



THE FATAL ACCIDENT: AN INDIAN, A COYOTE AND READERS COME TO THE RESCUE

by Dan Whipple

I saw God when I worked for *High Country News*, and it surprises me that I have never been mentioned in the voluminous literature on the subject.

What happened was this.

Four of us were driving back from Jackson, Wyo., in August of 1978. We had listened to a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony conducted by Ling Tung at the Teton Music Festival. We were all *HCN* staff members of various intensity and duration. Reading clockwise from the driver: Justas Bavarskis, part-time associate editor; me, then a half-time contributing editor; Marjane Ambler, full-time associate editor; and Jazmyn McDonald, full-time business and office manager.

We came over a hill about six miles north of Ft. Washakie (which is, in turn, about 15 miles north of *HCN's* then-home base of Lander) and there was a horse in the road. It was not a majestic mustang of the plains, engaged in the pursuit of its wild and free-roaming ways. It was just a horse (of course, of course) and it was just there in front of us, with all the feral dignity of a grenade.

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Justas was driving my car because I was too drunk. There was a puddle of beer cans at my feet on the passenger's side. Miller High Life, I think. The car was a blue Pinto (so there's even irony, a horse wrecking a pinto), which had been given to me by *HCN* editor Joan Nice and her husband Bruce Hamilton. The seat on the passenger side was no longer bolted to the frame, and could be set to rolling gently, mimicking the sage-covered prairie as it sped by. Also, the headlight beams were a little wall-eyed, which may have been part of the reason that this horse — or any horse, come to that — could appear instantly before us like an avenging angel.

The horse was brown. Justas saw him and cut the wheel hard left. He said, "Shit," very softly. He had a gift for understatement. Justas had a low, growly voice like a two-day beard. It was the last thing he ever said, so far as I know.

Someone in the back said, "A horse." I didn't say anything, but I remember thinking, "I wonder what will happen now?" Everything slowed down to the pace of really good, 1960s dope. Went under the horse's nose, leaving him (or her) standing there peacefully on the blacktop, front hooves on the double center line. We went over the side of a steep embankment — steep enough, anyway — not far from a highway sign that said, "Sage Creek." It was supposed to say "Sage Creek," but someone had shot out the "e" with carefully placed rifle fire.

The car rolled onto the driver's side. My door popped open. I got a good look at the sagebrush that was about to break three bones in my back. Then the transmitter went out.

Justas was killed. Broken neck. When the car rolled to the driver's side, it rolled on him. Could have rolled the other way. So, as Vonnegut says, it goes.

We lay there for a while. Me with my broken back. Jazmyn with a dislocated shoulder and a desire to go for help. Marjane's leg pinned under the car. Justas dead.

We lay there for a long while. About three hours. No cars went by. Wyoming is not a crowded place, but three hours without a single car on a main highway is unusual, even in Wyoming. The Pinto's headlights were still on, the wall-eyed one pointed toward Orion's belt and the other toward Omaha.

Near dawn, a coyote came down to us and sniffed around Justas's body, which was lying a little away from the rest of us. He stayed just out of the cone of light thrown by the dying headlights. He didn't do anything, just sniffed around a little. His intentions, while perhaps not friendly, were not openly belligerent.

The coyote is an animal bowlegged with the mythic freight of several cultures. Marauder, Trickster, Jester, Prometheus. He is one of the few animals not seriously considered for the *HCN* symbol during countless meetings on this sensitive subject. That indicates how low his stock has fallen since his heyday as the central character of Native American legend.

But here he was, present at the death of one of my best friends — a death so tragic that even 11 years later I can't construct any meaning to it — and I wanted to ask him a question. He sat near Justas's body, his tongue hanging a little out the side of his mouth and breathing short, shallow breaths, like a dog who has had a good but not hard run.

Then a car came up on the highway and a beautiful Indian girl got out to help us. By the time her tires had ground to a halt on the shoulder of the road, spitting pebbles, the coyote was gone. He didn't leave, exactly. He was just gone. The woman, who introduced herself with casual politeness, had fallen asleep on the floor at a friend's party, she said, and was driving home late. She drove back to Ft. Washakie and called the emergency rescue team. I hope she is canonized some day.

Jazmyn was released from the hospital quickly, but Marjane and I got to hang around a while. I lay in a fevered, semi-delirious state for three days, the doctor unable to figure out what was wrong with me. Besides a broken back, I mean.

All the nurses knew my problem, but were prohibited by medical protocol from making diagnoses. It seems that when a person hits a sagebrush at 55 miles an hour without benefit of an automobile, little pulmonary embolisms get knocked loose and make a beeline for the heart, in an attempt to kill. It was news to me. But they kept me in morphine, and it didn't seem like something to worry about.

A friend, however, the centerfielder on our softball team, visited me in the hospital and was convinced that he had visited a dead man. He told his wife so that same night.

On the night of the third day, I fell asleep at about 10 p.m. A few moments later, I woke up and got out of bed, the first time I had walked since the accident. I thought vaguely, "I shouldn't be doing this," but was not greatly troubled. Then I looked back and saw myself lying still asleep. I looked at my hands, which seemed to be working normally, and I took a few steps away from the bed and again looked back. I could even feel a tiny draft at my back from the opening in my hospital gown. I should emphasize that there was nothing dream-like about this experience. It was concrete and detailed, right down to the pink plastic water jug on the table by my bed. I started to shout.

As I did, I noticed that I wasn't alone; a coyote was standing next to me. He did not seem particularly friendly, much like the night of the wreck. He considered me a moment and said nothing, but took my arm and helped me back to bed. An hour or so later, my favorite nurse came in, leading my doctor by the hand and carefully describing to him the symptoms of pulmonary embolisms and their prescribed treatment. Through my drug and fever-induced fog, I could tell that she did not plan to let me die because he was unable to solve such a simple problem, even if it steamed some stethoscopes. They started medication immediately to break up these devils, and I recovered within two weeks.

Someone asked me once if I believed in this. That is like asking me if I believe in cabbage or Willie Mays. Some other friends have thoughtfully suggested interpretations. One, whose experience in these matters is nearly encyclopedic, said it is a fairly common drug-related phenomenon. Another, who had read *Life After Life*, a book about near-death experiences, suggested that I had died and then for some reason been sent back. Of these two explanations, I prefer the drug one.

Some folks have suggested that nearly getting killed was the best thing I ever did for *HCN*. We were professional poor people in those days, paid very little and without luxuries like health insurance. The hospital bills for the three of us eventually came to \$12,000. When word reached *HCN*'s readers, we became the recipients of an incredible, spontaneous binge of generosity.

Some friends, Mike Weber, Lynn Dickey and John Jenkins, organized a fund-raising and relief effort. They prepared a letter that was sent to all *HCN* subscribers. Within a few weeks, readers had sent in over \$30,000.

Contributions came from places you would expect and places you wouldn't, and the letters were heartwarming. An elderly couple sent two one dollar bills; they wished they could be of more help, but they lived on social security checks. Nonetheless, they wanted to send something "because we know how expensive medical care is from our own experience."

Some employees at Amoco took up a collection at work, and sent, if I remember right, \$185. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of individual contributions, most relatively small — \$25 to \$100 — but every one generous and moving. A lot of people wrote to say we should get health insurance. A point well taken, I thought. I would like to say that I laughed and cried over each letter like they do in the movies, but my back hurt when I laughed and I saved my crying for Justas. It is safe to say, though, that it was one of the most emotionally and spiritually uplifting things that has ever happened to me.

It has been a while since that accident. *HCN* is on a stronger financial footing now and everyone has health insurance. But that wreck has entered the folklore not just of the publication, but of the Rockies. Every once in a while I still run into someone who knows only vaguely of *HCN* and, when I tell them that I once worked there, they will say, "Oh yeah, they had that big accident a while back where all the editors were killed. You know anything about that?"

I allow that, yeah, I know some about it.

I don't tell them that I saw God, though, because it is too incredible. And that God was not the coyote I told you about, who is merely a legend. It was you, gentle reader, a generous, loving and benevolent spirit that convinced me that humankind can be lifted above the everyday pain and turmoil that we inflict on ourselves and each other. Because I was.

Thanks again. ◆