

A Topology (for the Coney Island Lode)



In 1947 my father filed a quit-claim deed on the Coney Island lode, a stubby little gold mine in Park County, Colorado, which burrowed 5 or 6 feet into the side of Mount Loveland. There was no gold in this gold mine and it was early on abandoned by the miner, Ray Baxter, who in 1947 quit his claim to it in favor of my father, for \$10 and “other good and valuable consideration.” Besides a useless gold mine the quit-claim entitled my father to a 3-room log cabin on the property, which was the whole point of the deal; a plank bridge across Buckskin Creek between the two; and, over the bridge and off to the left, a little fresh-water spring. Over the next few years he built a huge stone fireplace and two sleeping rooms, dark and a little scary and desperately cold.

We lived 12 hours away, in Kansas. Every summer we packed full our car, leveling out the back seat with bags and blankets to make a tiny playroom, and drove through the night across the broad dark plains of western Kansas and eastern Colorado. My little brother slept in the back; I sat in front by the window, and my mother tipped the seat back to make me a bed. She sat close beside my father and they sang together while I dreamed out the window, listening, my head lost in stars and black prairie night. By dawn we saw faint blue mountains ghosting along the horizon; by full light we arrived at the cabin. My father unboarded windows and chimney, cut wood, fetched buckets of water; my mother cleaned, made up beds, built a coal fire in the stove. I carried springwater in coffee cans and gathered pinecones, which they apparently found useful.

As a child I loved the high country. I stalked around the mountainside behind our cabin, enacting dramatic stories which involved Indians and criminals and an orphan girl raised

in the mountains by a miner, whom I'd run into in some obscure book. I had a pet horse which was an aspen limb, pale and smooth; I rode him wildly and hitched him to trees. My mother wrapped sandwiches in waxed paper and my father and I climbed mountains. We hiked through cloud and fields of snow, toes lumpy with cold. We explored ruined mine buildings and collapsing one-room cabins, where I searched for relics and clues to miners' lives; we ventured cautiously into the cool darkness of the tunnels. Above timberline we clambered over bare blasted rock, the shattered bones of the mountain, up to the peak where we gloried in our achievement and wrote our names in the log book we found there. Those years I was my father's chief hiking companion. My mother, who once had delighted in this high country where my father was happiest, was by now bogged down in the drudgery of caring for house and children without electricity or running water. My little brother was useless. I climbed with my father.

As I entered my teens the visits began to bore me. The country depressed me; it made me tired. Even walking at this altitude required an effort almost beyond a teenager. I wanted only to be let lie about the cabin reading until the day they'd take me back to a civilized place that had flush toilets and proper grass; but it was too late: I was down as a mountain climber and I feared it would break my father's heart to learn that I no longer liked his high country.

In college my summers were full and I no longer made the visits with my family; later I moved far from Kansas. Decades passed. Then in 1995 my husband attended a conference in Aspen, 100 miles from the cabin. I went along and afterward drove to the cabin, alone. It broke open my heart. Turning into the road up Buckskin Gulch I could see my mother's face; I could see my father standing in the yard of the cabin, grinning, hands on hips, hat pushed back. Details I had long forgotten fitted my hands: I reached for a screen door handle but hit empty wood, and was puzzled by my gesture until I saw the two screw holes which had once attached it. I found our old sofa in a shed and placed my fingers in the carvings of the wooden arms, and saw me, little, fitting my fingers there in firelight. The plank bridge had collapsed and was resting on the floor of the creek, but it still rose above the water and was still passable, and I instinctively walked to the spring. The Coney Island was returning to the mountain; it now consisted of a few log timbers and a slope of red dirt.

The freshness and wildness of the air, the rough textures, pummelled me, filled my head, compelled attention. I ran like a little kid, which suitably caused me to struggle for breath. I walked old mountain paths but couldn't remember the dramas I had enacted there. At night I timidly lit Coleman lanterns and struck up fleeting fires in the old stone fireplace. I scared myself to death writing in my journal about the pine trees which blocked the stars with their black shapes, primordial life forms which bore no resemblance to normally evolved trees. I steeled my nerves and poured a glass of wine and walked through the pines anyway to a little clearing where I leaned against stone and washed out my mind with a billion stars and wondered at the melancholy warmth of a lamp-lit kitchen window lost in black Indian night. I climbed a mountain, alone: Mount Democrat, 14,148'. I watched in wonder as the shattered outlines of the Mosquito Range,

my father's Windy Ridge, rose above the saddle; and then the world was below me and I stood in the wind at the top of Democrat. I signed the log "for my father, Tom Butcher."

Stopping back through my hometown I told my father my adventures, hoping to fire his memories; but he, now old, was only fearful for my safety. Both he and my mother died the following winter. The Forest Service has decided that my two brothers and I have no right to my father's claim. There is no gold in that mine, they say, and never was, so we have nothing on which to base a claim, and we must tear down the bridge and the cabin, fireplace and all, and certainly the outhouse, and vacate. We are attempting to purchase the land, a long, chaotic and possibly ruinously expensive process. In the meantime I visit when I can. I took my daughter and her family there; they seemed to enjoy it, or maybe they were very good sports. We climbed a mountain together.

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