

Recollection

All of my memories of my grandfather are overlaid with stories I've heard or pictures I've seen, so I cannot claim that everything I will relate here is true. The best I can do is to assert that these stories were told to me by my family, who are fond of me, and have no reason to lie.

The first recollection that I can claim as my own is of Grandpa's armchair. It was stuffed black leather and I distinctly recall the smell of the leather mixed with pipe smoke and horse, and the fact that it would hold the heat of his body for a minute or two after he had risen. The chair sported two large patches that someone had glued on over holes in the leather and was dented by my grandfather's boney bottom. He would sit in that chair after retrieving his pipe from the mantle over the fireplace and smoke before bed. Occasionally he would take his pipe outside to the back porch, which was a low deck facing Pike's Peak.

According to my father, when Grandpa was a ranch hand, his palms and fingers were so calloused that he could pluck a coal from a fire to light his smoke. I cannot attest to the fact but I do remember this: I must have been very young, but I can remember one evening sitting out on the back deck with him, just the two of us. He sat down next to me, low to the ground with his knees up around his shoulders like a grasshopper. He gave me the kind of look that let me know he was measuring me to decide whether or not to show me something. I must have stared right back at him, more frozen than assertive, until he decided to show me. He pursed his lips over a mouthful of smoke, then released it in a stream towards the mountains. He looked at me again then spit into his palm. He briefly showed me the puddle of spit in the center of his palm and then knocked the glowing

ember from his pipe into it, folding his fingers over to crush out the tiny coal. After that he wiped his palm on his jeans and worked his way into standing position. He grinned at me and I followed him inside.

Grandpa had a hunch on his back from taking a bad fall bustin' broncs. It was not a grotesque, Quasimodo-type bump, more buzzard-shaped, without the corresponding shirking attitude. Hey, did we love that hunch! My brothers and I used to stuff pillows into the back of our shirts and stroll around trying to imitate Grandpa's walk. It's fairly impossible, when you are that age, to imitate the stride of someone with a 36 inch inseam so when we tired of that, one us would get on our hands and knees to be the bronc while someone else got to do the bustin'.

I believe one of our favorite stories about Grandpa was that he could ride before he could walk. This is at least a tiny bit plausible because remember, he was born in 1905 when cars hadn't completely taken over the roads. A thousand times more alluring than Robert Redford as a horse whisperer, Grandpa came to an easy understanding with any horse he approached. When he settled down to teach at Fountain Valley School, it has been said that he was gifted at pairing horses with the boys who would ride them. If a boy was having trouble with discipline, he might assign him a skittish horse that needed routine and demanded responsibility. If a boy was shy, Grandpa might put him with a horse who was prone to racing the other horses in a herd or an affectionate horse who liked to snort down collars or nip behinds. He would lead overnight horse packing trips with the boys and was famous for his airmail pancakes. He used to deliver these to us with a flip of the spatula straight from the kitchen into the dining room. If you haven't

tasted a pancake that has just flown four yards to land on your plate, (or at least near it), then you're missing out on one of the best tastes of childhood.

After my family moved East from Fort Collins when I was two, we would visit my grandparents in Colorado Springs every summer. For the tenure of our visits I "owned" a pony named Chuckles. Although I never got over my sense of reverence enough to really enjoy riding Chuckles, I feel that we developed a bond over the summers. I misinterpreted my Grandfather's quiet manner around animals, and in my imitation of him I always left out the joy and over did the wonder. Chuckles, who was shaggy and placid, did not seem to mind my exaggerated awe, but it seems I was born without my grandfather's gift for horses.

My grandfather's name was Frank Dexter Cheney, by the way. Dec, for short, and if that is not the best name for a cowboy, I don't know what is. Dec married a woman named Boof. My grandmother was such a stunning child that everyone just called her Beautiful until her younger sister, who couldn't pronounce Beautiful, shortened it to Boof. (And lest you think I am being immodest you should know that I inherited neither Grandma's golden curls, her blue eyes nor her Grand Tetons. I got Grandpa's 36 inch inseam instead.) But names are important out West. Crazy Woman Creek, Gros Ventre Mountains, Sawatch, Bridger, Sawtooth, Big Horn, Bitterroot, Wind River. My father grew up in the West and he can recite these names like a litany. Big Belt, Popo Agee, Medicine Bow, Starvation Pass. He says them with his eyes closed as if he can conjure up the mountains before him just by calling their names. There is not a day that goes by where Dad doesn't think of the West, so he would tell us stories.

We loved these stories as kids. Cowboys! Wranglers! Chuck wagons! Even the creatures that inhabited the West were thrilling. Coyotes to howl at every moon, mountain lions to drag off naughty children, bears to help themselves to your garbage. Plain old cows became “doggies.” What we failed to imagine was this: When Grandpa first arrived in the West, he could ride a week in one direction without once crossing a road, a fence or an electric wire. The chuckle and creak of saddle leather was uninterrupted by the distant hum of a plane. But don’t get the idea that it was quiet. No, the West roared with wild life! Birds of every shape and appetite, antelope clattering away, the snap of a thousand twigs and the rustle of a million grasses. My dad tells the story of one night when Grandpa had been out on a trip by himself. The first and last thing he did every day was to brew a pot of coffee. So he was sitting there alone in the dark, somewhere in Idaho, by the Salmon River maybe, just listening to the pop and crackle of his fire and stretching his legs. Suddenly, a man materialized out of the darkness and said: “Mind if I share some coffee?” Grandpa just about wet his pants. Turns out the man was a gold prospector named Joe Black. He gave Grandpa a small twist of paper with a little gold dust in it. When we were kids, we got to look at the gold dust floating around in a small vial of water.

We did not often hear stories about grandpa from Grandpa himself. He would have been appalled to hear today’s rap artists brag of their wealth and sexual prowess, he would have hated the touchdown dance. But this is one story he did tell.

It was an old cowboy joke that there is a woman behind every tree out on the Wyoming plains. The joke is that there no trees out there and ha!--no women either. Rumor went round the ranch where Grandpa worked that a real live woman, somebody’s

daughter, was coming to the ranch. Grandpa's best friend, we'll call him Jack, talked all kinds of talk about he was going to make that woman fall in love with him. That is at least how Grandpa phrased it for our ears.

Jack went off to the bathhouse to get scoured up for this woman and Grandpa decided to play a joke on him. Back in those days, if you wanted to take a bath, you filled up a washtub with hot water and then stood in the tub and used a sponge to get yourself clean. Grandpa waited until he knew Jack would be mid-scrub and then called out in a falsetto voice, "Hello?" and walked into the bathhouse. Jack, thinking it was the woman come early, crouched down in the tub and clamped his hat over his private parts. The best part of the story is that a few minutes later the real woman knocked on the door. Jack was not about to be fooled twice, so he stood straight up in the tub and held his fire until the woman had gotten in the door. Then he let fly with the soapy sponge, catching her square in the chest. We never found out what happened next because Grandpa was always laughing too hard to go on.

I'm afraid that the West I live in today is dull and crowded compared to the West of my imagination. Sometimes if I'm lucky, I get up high where the trees have dropped back and the sun knocks hard. Life is lived close to the ground up there and solitarily, but just as you think it's being humble you spot an elephant's head flower or a columbine. I am still profoundly grateful that West is even more vast than I remembered, that I was not mistaken in my hope that the West might be a space big enough to cradle all I have carried from a cozier, cramped Eastern place. Up high, the metallic smell of red dust and melting snow burns your nostrils. You hear wind, but only as a soft hum far off. The

colors are so pure they defy naming. Blue, green, rust; these are words that give up their meaning in high places.

By the time I was born, the sun had carved out every last bit of my grandfather's face and hands. When it had perfected the wrinkles and spots and bleached every last hair, it went to work on cells we couldn't see or come to love and he died when I was still a young girl. He bequeathed me with a love of open space and a desire for solitude, but I am not sure if I am a Westerner or an Eastern at heart. The mountains out here can render me dry-mouthed and weak kneed. They are, I believe, the perfect reflection of grief. If grief has a face, the vista from the top of a fourteener or from a high ridgeline helps me give expression to a feeling that is both empty and crowded. The eye is filled with distant things, it can feast and hunger in the same moment.

If I am feeling particularly melancholy or just thoughtful, sometimes I'll hum a few lines of the song Grandpa used to sing with his hat clutched to his stomach, his big baritone making my ribcage rattle:

“There was blood on the saddle and blood all around

And a great big puddle of blood on the ground

A cowboy lay in it all covered with gore

And he never will ride any broncos no more”