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A Glimpse from Bald Peak

Jim Richards

On a summer morning at Hebgen Lake, Montana, waterskiing came first—always. We got to the lake every morning at eight-thirty, just in time to feel the cold morning breeze surrender to the sun and see the ripples vanish from the lake, leaving it a smooth, blue-green glass. Only this morning the ripples didn’t vanish.

“Well, what do you think, guys?” My dad turned his back to the lake to face us, his hands on his hips.

“It’ll calm down,” Mike said. Mike was sixteen, eight years younger than me, bleach blond, and tan as leather. He fixed his eyes on the lake in serious concentration, as if he could make the ripples on the lake disappear psychokinetically. I stared at him equally as hard, maybe hoping to move something too, inside of him. He was a good kid—was. But lately he’d taken a dangerously sharp exit off of the straight and narrow onto the rough road of . . . drugs? Immorality? Who knew? Last year he started bawling in the stake president’s office where the whole family was gathered
for the setting apart of my sister, Emily, who was leaving on a mis-
mission for Spain. We were going around, one by one, expressing
our affection for her; when we got to Mike, he burst into tears.
Mike, Mr. Non-emotional, Mr. Keep-it-all-inside started bawling,
and it wasn't because Emily was leaving. Unfortunately, his
eyes were past crying now; they just stared into the lake, trying
to make it smooth, for another rush-of-a-ski ride.

“I don’t know, it looks pretty choppy,” I said to Mike,
whose eyes were still locked on the lake. My nine-year-old brother,
Eddie, was busy using a yellow, plastic bucket to dig in the sand.
He could care less about the lake, the weather, anything. He was
nine, and he was happy. Just like Mike used to be.

Dad walked down to the end of the dock, took off his felt
cowboy hat, rubbed his bald head, and looked at the mountains,
then the clouds, the lake, and back at the mountains; he was
playing prophetic weatherman.

“Well, what do you think, Nostradamus?” I yelled, cupping
one hand around my mouth.

“Looks like it’s going to be windy for a while,” Dad said,
walking back up the dock toward me and Mike.

“Amazing, absolutely amazing!” I said, shaking my head.
He stepped off the gray dock onto the course sand, slipping his T-shirt off on
the way. He was getting big. The muscles in his back looked rock
hard as he lay stomach-down on the cool sand, using his shirt as
a pillow.

“It’ll calm down,” Mike said again.

Actually, he knew that Jenny and Stacy, his fine-fleshed
friends, would be coming down to the lake soon from their cabins.
For Mike, they were the next best thing to waterskiing. For the
girls, Mike was the best thing. And he knew it.

From the dock I could see across the corner of the lake into
the marshy meadow of tall grass where a moose meandered.
From the meadow I could see where the pines began, growing thicker and taller as the mountains got higher. From the edge of the forest I could see where the terrain became rocky, steep, and capped with clouds, the highest summit around—Bald Peak.

And from the look on my dad’s face, and his Brigham Young stance, I could see that today he wanted to hike to the top. And so did I.

“Let’s do it, Dad,” I said, raising my eyebrows.

“I’ve always wanted to. Do you think we can make it?” he said, looking at his watch which he wore on the inside of his wrist.

“Well, I’ve been considering it lately, and I think if we ride motorcycles to Lionhead Ridge,” I pointed, “we can hike down the other side and across, to the base of Bald Peak. From there we should be able to climb the south side of the face.”

“Well, we’ll figure out how to approach it when we get there,” Dad said starting off toward the motorcycles, “Eddie, come on.” Eddie dropped the bucket, came running across the sand, then stopped next to where Mike was lying in the sun.

“Come on, Mike,” Eddie said. He wouldn’t want to go; I knew it, and Dad knew it. I wished so badly that he would come. It wasn’t that big of a deal, but with each little activity he missed, he separated himself more and more from the family. Thinking “better that he reject me than Eddie,” I spoke up.

“Mike, come with us,” I said. He acted like he hadn’t heard what we’d been talking about.

“What?” he mumbled, without raising his head.

“Hike Bald Peak with us.”

“No . . .” For a minute, I knew he remembered how much fun we’d had on summer hikes in the past—to Coffin Lake, Lionhead Mountain, Sheep Lake—if he would just come he would love it. “No thanks,” he added. Somehow, these little ways of distancing himself were more painful than his times of emotional explosions or running away.
The morning was nearing noon, and I had to be to work at Three Bear Restaurant waiting tables at six p.m. I figured three hours up the peak and two hours back down would give me just enough time to shower and drive to the restaurant in West Yellowstone, about ten minutes from our cabin. We needed to hurry, and for some brilliant reason we saved time by not preparing a lunch for the hike. We grabbed an almost empty bag of sour cream & onion chips, and a few small bottles of water. I had been in these mountains plenty of times. We would manage.

The motorcycle ride to Lionhead Ridge was about twenty minutes for me, thirty for my dad and Eddie. Since I beat them to the ridge, I had some time to listen to myself think—about Mike. What had happened? He used to be so close to everyone in the family, especially me. Now he was only close to his “friends.” We used to laugh together so much, now he would hardly talk to me. Agitated by my thoughts, I listened to the sounds of the mountains instead: a hawk screeching high above the lodgepole pines; tree trunks creaking under the weight of the breeze; grasshoppers whispering like rattlesnakes; sage-hens cooing from the thick brush; and eventually a couple of motorcycles buzzing and echoing up the trail.

We parked our motorcycles behind trees on the hillside where they couldn’t be seen from the trail and started hiking through the woods.

“I think if we cut across, down this side of the ridge, then we will eventually come to the base of Bald Peak where we can hike up,” I said, ducking under a branch.

“We don’t want to go too far down, though. We should stay near the ridge,” Dad said, helping Eddie over a fallen tree. If there is one way my dad and I are alike, it’s this: we’re always right. Well, I’m right, and he thinks he’s right, especially when it comes to the mountains.
“If we stay near the ridge we’ll have to come down eventually anyway to get to the base of the peak.” I angled my path slightly down the mountain.

“But if we don’t stay near the ridge we won’t be able to see where the bottom of the peak is.” He angled his path slightly upwards and Eddie followed behind, picking up rocks and dropping them periodically.

This discussion ended like most between me and my dad, without an agreement. Just me going my way and he going his. We knew we’d end up in the same place. The only difference was that he thought his way was best, and I thought mine was. Actually, both ways turned out to be much more difficult than we had imagined. The mountainside we traversed was steep and there was no trail. We hiked with one leg about a foot uphill from the other, an excruciating task for ankles. Then, when we reached what we thought would be a gradual descent to the base of the mountain we found a series of gullies and steep ravines. For the whole hike we were either going straight down or straight up through thick forest. By the time we got to the base of the mountain we were already terribly tired and way behind schedule.

“Well, we made it . . . to the base,” I said, closing my eyes to keep my sweat from burning them.

“Yeah, should we head back?” my dad said, taking off his sweat-soaked hat.

“Yeah right, we’ve come this far,” I said, shading my eyes to try and locate the peak.

“You’re doing great, Eddie. Can you believe this kid, hiking like this at nine years old?” My dad patted him on the shoulder. Eddie, mimicking, reached and patted my dad on his upper arm. Dad was more patient with Eddie than with any other of his ten kids. Maybe because Eddie was the tenth. He’d had a lot of practice. I don’t think Eddie will ever know the stern and strict love Dad raised me with. Dad was already Eddie’s friend.
When I was nine-years-old, he was only my dad. It wasn’t until I got back from my mission that we became friends, I think. It’s hard to tell with my dad. He keeps things inside, even from Mom. Just like Mike. In a way, I think dad finds in his friendship with Eddie what he missed in Mike. I bet it hurts to be a father, even a good one.

“If we switchback up here,” I pointed, “then we can reach that incline and climb straight up.”

“It’s too steep, we’ll have to switchback at an angle heading for the lower part of the ridge then walk up to the summit.” Dad put his felt cowboy hat back on and motioned Eddie to start out ahead of him. We moved up the mountain steadily on our separate ways for the same destination.

It took us over an hour of switchbacks and bear-crawling up rock slides to finally reach the summit. It was Awesome. From the peak, looking east, we could see the blue entirety of Hebgen Lake, straight ahead, stretched the wide yellow plains where our cabin was; and on the right, we could see the square-mile city of West Yellowstone. I looked at the lake for a long time from this distance, trying to see Mike, which I knew was impossible.

The majestic view from Bald Peak was a natural witness to me of an artistic creator, a testimony of God himself. I felt a powerful reverence, and it made me mad—mad that Mike wasn’t next to me, feeling what I felt. I stood there staring at the lake, inspired and frustrated, as the upward wind chilled my sweaty clothes.

The stale sour cream & onion chips tasted delicious, but didn’t last long. Neither did the water. We had nothing left to satisfy our hunger and thirst. Because of the valleys and steep ravines we knew the hike home would be just as hard as the hike up. It was four o’clock, and I needed to be clean, dressed, and taking someone’s order in two hours. For some reason I thought I could still make it.
“Dad, I think if we hike down the other side of the mountain we can walk along the north ridge-line and make it home faster.” I untied my flannel shirt from my waist and put it on.

“You think so?” If he was about to agree with me, I knew he must be exhausted. “I’ll try anything if we don’t have to go back the way we came.”

My dad stayed mid-way up the mountain while I hiked down the other side to see if it was a possible alternative for a way home. Eddie stayed at the top within Dad’s sight. When I was almost to the very bottom of the backside of the mountain, I realized it would be impossible. I was surrounded by cliffs dropping hundreds of feet into jagged rocks.

“Hey! Are you okay?” my dad shouted. He sounded panicked, like he had shouted several times and I hadn’t heard.

“I’m coming back up!” I shouted twice before he heard me. When I got back up the mountain I bent over with my hands on my knees, struggling to catch my breath. I felt my back and legs cramping up. My tongue was dry as a cat’s paw, and my temples pulsed with pain. I had no water, and welcomed the sweat that dripped down my face into the corners of my mouth. I took off my flannel shirt, damp with sweat, and tied it around my waist. My watch read 4:45.

My dad and Eddie had started heading back down the ridge-line and I caught up with them at the top of where we had ascended the face.

“I’m going to have to hurry on ahead, Dad. I have to get to work,” I said between breaths.

“Right. Good luck,” my dad said, without turning around. The fastest way down, I figured, was to sit on my heels and slide on the loose rocks. I did this for forty minutes before I got to the bottom with aching knees and punctured palms from pushing and balancing as I slid down the rocky face. Crossing the first ravine, I realized that the flannel shirt I’d tied around my waist was gone. I didn’t even consider looking back.
The next two hours of my journey were the most grueling of my life. My body’s resources were completely exhausted. My stomach cramped and burned as if it were drying up. I couldn’t make more than ten steps up the steep hillside without stopping. I was in the shadow of the mountain now as the sun got low, and the mosquitoes came out to feed. I was too tired to brush them away from my neck, my arms, my face. My body no longer sweat, but endured a burning chill like a fever. The evening air and swarms of mosquitoes made me really wish I had not lost my flannel shirt. It was after six, but getting to work was not important, just getting home alive.

Near the top of the last steep hillside, I was resting after every step. Finally, my body refused to go on. I collapsed face-down, dizzy and dehydrated. Lying on my cramped stomach, resting my head on my arm, I could see into a dry creek bed. Buried in the sediment I saw the top of a plastic bottle. I reached for the bottle and uprooted it from the earth. A Pepsi Big-Slam, one liter. Muddy or not, I would drink it. As I twisted the dirty lid I heard the refreshing burst of carbonation, a sharp hiss saying the soda was still good. I put my flaky lips around the muddy mouth of that bottle and drank nonstop till it was gone.

My body must have absorbed the liquid instantly because my stomach felt empty within seconds after the drink. My strength was revived enough to finish the ascent and make it to the motorcycles, where I hopped on, rode home, and made it to work an hour and a half late.

In the restaurant I cleared plates and took orders in a daze. I wasn’t there; I was wondering who had dropped that Pepsi and suffered thirst so that I would survive. Maybe some hiker had dropped it out of his pack on Lionhead Ridge last summer, and the spring runoff had washed it down to right where I would need it the next year. I marveled at how miraculously coincidental
the whole thing was. It made me wonder if next year a tired hiker might be caught in a storm and find my flannel shirt on the mountainside to keep him warm. As I looked at the hungry tourists eating all around me, I thought about these strange events that make no sense until long after they transpire. It’s like every once in a while God gives us a glimpse from his direction. He lets us look back and says, “See, see the way I weave?”

When I got home from work I wanted to tell Mike what had happened, but he wasn’t home. Dad had made it home, but only after carrying Eddie, vomiting, and suffering early stages of hypothermia and muscle spasms in his legs. I stayed awake for a while, hoping Mike would come home so I could tell him about the hike. Come home Mike, come home, I thought as I fell asleep on the couch. He stayed out all night. I don’t think my dad slept at all. I’m sure my mom didn’t. Mike, what are you thinking? Give me a glimpse, God. Give me another glimpse.