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WESTERN UNION

Marrying into the American West that occupied my dreams as a child.

Like most boys, I grew up worshipping guns. Born into the era before the video game and the pixel-easy murder of a million people a day, I passed my adolescence playing old-fashioned war with my friends. Instead of the Airsoft BB rifles and high-tech paintball guns wielded by my stepchildren on the killing fields of Boulder (otherwise known as our backyard), we shot clumsy, spring-powered plastic bullets at each other from innocuous toy pistols. Lacking the advanced technology for the "kills" of laser tag, we hurled that special New Jersey ordnance known as the "dirt bomb." All of this was not only a rehearsal for manhood in the venerable American tradition of education through violence; it was also a conscious reenactment of the lives of Daniel Boone, Kit Carson, and Buffalo Bill Cody, those heroes of the frontier who had haunted my imagination since I'd first begun to read.

Everyone owns a myth of his or her origins, and when we don't have the one we want, we do like I did: cheerfully make it up. What did I, a suburban child, have to do with the dead-shot abilities of a famed trapper and soldier like Kit Carson? Nothing, obviously. But such invention of a persona out of whole cloth is also part of the American tradition. As a nation of immigrants with a continually reinvented and receding past, we specialize in adopting identities—and lineages—at the drop of a hat. When a child, I wasn't especially interested in belonging to the tradition of my actual forebears: pious, pushcart-driving Eastern European Jews who swarmed over the Lower East Side of Manhattan around the turn of the 20th century and then fanned out across the country, looking impossibly stranded and depressed in photographs of that time. I was an American child and I wanted American action, and so, in the backyard of our suburban home, I invented a past that included cowboys, Indians, running gun-battles, and copious amounts of preteen blood.

That was then. As an adult, falling in love in Rome, Italy, and moving to Boulder, I had the sense of being strangely beached between imaginary and real geographies. Colorado, after all, was the crucible for the Godec and Nelson and Pettingell families into which I'd married. My wife's families were Colorado, and were also that rarest thing, authentic pioneers: bred-in-the-bone, soaked-in-the-Stetson residents of an area—the American West—I'd dreamed of belonging to for the most formative years of my life. Judy's people were the beneficiaries of that thing which I, as a member of a tribe sentenced to 5,000 years of wandering partition, would never know: a spirit of place. They belonged to the land; they'd been judges, miners, engineers, postmasters, nature photographers, and county clerks. In the process, they'd even managed to have a thirteener, Pettingell Peak, named after them. As a 12-year-old, aloft on fantasy, I'd thirsted after the exact landscapes they sprang from, and yet as an adult new to the region I was forced to feel against my skin the many crucial ways these good people differed from me. More than once I posed the question: What was I, the inheritor of a learned indoor tradition of hair-splitting, gems of logic, and fine ethical distinctions, doing amid all this sagebrush, chaparral, and bluff Western candor?

About a year ago, piqued by this question, I decided to set out on a casual quest to find out the truth about a family that, unlike my own, had spent generations in the same bounded space, and had claimed that space through the sheer continuity of their presence. What had they endured in the process? And what had motivated them in the first place to clear brush, tramp up and down snowy slopes, rope and wrangle and dig for precious metal in holes in the earth? I associated them with a certain tough fair-mindedness, a stoicism and a dignity that was different both from the revved-up dramas of life on the East Coast and the blissed-out sunny serenities (and congestions) of California. They had qualities that were—I suspected—specifically Coloradan. How had these qualities taken root here? What had lain behind their flowering?

"He died up there," Judy says, gesturing over our heads to a switchbacked road set in a cliff above the city of Aspen. Turning our car off Main Street and heading over the wonderfully named "No Problem Bridge," we enter the narrow gravel road and begin to rise.

The "he" in question was Frank Godec, Judy's paternal great-grandfather. His death was reported in the Aspen Times of May 17, 1917, as follows: "Frank Godec was killed in the No 3 Tunnel of the Smuggler Mine by a cave-in...today." What the dry, factual tone of the death notice leaves out is that the text itself was first read by the miner's son, Joe Godec, as an 11-year-old boy returning home that particular day after school. As was the custom in small American towns at that time, the news of the day was posted in the window of the general store. It was a warm late-summer's afternoon, but we can imagine the stroke of cold going through him as he stared at the small letters in a certain dawning disbelief. (My busybody childhood mind, meanwhile, colors the town around him with the Deadwood-esque scenery of swinging saloon doors, creaking wagon wheels, and lean, squinty-eyed pistoleros in floor-length dusters bellying up to nearby bars.)

We've already spent awhile driving around the city. Having never been to Aspen before, I'd privately expected something along the lines of a country-and-western version of Florence, Italy—that is, a giant glove shop masquerading as a town. Yet I'm impressed, at least initially, by the exacting modesty of the place. Its working-class past lends it a saving camouflage, and its wealth—aside from the coolhunting shops visible on certain side streets—is by and large discreetly contained in the giant, polyhedral pleasure domes scattered through the hills above the city.

As we continue to rise on the corkscrew switchbacks, drawing nearer the mine, we move farther away from the original site of Frank Godec's home, on King Street below us. According to family lore, his widow sold the house after he died for "forty dollars and a sack of potatoes." With the money, she bought a car and set out for the comparatively wealthy burg of Pueblo, where both Judy's parents and Judy and her siblings were born. The miner's shack was razed long ago, and the original plot now contains one of those turreted fieldstone-and-timber Aspen palaces whose purchase price was surely worth the area's weight in natural resources circa the turn of the century.

We crest a sudden rise, now several hundred feet over the city, and the scrubby berm opens up to reveal the panorama of the mine itself. Set well back behind barbed wire fencing is the vast gray and brown apron of ancient tailings, and on the bluffs above the outbuildings, the American flag, and small turn-of-the-century railcars that originally ferried silver-rich ore to the smelter. We're again reminded both of the magnitude and the disfiguring nature of mining: literally opening up the veins of Mother Earth and letting her bleed out. The place, which fairly screams Superfund, was the

site in 1894 of the extraction of the largest silver nugget ever found, a shiny behemoth that tipped the scales at a whopping 1,840 pounds. Today, a large antiquated-looking "Keep Out" sign on the fence warns visitors away. The sign appears to be original, and on closer inspection bears an injunction that neatly sums up my childhood fantasy of freewheeling frontier justice. It reads: "Trespassers who survive will be diligently prosecuted. This includes any government employee."

A peculiar bleakness seems to blow through this area, a feeling of hardscrabble lives, immense physical dangers, and existence eked out against crushing odds. Every day, in rain, snow, blistering heat, and thin air, Frank Godec made the trek up the hill to this mine from his tiny home, and then entered the mineshaft to climb back down inside that same hill and scrape for metal in the earth. One day, with a thunderous roar, that earth buried him alive. Like a pencil grabbed to underline an irony, a private jet suddenly lifts off in a straight line in the distance as we stand there. The lights of the town are coming on below, the revelers preparing for another night of expensive merriment. The vision of the mine, especially at dusk, is not one that encourages lingering.

Every family seems to have a Moses of a sort, a man who opened the first doors, busted the first clod, and performed the heroic tasks under whose sway succeeding generations toiled in relative ease. The buried miner Frank Godec was certainly no weak branch on Judy's family tree, but it was her great-great-grandfather on her mother's side, a man named Jake Pettingell, who sank the taproot and founded part of the Front Range as we know it.

Pettingell was an Easterner who arrived in Sulphur Springs, Colorado, in 1880, still a young man, and never left. Noted in a local paper for his "youthful step, snappy eyes, and ready wit," he was, the article reads, "determined to carve a worthy Grand County out of the wilderness he'd known as a boy." Pettingell did just that. In fact, as regards Grand County, the man was in perpetual motion. He was a mayor, deputy fish commissioner, county clerk, and eventually county judge, serving for so long in the same courthouse (50 years) that it got him a place in Ripley's Believe It or Not. While alive, he opened a successful hotel (the Grand; since demolished), and amassed both a considerable reputation and fortune. Posthumously, a mountain—the 13,553-foot Pettingell Peak—was named in his honor, and his legacy includes dozens upon dozens of family members scattered throughout Colorado.

Early this summer Judy and I set out to explore Planet Pettingell. In my quest to unearth the truth about this man, I'd already spent much time paging through brittle books of old newspaper clippings. I'd skimmed volumes on the history of Grand County. I'd stared lengthily at his photos. Through these various means I'd come slowly to possess the image of an immensely likeable individual. Pettingell was the archetypal Western film protagonist—peppery, country-shrewd, upright, funny, frugal, and personable. He seemed as concerned with his fellow citizens as he did with himself, and hewed to an old-fashioned model of civic morality. At the same time, he clearly had his eye on the main chance, and his record testifies to a keen, pretelevision sense of his public image.

It was Pettingell's legal intervention that caused the word "Hot" to be appended to the former Sulphur Springs, a commercially savvy move that helped distinguish the town from other healing-water locales nearby. It was Pettingell who, in his position as county clerk, "recording the transactions in an easy and fluent script," had highly privileged access to property records and used this fact to advance his booming real estate career. But it was also Pettingell who, upon the birth of

his son in 1903, threw a huge stag party attended by every rancher within a day's horse ride. In the ensuing booze-up, celebrants consumed 137 quarts of Champagne. Nonetheless, according to a paper of the time, "a unique feature of the celebration was the refusal of Mr. Pettingell to join in the drink. He looked wise and kept his hand on his checkbook while 200 men of all sorts and conditions spent 1,700 dollars for him."

To journey into Jake Pettingell's past, one must, genealogically speaking, pass through the present town of Idaho Springs. Judy's relatives are thick on the ground here. And yet Idaho Springs, in truth, doesn't have a lot to recommend it today. A raw, wounded openness floats over the place, a sense of civic stagnation and drift, unrelieved by a pretty main street. Too far from any large city to have caught a lift from its proximity (as Carbondale does, for example, by drafting on the winds of Aspen), and without anything indigenous that would draw tourists, it hunkers down in a kind of Rocky Mountain lull.

Nonetheless, this was near where Judy's maternal great-grandfather, Tulley Nelson, in typical pioneering fashion, hiked the scary-high Empire Pass as a boy to get to school in Georgetown, and later, as an adult, became famed for his picturesque mountain photos of bighorn sheep. It was also here that the McCormick girls, Judy's grandmother and two great-aunts, renowned for their beauty, enticed suitors from all over the area for dances at the Elks Club and old-fashioned flirtations on the glider. Back in the palmy, peaceful days before World War II, an ambitious suitor might have taken one of the girls to the Idaho Springs Opera House, still standing today. To draw near these pretty mountain flowers, however, the boy would have had to jump over the rather high stile of their mother, a woman by the name of Mary McCormick for whom the word "formidable" seems far too gentle.

Flinty to the point of petrifying, Mary ran the Rex Cafe (long gone), which catered to truckers, and was known both for her forgiving heart and her toughness. More to the point, she was reputed to have once said of her drunken wastrel of a husband: "He came home one night coughing blood, and I did what was necessary: nothing. He died at my feet."

Every family has colorful stories of its ancestors, and I have my own baker's dozen—my Uncle Albert, the East River tugboat captain who died too young; my Uncle Bernie, the moustachioed Romeo who struck it rich as one of the original investors in PAM cooking spray and built an indoor pool in his New Jersey house which was used—to his wife's horror—for porno shoots. But I have to admit that lovable toughness in my family's women is in short supply. Compulsive generosity, maybe. The occasional beautiful face, for sure. But the emphasis in our family is not on the pioneering virtues of frugality, physical stamina, or the kind of salty toughness characterized by Katharine Hepburn, or in this case great-grandma Mary. Nor is it identified with any one place. Its hallmarks are the rueful, the ironical, the tragicomic, along with a persistent interest in "culture." Its master theme, if it has one, is about outwitting the statistical probabilities the better to have a good life, and of laughing uproariously at others' foibles with—always—a catch in the throat.

But iron spines and a kind of cheerful stoicism seem to have been plentifully parceled out to the ladies of Judy's family, along with an old-fashioned tendency toward self-reliance. Gertrude Frey, Jake Pettingell's daughter, lived out her dotage in Idaho Springs, and her prim Victorian still stands today, as does the spotless white picket fence around it. It was beneath that fence that the widow was found lying motionless on the grass one evening. Alarmed residents called the police, who

when they arrived found her somewhat cross at the interruption. She'd merely been clipping the grass-blades between the pickets with a scissor, she explained, and needed to get back to work!

Up the road a stretch, in the town of Empire, the same Tulley Nelson who once hiked high in the Rockies to photograph bighorn sheep whacking heads for the favors of dotting ewes was also, according to family lore, the postmaster. But today in the sleepy city hall, the clerk interrupts nursing her baby long enough only to explain to Judy and me that she has no records on hand to confirm that fact, and the part-time postal clerk says the same. And so, disappointed by the town's apparent civic amnesia, we motor on. Our search, as it has been since the beginning, is not only to glimpse the sites in which Judy's family took piecemeal possession of Colorado—but to somehow close in on their own Founding Father, Jake Pettingell.

An hour out of Empire, we're drawing nearer to Hot Sulphur Springs and it's impossible not to notice how the rolling hills past Fraser are now denuded and reddish-brown, savaged by *Dendroctonus ponderosae*, otherwise known as the mountain pine beetle.

Our destination is just a few minutes away from this monochrome landscape, freshened with the occasional roadside splash of Indian paintbrush, and I'm thinking about the target of my quest. I'm thinking how later in life, Pettingell and his wife (abetted by his star-status as America's longest-serving county judge) were photographed being welcomed as visiting dignitaries in Chicago as they traveled across the country. There was something nearly Trumanesque about Pettingell in these photos from the 1930s. Trained as an actor in his youth, the face had finally come to fit the mask: After years as a jurist, he looked every bit the elder statesman, and his wife had taken on a vague but striking resemblance to Eleanor Roosevelt.

With my image of Pettingell weighted toward these photos, I'm unprepared for what I find before me when we finally arrive, because the town of Hot Sulphur Springs, not to put too fine a point on it, is a bust. Aside from the lavish tricked-out resort, there's nothing to see but a completely forgettable small intersection of streets in the exact middle of nowhere. What was I expecting, Versailles? In my enthusiasm, building my case for something splendid from my research, I'd forgotten a single crucial fact: Pettingell was a true pioneer. He carved a life for himself out of the wilderness. Without complaint, he endured hardships that are well beyond our comprehension. In this resides his greatness, and his importance both socially and personally, to Judy's family. But his early life—I'm reminded now—wasn't exactly long on what real estate agents call "mod cons."

As if to underline that fact, getting out of the car I behold the county courthouse from where he administered justice. Courthouses these days tend to be imposing structures, done up with soaring neoclassical reminders of the awesome importance of the Law. In this case, the chinked log structure, standing inside a kind of corral of ancient buildings, is so small, so drab and unprepossessing, that I can't quite believe it, and continue to stare silently a moment while my admiration for the man expands at warp speed. In distinction to the East, which around that time was already condensing itself into vertical cities, the early West was a place where grandeur was either naturally present in the immensity of the landscape itself, or was found internally, in the depths of one's personal convictions. One didn't need built reminders of such things.

I realize this, yet after all that buildup and research, I feel deflated anyway. I can't help it. It's part of my problem, I realize, to presume that great achievement in life will always be signaled by great

worldly manifestations of same, and the modesty of the structures in front of me is a sharp reminder of my error.

Chastened, I get back in the car and drive. A half-hour later, pulling up to the town of Grand Lake, we come to the site of Pettingell's summer resort and experience the placid yet somewhat startling apparition of a lake arriving at the end of long travel through dusty scrub. Pettingell gifted the land to what is currently the Grand Lake Yacht Club, as a photo of him inside the building testifies. But the building is closed just now, and it has begun to rain.

Fortuitously, shelter from the downpour can be found in the Kauffman House, a beautifully restored Victorian-era home, which functions as a period museum of the life of early Grand Lake. Many photos of Pettingell are here, along with much gear and tackle of the period. That same sense of life lived with rudimentary means is present here as well, in the small, low-ceilinged rooms, the kitchen with its washboard and pump sink, the wavy glass of the windows, the buckled floors. And yet the high spirits of the time have left their mark in certain rooms of the museum as well. The giant long boards of skis are hung on one wall. On another, the taps and buckets for maple sugaring, along with sleds and snowshoes, overcoats, and toy trucks and games. Clearly, the people disporting themselves here a hundred years ago did so with no sense of deprivation whatsoever. Pioneering tends to remove the vestiges of self-pity that spring up with appliance-assisted leisure time. The rooms of the Kauffman House may be somewhat claustrophobic, but it's clear that the people living within these walls didn't have the time—or Internet access—to find their lives wanting.

From the porch of the Kauffman House, watching the rain poke divots in the lake, I ponder a particular historical irony. Around the turn of the 20th century, at roughly the same time as Pettingell was staking his claim on Colorado and thereby producing that strain of tough-minded fairness that I associate with the West, my ancestors were corralled in the dark, medieval market villages of Eastern Europe and Russia known as shtetls. These, too, were closely knit communities, but rather than stoic high-heartedness they tended more toward the production of tragic, often humorous irony. And when it came to the out-of-doors, well, let's just say that the two camps were so far from one another that not even the sound of a bugling elk could have crossed the gap.

Pettingell and his people actively relished their physical surroundings. Eastern European Jews of the time, having been ghettoized and segregated for several millennia, had a relationship to Nature that was wary, when it wasn't indifferent, and that, as regards their own bodies, produced some of the purest flowers in the history of hypochondria. Unmistakably, there was great joy to be had within the confines of the shtetl, with theater, music, and storytelling abounding. But Yiddish, the language spoken there, though it was rich in descriptions of social failure and the comedy of awkwardness, contained next to no words for "bird," or "tree," or "sunset." The prevailing notion seemed to be, "If you can't eat it, why name it?" And that sad fact tells you all you need to know about the relationship of 19th century Jewry to the out-of-doors.

The early-summer rain-washed air is cold, and we turn to leave Grand Lake on Highway 34, a two-lane blacktop that unspools due south. In the rearview mirror, I glimpse the beautiful, somewhat mystical calm of the place receding fast. But my mind is still filled with questions.

I should admit that like most melancholics I've never quite been able to surrender the past. I didn't have an especially happy childhood, yet the objects and people of this time of my life seem imbued to me with a special, aching significance I can't let go of. This is not sentimentality but deep, even hysterical attachment. As someone who writes novels, I end up reconstructing lineages through time, pointing out the flow-charts of marriages and relationships—in a phrase, telling stories. Stories are our way of making sense of a past—and sometimes present—which would otherwise be too various, symphonic, and overwhelming to be understood. By spotlighting individuals struggling in the sliding seas of life, and drawing the connections between their acts and consequences, we universalize the particulars of their lives, and in so doing—we hope—provide insights into the larger human predicament.

I've delved into the past of Judy's family not in a novelistic way but as someone looking for a glimpse into a constellation of relationships not his own, which might yet shed light on them. Contrasts sharpen understanding. In comparison to her family, with its firm, calm boundaries and essential dignity, I grew up in a permanent production of Aida. Someone was always singing heartbreak; someone else was always getting down on bended knee to pour out his or her wounded soul. There was a hectic, feverish feeling to my childhood, different from the firm edges that stable habitation of a place—especially a place wrested from the land—bestows.

As a child, I dreamed of the West as a place of wide-open spaces where epic battles were fought, and people were either friends or foes. It was war without consequences, and the West as cartoon. As an adult, living a regular life here, I'm grateful not only for a relationship with a grounded, loving woman and her family; I also feel a sense of unexpected pleasure in the reality of all that sagebrush, chaparral, and, yes, Western candor. It's calming. By yanking me outside the habitual frame of my self-involvement, it opens up a slew of fresh perspectives. The scale of the land and the views are like a happy version of the old skull on the monk's table, the reminder of death that allowed you to appreciate life that much more richly. And this understanding on my part is something of which I think even grand old Mr. Pettingell would have approved.