – and maybe any era – we had a sense that high school possessed import beyond what we could appreciate then, and that once this final summer was over, *it* was over. Home became a decision, something eternal rendered ephemeral.

The last rain drops splashed on the rocks in front of us, ceasing as quickly as they had begun. We were too stunned by what we had seen to wonder that the boy wasn't dead, let alone to speak about it, and we shook out our ponchos and continued on our way, walking in silence until it felt comfortable to talk about other things. As evening pushed down from the peaks, we

made camp on a rise that overlooked the South Fork of the Poudre River. We pitched our tents on a high, level spot beneath a stand of old lodgepole pines that had dropped a soft mattress of needles, where we could sleep with the sound of the river. Before we finished college, the site would be consumed by a fearsome wildfire, leaving a graveyard of charred trees and their serotinous cones to regenerate for another generation of Colorado high schoolers. But on that night, unable to make a fire with the wet wood, we ate cold pork and beans with bread for dinner, talking in the moonglow about the fishing we would do in the morning and what we had heard about college sex. We did not talk about the boy. Instead, as we traded our cans of beans for a contraband bottle of rum and smoked cheap cigars around our soggy fire pit, we promised one another that we were the type of true friends who did not forget where we came from.

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On the day that John Denver died, a Tuesday in mid-October, the rain was falling in Tacoma for the third day in a row, light but steady, with no relief in sight through Friday. I could hear it over the music I had been playing all evening in tribute: his last recording, a live benefit show he had played for the Wildlife Conservation Society, which was turned low for the quiet hours of the night. The water dripped off the eaves into the puddles of the courtyard below in a steady but irregular beat. The cool night breeze came in through my window and I sat sideways at my desk where I could feel it and listen to the irregular rhythm of the rain mix with the music.

I loved the unceasing rain then, after a month and a half in Pacific Northwest, and I doubted I would ever grow tired of it. When I left for school people had warned me that the

damp newness would wear off, that the wonder of it would grow old quickly. But it had not happened yet, and the rain still seemed calming to me then.

Just as “Rocky Mountain High” started and John was born, once again, in the summer of his twenty-seventh year, there was a soft knock at the door. Without waiting for me to answer, the handle turned with a loud, dissonant click of the latch and a girl slipped into the room.

“Mind if I sleep here tonight?” she whispered, smiling.

“Sure. I’d love that,” I said, not getting up. She walked over to me, leaning up against my desk, waiting a minute to listen before she spoke again.

*coming home to a place he’d never been before*

“What’re you listening to?”

“John Denver. The Wildlife Concert. He died today”—and she made a noise meant to convey her shock and sadness—“yeah, I know. He died today, just a few hours ago, actually. Crashed a plane he was flying into the Pacific. Near Monterrey.” I threw in the last part because she was from the California coast.

“Oh no,” she whispered, wrinkling her brow as she picked up the CD case to look at his picture, his smiling face, middle-aged and leathery by then, framed by a mop of blond hair that tumbled down his neck as he sang some song about the West. “My dad loved him.”

“Mine too. We have all his records at home. It was the only concert he ever went to growing up. Played the records all the time while I was growing up.” The chorus was starting.

“Listen. This is about where I live.”

*A Colorado Rocky Mountain High  
I’ve seen it raining fire in the sky.  
The shadow from the starlight  
is softer than a lullaby...  
Rocky Mountain High.*

We listened, but when the song was over she walked over to my stereo and turned it off. Outside it was still raining, louder now without the competition.

“I’d love to see Colorado some day,” she said, coming back over to where I sat.

“It’s a great place.”

“I bet.” She stepped in closer, standing in between my legs, and then knelt down, sliding her hand up my thigh and wrapping it around my waist, pulling gently as she looked into my eyes. “Come on. You can tell me about it in bed.”

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That fall my little sister’s fourth grade class launched a letter-writing campaign, spearheaded by the neighbor girl down the street, to adopt “Rocky Mountain High” as the state song. They wrote local politicians, state legislators, and the governor lobbying for the change. A Denver newspaper reporter did a search for the old state song and found that he had to go to the capital archive just to see a copy of it. The singer’s family even released a statement to the effect that they would consider it a great honor, and that my sister’s class had their full support and blessing. The opposition, which surprised the students and their parents with its passion and venom, came from a vocal contingent who claimed to champion the best interests of Colorado’s children and refused to believe that the song was not about drugs. By the time I came back for Christmas it was on the state legislative calendar for discussion after in the new year.

My last evening in Colorado over Christmas break I went for a walk with my dog, Lucky, in the meadow east of my parents’ house. Half of the meadow was missing since we had last walked there. A burgeoning subdivision had popped in its place, right on top of what had been a

prairie dog colony. Lucky had spent her puppyhood chasing after the chirping rodent sentries, each ducking down into his burrow at the last moment while a new one farther on rose to continue the alarm, leading Lucky in endless circles that suggested a coordinated strategy. I assumed that the occasional transient coyotes and the red fox that denned near the irrigation ditch were better hunters, and on several occasions I had seen the lethal prowess of the bald eagles that made their winter nest in a dead cottonwood on the bank. The eagles had hunted Lucky once as a small puppy, circling above her until I picked up some stones and launched them into the sky – morally conflicted warning shots, intentionally wide of their endangered target – until they glided back toward their gnarled perch. Now there was a gold-lettered sign on the corner that proclaimed the winding rows of idyllic pastel two-stories to be Westfield. On one of the finished blocks, I could count seven identical prairie palaces in an alternating mirror-image pattern (with a dormer added here and there to obscure the monotony).

From the open half of the meadow, the Front Range was not yet obstructed. Low-hanging gray clouds that had emptily threatened snow all day now shrouded the top of the first ridge in mist, suppressing the color of the sunset as it sank to its place behind the mountains. It had been a cold break, the morning temperatures hovering around minus ten. It was especially cold in the basement, my new bedroom, which was unfinished and had only concrete walls for insulation. I had been moved down there to make way for my little sister, who had moved into my old room the same week that I left for school.

As the sky went dark and cold, the clouds broke apart and the stars showed through. We walked north through the crunching grass and soon there were so many stars that they cast my faded shadow on the ground beside me. The dark contour of the Rocky Mountain foothills, silhouetted by starlight against the bright navy sky, drew the western horizon. I pictured the

cathedral mountains that I knew stood behind the first ridge, tried to remember each one I had visited, but they all ran together in a series of vivid impressions – a handhold above, the summit across the saddle, a panorama of distant snowcapped ranges, the sun shining through the trees, the faces of my friends in firelight. I sat down on a rise in the middle of the field, laying back on my puffy down parka, and I looked at the horizon, trying to engrave the brilliance of a clear Colorado winter night on my memory, to have something real and precise to take back with me, but in my head I could hear the rain tapping its irregular rhythm.

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I had planned on going to Hawaii with the university baseball team for Spring Break, but six days before our scheduled departure, while mountain biking with my roommate through one of the verdant forest stands of the Pacific Northwest, I fell. It was the end of my baseball season, and it would prove to be the end of my career. I have no memory of what happened, but when I got to the emergency room I was a laundry list of damage: concussion with a possible skull fracture (but only a small one), three broken teeth (although one only slightly), a hole in my upper lip where a rock had gone through, a rock slightly larger than a BB sitting underneath my eyeball behind my orbital bone, my right eye swollen shut with scratches on the inside of my eyelid, a hemorrhage underneath, and abrasions from my ear to my nose over almost exactly half of my face. My swollen lip made it look like the raw side of my face was always smiling.

My parents flew me back to Colorado as soon as I was able to travel. For the first week I lay on the couch and listened to a stream of caring people tell me how lucky I was. Lucky I did not land an inch higher or lower (brain damage versus broken neck). Lucky that I still had both

eyes. Lucky that I was not dead. Family friends came to the house to see for themselves.

Relatives called. In church Pastor Winter prayed aloud for me, thanking God that I was all right and asking for a quick and full recovery (if it was His will, of course – way too large a loophole for me to take comfort in). He mentioned me right before making intercessions for the cancer patients and the decaying elderly of the congregation, for whom he only asked compassion and courage. During the fellowship time after the service I had at least twenty people come up and tell me sincerely that they were glad that God was watching over me, that they had said a prayer as soon as they heard, and that (of course) we can never know His plans or what He has in store for us.

After a week-and-a-half of lying invalid on the couch I felt well enough to be bored, so on the second Tuesday afternoon of my recovery I went to see my old high school teachers. But as I walked through my old halls and saw all the familiar sights I felt out of place. I had never noticed before how small and tacky everything was, how childlike and similar high schoolers look. After chatting politely a while with my teachers about how exciting college was and how well they had prepared me for my courses, I walked out the back doors by the locker rooms and across the parking lot to the baseball diamond to see my old team play our crosstown rival, Rocky Mountain High School. Even the guys I had played with a year before looked skinny and young to me in their baggy uniforms.

The game was close, but our pitcher, who had been called up from the JV squad that season, was rattled and getting wild. He walked behind the mound, looked out past the fence toward the mountains, and took a deep breath, just as the coach had taught me to do when the game felt too intense. Watching him from beneath my wide-brimmed hat (to keep the sun off of the sensitive new skin), I wished I could explain the meaning of the ritual to him. Our coach



always assumed it was self-evident, but when I had stood in the pitcher's spot, feeling the weight of the big game pressing down on me, I hadn't even seen the mountains when I looked to the outfield, and I was sure he didn't either. Watching my old teammates play made me ache for just one more chance on the mound, now that I had gained some perspective on what big was and I was out there for. My vista was just a small bit wider than it had been a year before, I knew, but it was enough that I could have finally enjoyed the game in that way that my dad always knew it should be enjoyed and tried to tell me.

That night, against the wishes of my mother who wanted me to stay home and sleep, I tried to find some of the other misunderstood moments of youth that I thought were lodged in the places of my hometown. I went to see a movie with friend who was still a high school senior. She didn't look like the kids I had seen that afternoon, but still I felt older and distinctly different from her. The show was good into the middle of its story, where it was so intense and passionate that it gave me the urge to tell someone I loved them. I found myself thinking of the boy dancing in the storm. Fleeting impressions of that afternoon preempted the picture on screen – I saw him spinning, the wind whipping the grass, the flash of light illuminating the jagged peak, his palms upturned in the rain, his body sprawled on the wet ground. I could tell that his face had changed, that the boy in my memory was no longer the boy I had seen, but I was not sure who he had become.

The film could not carry its fervor through to the finale and the intensity fizzled. By the end, I was no longer thinking of love or any other grand thoughts, but I did not want to go home yet. It was only nine, too early to call it a night, so we went to get coffee. After coffee we went to City Park where we played on the swings and the toys, as we had on high school nights, and despite the spring chill I felt like it was summer again and no one had left home. We went to sit

at the lake, bundled up together in our coats and hats on my favorite bench, where the tree overhangs the view of town and the streetlight reflections stretch towards you across the water as you look at the stars hovering over the quiet houses. There were so many more stars than in the Northwest, and I found myself talking about it and about school, trying to explain what it meant to see different stars at night, to move among different trees, to hear the sound of week-long rain outside your window in the quiet hours of the night. She nodded and made sounds meant to convey understanding, but I knew that she and I were at different places and that I could never explain to her adequately what it was like to come home from school and sit on your bench and know that everything has changed. So instead of trying to explain to her I just carved my initials into the bench with the pocketknife on my key chain, deep so they would still be there when I came back for summer, and told her that it was time to go home.