Both Sides of the Border

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Claude Ellis and Violet McCormick, who met the risk and challenge of settling Scurry County and survived by perseverance and hard work, 1930
The wind can blow across West Texas at speeds of up to fifty miles per hour as it rushes across the empty space to wherever the wind must go. As it makes its hurried journey, the wind scatters dust, tumbleweeds, and the occasional traveler throughout the landscape. Every now and then, though, a cactus or ravine will catch and hold an object from this blowing stream, and settle its capture into the thin, West Texas topsoil. At least, I thought, that is what must have caused my grandfather to root here.

I knew that Grandad—as we kids called him—had started in the North, in Oklahoma, and ended up in no place in particular. The place had a name, Snyder, but not much more than that. It was just a forgotten little county seat in a forgotten little county that must have seemed, rather than pleasant, a little more tolerable than where my granddad had come from. Why he left home at all remains a mystery, as must every young man’s journey from “there” to “here,” but he found a “here” in West Texas that appealed to him for some reason so he stayed awhile. Make no mistake, the land had and has its own charm; it’s not easy to see, but it’s there. It is found in the soft hills and rough animals, in the white cliffs of the Caprock, and in the sound of the wind as it whips through the mesquite. Its charm is found in its dare of vast spaces. Grandad took this dare, and one day, from either desire or necessity, he decided to stay. In fact, he did one better than just staying: he thrived—which shouldn’t be confused with getting rich
or becoming powerful. It means simply that he grew roots and
found in the land enough sustenance to survive. To be fair, he
found more than enough; it was enough even to send for his girl,
my Granny, back home in Oklahoma. They married when she
arrived in Scurry County. Her new home must have appeared a lit-
tle bleak at first, but like most women living in Texas in the early
1900s, she proved to be as tough as the land into which she had
been transplanted. And my granddad’s flower, Violet, thrived too.

Together, Granny and Grandad made life in a hard land bear-
able and even beautiful. She gave birth to and tended six children
while taking care of the rural grocery store and gas station my
grandparents opened, and he worked as the iceman in the area,
making deliveries to those who needed the cold. They must have
dreamed of more, though. For awhile, it must have seemed if their
dreams were to be forever eclipsed by bawling babies, fighting
brothers, and a truck that was too old to run. In time, however,
the babies grew up, the brothers quit fighting (at least each other),
and—even though the truck still wouldn’t run—the grocery store’s
business began to pick up, for civilization and opportunity were
getting closer. So were my grandparents’ dreams.

The boom in their small grocery store and gas station business
was attributable to one of the most significant discoveries in the
Big Country: the Scurry County Canyon Reef Oil Field. As far as
oilfields go, it turned out to be one of the great ones, making this
once quiet little county the largest oil-producing county in the
nation. With the discovery of this subterranean Aladdin’s lamp
came the wildcatters and treasure-hunters who fixed their eyes on a
filthy prize they called oil. These seekers of wealth came from near
and far, often finding that which they sought, and their fortune
revived the hopes and dreams of those like Grandad who were
already in the area and were now susceptible to the lure of success,
given the sudden surge in their local business traffic.

Unfortunately, drilling for oil was (and remains) expensive. My
grandparents and their neighbors were not able promoters nor had
they friends with the money to finance a drilling operation, but
they had always found opportunity to save what little money they could earn. (Whatever else Scurry County might have offered, its cultural, artistic, and stylistic activities were not going to break a man or woman.) So, reaching deep into the tin can they kept at the back of the top shelf or searching into the mattress they slept on every night, my grandparents and their neighbors pulled out their life-savings and debated whether they should risk it all and possibly strike, or risk it all and have to start again from scratch.

My grandparents took the risk and struck, and their lives were changed forever.

I know that their decision to risk it all changed my life too. This defining moment in my grandparents’ life forged my legacy and sent my life down a path it otherwise would not have traveled. Had they decided not to take a chance, I would not have had the opportunities I did. I might have had worthwhile experiences anyway, but they would not be the same ones that I have come to assume are the experiences that have made me who I am.

It took me a long while to make the connections between the life I was living and the risks my grandparents took, and until I did, I never spoke of it at length with my father. Not too long ago, however, as I was thinking over these things, I asked my father to tell me the story of his parents, and I listened closely to what he said. This is what he told me:

Daddy left Oklahoma with his family when he was a young man, and they moved to New Mexico. It wasn’t long before they starved out there and began the long trip back home. On their way back, they stopped in Scurry County and leased a farm that didn’t do all too well. But Daddy decided to stay anyway. He got lonely out here and sent for your Granny who was still back in Willis, Oklahoma. They leased a farm out west of town and did some dry-land cotton farming, but that never really did too good. Let’s see—I guess Daddy’s break came
when he got a chance to buy a grocery store and filling station, the one that used to be out on Highway 180. He left Mother in charge of that and us boys while he sold what everyone needed—ice and kerosene.

Daddy was able to lease a farm in the early part of the boom that did pretty good—at least good enough for him to be able to move his filling station to town and begin his own small business. He owned a little land about that time as well that he got some offers to drill on, but instead of selling the land’s mineral rights to the drillers, he kept them. Most everybody else sold their mineral rights because it was a quick way to make a buck back then. Although his tactic didn’t make him rich, he got about eight percent on the oil produced. And that was only because he was in the pay. A waitress that worked for him at his truck stop had some land right next to his, and she always told us that if she would have been in the pay too, she wouldn’t have to be working as a waitress. It kind of made us all feel a little funny about going in there.

By the mid to late ‘40s, Daddy had made a real business of his filling station. He just seemed able to tend to his business like other people tended to their person. For a man that could hardly read, he could sure make a decision. Working hard was just part of who he was. Daddy retired by the mid ‘60s.

Not quite the story I was expecting. In fact, I was disenchanted with my family’s story after I heard my father’s rendering of it. I wanted my version’s claim to Granny and Grandad’s risk, challenge, and adventure, not his tale’s emphasis on perseverance and hard work. I was also disappointed by my seeming lack of skill in
remembering my family’s tale. How often had I heard a relative tell this story? Why did I remember it differently from my father? I wanted to know the truth of my grandparents’ lives because I felt my own life was implicated in that truth.

I know that the disenchantment I felt at hearing—really listening to—my father’s tale of the family is selfish because it does not take into account that my father also shares a stake in our family saga, and he tells the tale, therefore, as authentically as he can. His version might not be any more factual than my version, but its authenticity obviously seems genuine to him.

But if we cannot even agree as to what the story is, why bother telling a family tale? If we are doomed to inaccuracies and untruths, then why not simply tell folktales and fairytales all the time with richly developed characters in exotic locales? Here is my answer: Something has been passed from my grandparents to me. It is partly biological, but not entirely a matter of genes. My potential—as well as the color of my eyes—is a gift, an inheritance, from my ancestors. When I can name this gift, when I can claim it by giving it a narrative form, the potential becomes mine. If I can name my grandparents’ risk, if I can own their courage through the stories I tell, then that courage is part of my inheritance as their heir. It is part of who I am. My father’s story about the family is different from my own because I know now that my father has claimed his gift from them too. If his parents could persevere and achieve a lifetime of hard work, then my father must have the potential to do the same.

My grandparents’ gifts of their life stories are of the most selfless kind. They allow me—as well as my father—to manipulate their lives. With that sort of power and personal investment, I would do well to be cautious. Perhaps that is why I did not want to get their story wrong. I did not want to abuse my grandparents’ selflessness. I am less concerned about imprecision now, though. Their gift was the characters, the images, and the plots. They never promised the themes. And they certainly never promised to become the brand
new characters I created who wear their faces and answer to their names. That is the nature of their gift. And it gives me a peace of mind to know it.

This is also the nature of their gift to me: it does not reach a conclusion. Today, I can only see and hear part of the story—a story of risk, adventure, and success. Tomorrow, a new set of circumstances in my life and the need for a new identity may find me telling the story my father told of his parents’ sorrow, defeat, quietness, perseverance, and simplicity. This will not make the former tale of my grandparents false nor give a more accurate account of my grandparents’ history, but it will most certainly reflect a change in myself—a young man who is just beginning to see the extent to which he resembles his father and grandfather.

The wind can blow across West Texas with gusts of up to fifty miles per hour. When it does, it collects the stories that we have released from the cages of our mouths and hearts and lifts them up out of our control, spins them around, mixes them up, arranges them anew, and lets them float gently back to the ground. When we stumble across them (as we always do), we pick up and pocket that arrangement which suits us best at the moment, which we consider, perhaps, the most attractive. Whether or not the facts are correct is of secondary importance. What is primary is the ability to re-think and re-tell a resonant story of where we came from and, therefore, who we are and who we might be. After all, our best truths have always been fiction. But we folklorists have known that for a long time.
I must stop long enough to tell this story before going on with our new home. In Mississippi I had had only a personal maid that my father had given me when I married and later a nurse maid for the children, but Mr. Ferguson did not believe in owning slaves so they were left behind. Mr. Ferguson had gone to a slave auction with his father once when just a child. His father had just bought a slave woman and her teen-aged daughter was the next to go on the block. A man who was dreaded by all the slaves was bidding on her, and the mother fell at Grandpa Ferguson’s feet begging him to buy her daughter so she wouldn’t be mistreated. He did buy her, although he had to give $1,000.00 for her, but this scene lived on in Mr. Ferguson’s heart, and he vowed never to own a slave. Many people back in Mississippi had already freed their slaves before we left there because they were beginning to see the wrong in it.