

## **My Late-in-Life Romance**

Call him Garth, for he is of Scottish extraction. Sometimes charming, often interesting, and always politically astute, he's a good-looking oldster, very tall with dark, dark eyes. He sports a small mustache and still owns most of his hair. A house near his sister's in Colorado's Estes Park is his home; he lives in Cheyenne only temporarily, he said. On account of a woman, I was to find out. He made sure that I understood, his status as retired professor makes him an attractive partner.

"I love your columns," he initiated our email conversation. "You are the voice of sanity in this town."

I smiled at the blatant flattery. Fawning or not, when a compliment arrives, it makes my day. I don't get many of those.

That year—2015—my editor, who composes the headers for my columns, chose titles like "Big Tobacco Targets our Kids," "Marijuana Policy is Silly," and "Hemp is the Way to Go." The columns urged state legislators to issue permits for Wyoming farmers to grow hemp.

Another column, "Drug War? No, Drug Mess," reviewed Nixon's War on Drugs, a "war" that misclassified hemp as a Schedule I Substance—this, even though industrial hemp contains less than 0.3% THC, the Cannabinol that's the psychoactive substance in marijuana, while pot holds 15% or more. The next column explained the useless campaign against ditchweed, which is a wild-growing form of hemp that is no threat to anyone, least of all to public safety.

"The DEA's Suppression Program is the drug war unleashed on ditchweed. As its name implies, ditchweed is hemp growing wild at roadsides. It does not contribute to the black-market marijuana trade—a market, by the way, that would not exist if weed were regulated like tobacco

or alcohol. Eradication chemicals are harmful to the health and safety of residents, inflict untold damage to the environment, and burden taxpayers with unreasonable costs.”

“Let’s meet at Starbucks,” Garth’s email suggested next.

“I don’t do Starbucks,” I replied. “I brew my own.”

Not quite true. The year before, on a visit in Beijing, I got so desperate for coffee, I shelled out the equivalent of \$4.50 at a Chinese Starbucks, but only once. After that, I stuck with my friend’s green tea, which I knew from her days as my housemate in Nashville, Tennessee; indeed green tea was her go-to comfort zone through her ten years of U.S. residence. Sadly, she’s rarely in email contact.

To get his foot in the door, Garth joined Climate Parents, a group of parents and educators in which I was active. Concerned over Wyoming legislators’ opposition to the teaching of climate science, we traveled to Casper and spoke at meetings of the Education Commission, where we—alongside the commissioners—listened to the arguments of creationists. Later that month Garth helped me lobby for hemp at legislative sessions of Wyoming’s Agriculture Committee. Since we both lived in Cheyenne, attending legislative sessions was no problem.

To the lawmakers I repeated what my columns outlined. “Growing hemp was legal in the U.S. until 1957. Today, half of the 50 states have laws that allow hemp production. Why not Wyoming? George Washington grew hemp at Mount Vernon. So did Thomas Jefferson at Monticello. Benjamin Franklin used hemp to produce paper in one of America’s first paper mills.”

Garth handed out a National Hemp Association leaflet while I spoke. The flyer explains outdated and cumbersome federal regulations—and the inability or unwillingness of Congress to

discard them. It shows graphs of the states that have charted their own course.

“The American Farm Bureau Federation, the National Farmers Union, and the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture all support industrial hemp agriculture. It’ll create thousands of jobs. Kentucky, once the nation’s top hemp-producing state, started growing hemp again last year. It’ll heal the soil that’s depleted by unrestrained tobacco agriculture.”

I ended on a positive note: “Congress enacted, and President Obama signed into law, the 2014 Agriculture Act, which allows states to regulate hemp production without DEA interference. A follow-up Omnibus Appropriations directive cuts off funding for DEA hemp- and marijuana pursuits. We may proceed unmolested. Wyoming’s economy will benefit.” Our legislators seemed unconvinced by our pitch; still, Garth and I left the capitol in high spirits.

By now I had met Garth’s significant other, a Russian woman considerably younger than he who, it so happened, was in the process of severing their arrangement and moving into an apartment of her own.

“It was our agreement all along,” he said. “I’d help her through college—it’s why we moved to Cheyenne—and then she’ll find a man her own age.”

Yeah, sure.

Over time a relationship evolved from activism to engaged dialogue. Yet a story about an alcohol-dependent son, which he brought up repeatedly, made me wonder. Did the tale serve to screen something else? Garth has a daughter, a physician somewhere in Oregon. Was she married? Did she have a child or children? He seemed disinclined to talk about her.

Whenever Garth told of Rowan’s alcoholic benders and suicidal funks, he hastened to add that the son was “brilliant, absolutely brilliant. He left to study in Australia, saying he’d never

return. In the U.S. he'd shoot himself, he thinks, what with weapons so readily available here.” He added an exposition of the son's academic accomplishments.

In conversation about himself, Garth confided that, after retirement, he worked in Russia to promote private enterprise. He loved traveling there and got to know would-be entrepreneurs even in the country's coldest regions. Serious financial losses ensued, however, when the state unexpectedly revoked his visa. He please his case to no avail. “When I got home I sat in my house and cried and cried,” he said. He loaned me *Midnight in Siberia*, a memoir written by former NPR Bureau Chief Davide Greene who, sometimes with spouse, sometimes with advisers, crisscrossed the country by railway. “I rode that train,” Garth said, pointing to the drawing of a railway route. “I met clients in Novgorod, cold as could be.”

One of my columns from that time begins with an anecdote from the book. David and Rose Greene are held up at a train station by a queue of Russians waiting to deposit their “purses, backpacks, luggage, wallets, belts, and jewelry” on the conveyor belt for a security check which carries on even “without a single police officer, railway attendant, or vokzal staff . . . in fact, half the people set off the metal-detector alarm as they pass through.” No-one stops them.

The line moves at a snail's pace, comments Greene; still, he puts his luggage on the belt “going through the process without questioning it.” His wife, however, walks around the security post, ducks under the rope, and waits on the other side, grinning. “I am more of a wimp about these things and fully expected Rose to be tackled by a Russian security guard,” writes Greene.

“Stuff like that happens all the time. Those bureaucratic demands! The tales I heard from my interpreter!” Garth shrugs. “It's as if glasnost never happened.”

“The Wyoming winter is my Little Siberia,” I said, “I'll be heading to Texas to escape the

worst of it.”

I imagined my connection with Garth dissolved by the time I returned; hence, I was delighted—more than that, surprised and elated—when on my return Garth said, “I love you.” The occasion, however, and the manner in which the comment was offered, gave a moment’s pause.

The occasion was this. From spending two winter months in Texas I returned with several bags of pecans. One I handed to Garth, for which I anticipated a “Gee, thanks.” Instead he said, “Let me count the ways I love you.”

Let me count the ways I love you. What a way to convey emotion! He must have figured I’d recognize the phrase as take-off on a Barrett-Browning poem, as he knew that my last (and fourth) career was teaching College English. The utterance was a delightful riff even if it seemed a bit contrived. Had he used the line before? I determined to ask what exactly he meant with his Barrett-Browning paraphrase. Sadly, I never got the chance.

It’s not often that someone we value utters an “I love you.” When it does happen, it’s a powerful motivator. I decided to build a house on my acreage fifty miles north of Cheyenne. When Walter and family moved Texas, it ended my grandparent duties. My time was my own now. I imagined Garth joining me on Windy Acres, since his lease was ending soon. We’d live “off the fat of the land,” to use the Steinbeck phrase. A contractor was drawing up plans when Garth announced he needed to visit his son. “When things get bad, Rowan’s wife emails me. I pack up and go.”

“To Australia?”

“Or Turkey. Belgium. Wherever he happens to be. This will be my twenty-third time.

They live in Tokyo now.”

He previously let slip that Rowan, knowing his own instability, was determined not to have children but his wife had acted against his wishes. “They have a daughter, now sixteen. Smart as a whip. These days, he loves her to death.” To death? I pondered what it must be like for a girl whose birth was opposed by her father. Children respond to a parent’s ambivalent attachments with ambivalences of their own.

And now, journey number twenty-three.

“I see,” I muttered, although I did not see at all. I was shocked. Garth wouldn’t visit his daughter, a few hours’ drive away, but journeys halfway around the world, repeatedly, for an inebriated son?

“Would you agree to talk with a friend of mine? Laura Griffith spent decades abusing alcohol—and I mean abusing. At a fundraiser for Recover Wyoming she confessed, she was past fifty before her life turned around.”

“Where does she live?”

“She has her office in Cheyenne.”

“Well . . . “

“Laura runs a non-profit that helps addicts who have completed rehab. Typically, they’ve exhausted their resources. Laura says her own family disowned her during her down time.”

“Rowan has been through rehab. Several times.”

“Will you talk with her?”

“If you can set up something between now and Wednesday, then yes. I fly out Wednesday evening.”

Laura agreed to see us on short notice. After a thumbnail sketch of her own experience, she said, “Edith tells me your son has been in rehab before.”

“Repeatedly. Two weeks here, three weeks there.”

“I did the same—but I must tell you, two weeks doesn’t cut it. Four weeks doesn’t. It took me ten weeks for rehab to take hold.” Then she asked, “What do you do when you go to see your son?”

“I hold him. Hug him close. Then I throw out his booze and take away his credit cards. He trusts me, Counselor.”

“You may want to rethink the booze and the credit cards. Your son must be willing—and able—to call it quits on his own.”

Garth remained suave. He continued to address Laura with “Counselor.” He jotted down notes, promised an update on his return.

On his return from Japan, he let it be known his ex picked him up at the Denver airport and stayed at his place overnight. A week later came another frantic note from his daughter-in-law. I emailed, suggesting he consider “complicated grief disorder” as applicable to his son’s—perhaps his own—existence. I urged him to consider Griffith’s comments regarding his approach to Rowan’s problems.

Come to find out, Garth was unwilling to tolerate any doubts about his actions, decisions, and relationships. Turns out, his “I love you” was but the beginning of an end. Turns out, I’d fooled myself with my belief that our friendship would deepen with time.

“I’m not interested. I’m a one-woman man,” he said the day after his ex spent the night.

He must have known I’d recognize the claim for the baldfaced lie it was. Garth likes to

act the man about town. When it suits his purpose, he readily avails himself of poetic license.

“I’m moving on,” he emailed a few days later. “I want to have lived at fifty addresses before I croak. My Wyoming address is Number forty-seven. Time to break camp.”

Whatever possessed me to imagine a life together? It was a fantasy, sweet while it lasted but a fantasy nonetheless. A fiction.

“We are all damaged goods,” I emailed him. “This is so sad.” The message bounced back.

Did I mourn my lost love? Oh yes, I did. Our losses do take their toll; still, we must accord them the respect they deserve. It helps us accept the inevitable when it’s time to let go.

It’s been three years since that rejected email but I went ahead with my building plans, settling on acreage where climate change brought an end to the winter wheat a sharecropping farmer used to produce on my behalf. I used to get one-fourth of the annual net income; now, I get nada.

A phone call from my editor made me glad I was leaving the state capital. For seven years Reed Eckhardt had guided my commentaries on culture and society for *The Wyoming Tribune-Eagle*; as a rule the weekly columns were reprinted by Wyoming’s other main newspaper, *The Casper Star-Tribune*.

“You know we’ve been acquired by another entity,” Eckhardt said that day.

“I’ve heard about it.”

“I’m sorry to say, I’ve been instructed to inform all local columnists they would no longer be paid. I’ll be sending a group email to all of you.”

Stunned, I considered his message. The weekly pay, however modest, was an important part of my retirement income. Equally important, after each publication I sent the weekly write-

up to a readers' group which includes my sons. This was a blow on several counts.

“Does this mean your position is in jeopardy?” I asked, knowing Eckhardt to be in a vulnerable spot.

“Absolutely not,” he assured me. “I was told I’ll stay on.”

He was wrong. A week later he got the boot.

Do I want to offer freebee columns to the new owner and its editor? My hunch is, the paper is going the way of Wyoming legislators, beating the drum for a degraded capitalism that disdains social services, down to recycling single-use containers. I’m glad to have another goal. An energy company offered to tie up the acreage in an Option to Lease for the possibility to construct a wind farm on it and surrounding properties. I’ve been talking with neighbors.

Already the year before, when Opinion Editor Kerry Drake was ousted at the Casper paper, my columns ceased to appear there. Drake, however, was lucky. *WYOFile*, an online news service of impartial reportage, offered him a lifeline. He now writes a weekly *WYOFile* commentary, “The Drake’s Take,” with the logo of a drake in feathery splendor. Now and then I add a comment to one.

“Everything passes,” writes Erich Maria Remarque at conclusion of his final novel, a thinly-disguised autobiography of a German ex-pat, driven out by the Nazis, who lives out his life among German Jews in southern California. “Everything passes and man is the only animal who knows it.” The words capture resignation but also a sigh of relief. It’s over.

Remarque, who made his debut with *All Quiet on the Wester Front*, is just about forgotten now. New fiction has come and gone, touted for a moment, evocative for a time. Everything, but everything passes.